Resurgence and Renovation:

The Contemporary English Country House Novel after 2000

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Abstract

This thesis examines the resurgence of the English country house novel since 2000 as part of the growing popularity of the country house setting in contemporary British culture. In the context of economic recession, growing English nationalism, and a Conservative-led government accused of producing a '*Downton Abbey*-style society', country house texts are often dismissed as nostalgic for a conservative social order. This study reclaims the English country house novel from this critical dismissal, stressing the genre's political ambivalence. While readings of the country house resurgence are mostly played out through the media's reaction to television programmes, my research provides a detailed and comparative examination of literary texts currently missing from the debate. I situate Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001), Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* (2003), Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005), Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009), and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011) within a wider body of discourse on the country house, exploring the contemporary relevance and cultural value of the setting. It is my contention that the English country house novel self-consciously negotiates its growing popularity in contemporary culture.

In chapter one, I argue that the recent shift from material to textual inheritance in the genre is a way of reclaiming voices traditionally excluded from the canonical house of fiction. In chapter two, I examine the ideological significance of detail in the country house aesthetic. In chapter three, I explore how the generic preoccupation with authenticity is used to negotiate cultural value. Finally in chapter four, I assert that the trope of ruin signifies an evaluation of the contemporary currency of the country house setting. As such, I suggest that the genre, like the houses it depicts, is undergoing reformation.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Granda, who sadly died before it was completed. He was a lifelong champion of education, though his family could only afford to send his eldest sibling to university. He was instrumental and inspirational to my academic career, and to his memory I dedicate my biggest academic achievement to date.

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Contents

List of Figures

General Introduction. A Recent Resurgence

> *The emphasis is upon literature, for literature has been pre-eminently both the carrier of values from generation to generation between the writers and readers of books, and the creator of their values. But houses too may be "read". They are icons. Written sign and architectural sign reflect one another. Writers interpret what they see, and the way in which things are seen is conditioned by how they are described. There is no firm division between the visual arts and literature. Nor is there a clear divide between what might be called "high culture" and the everyday. – Malcolm Kelsall*[1]

Since the turn of the century, the English country house has become increasingly prominent in British cultural forms. While the setting has previously enjoyed periods of popularity in individual forms – the country house novel of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, or the heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s – the current resurgence across literature, film, television, and radio marks a striking stage in the setting's cultural diffusion.[2] While readings of the country house resurgence are mostly played out through the media's reaction to television programmes, this thesis fills a critical lacuna through its literary focus and detailed, comparative examination of a range of texts. As the first sustained study of this setting in the contemporary English novel, I reclaim the literary country house from critical dismissal and argue that the genre deserves more serious attention in terms of its negotiation of the contested significance and meanings of the country house.

Emerging in the context of growing English nationalism, economic recession, and a Conservative-led government accused of producing a '*Downton Abbey*-style society', country house texts are often dismissed by cultural commentators as products of nostalgia for a

[1] Malcolm Kelsall, *The Great Good Place* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 7-8.

[2] Drawing on the work of Patricia Kelly from the 1980s, Vera Kreilkamp suggests that the Big House novel has also undergone a 'renascence' (Patricia Kelly, 'The Big House in Contemporary Anglo-Irish Literature', in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*, ed. by Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (Tübingen: Guntar Narr Verlag, 1987), pp. 229-234, (p. 231), cited in Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracruse: Syracruse University Press, 1998), pp. 1-2).

conservative social order.[3] As John J. Su notes, 'sweeping condemnation of the postwar preoccupation with representations of the English countryside and heritage […] remains the default response in many scholarly discussions'.[4] This has been exacerbated by conservative reflections on Englishness published in recent years, such as Jeremy Paxman's *The English* (1998), Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy* (2000), and Peter Ackroyd's *Albion* (2002). This thesis examines the tension between the rising currency of the English country house setting and its critical disparagement.

Contrary to the prevailing perception of country house texts as mindless escapism, I suggest that these novels are highly aware of and responsive to current debates about their contentious setting, and are often engaged in a process of exposing its problematic history and redefining its contemporary meaning. As the above epigraph from Malcolm Kelsall suggests, literature is a key mediator of cultural value and this study examines how the contemporary English country house novel self-consciously negotiates its own position in the literary marketplace by modifying existing generic tropes or inventing new ones. It is my purpose in this thesis to explore how four generic preoccupations (lineage, detail, authenticity, and decay) play out differently in different novels and what these tropes reveal about the politics of the country house text.

This General Introduction will begin by contextualising the current resurgence of the English country house novel within the wider reappearance of the country house in British culture, reflecting on why the setting has recently gained currency. Agreeing with Kelsall's suggestion in the epigraph to this General Introduction, I view the genre as one that is closely

[3] Michael Kenny, 'Our parties must respond to the rise of Englishness', *New Statesman* (15 December 2012) <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2012/12/our-parties-must-respond-rise-englishness> [accessed 25 March 2015]; Frances O'Grady, general secretary of Trade Union Centre, cited in Philip Inman, 'TUC Congress: We are heading for a *Downton Abbey*-style society', *Guardian* (8 September 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/08/tuc-warned-britain-heading-for-downton-abbey-society> [accessed 17 November 2014].

[4] John J. Su, *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 57.

linked to the visual arts and combines popular and highbrow elements. I explore 2010 as a turning point in critical reception, after which the country house text is increasingly regarded as popular and conservative entertainment because of its links with television. I then map the key generic tropes of the contemporary English country house novel, tracing the evolution of the form since 1945. Finally, I survey the field of postwar and contemporary British fiction to situate my own study alongside seminal works, outlining how my methodology differs to existing scholarship. As in any study of contemporary cultural forms, the literary and social contexts of this resurgence are difficult to pin down without the benefit of hindsight. While this has presented methodological difficulties in terms of limited scholarly sources, it has also brought the reception of these novels to the forefront of my work so that my conclusions are informed by how contemporary readers and the media are responding to the genre in newspaper articles, television programmes, and online reviews. What follows, then, is a reading of contemporary Britain and its literary culture that, like the contemporary English country house novel, is aware of itself as subject to reinterpretation and revision.

A Recent Resurgence

The contemporary English country house novel has flourished at a time when non-fiction, film, and television have also become preoccupied with the setting. The current resurgence therefore cannot be wholly separated from the intertextual web of influence across these cultural forms. Indeed, many contemporary English country house novels have been adapted for the screen: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) has been adapted for cinema audiences (2007), while many novels have transferred to television, including Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002, adapted for BBC 2005), James Herbert's *The Secret of Crickley Hall* (2006, adapted for BBC 2012), P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011, adapted for

BBC 2013), and Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006, adapted for BBC 2013).[5] The English country house novel is not only popular material for the visual arts, but also for radio, as the adaptation of Elizabeth Jane Howard's 1990s country house novel series, The Cazalet Chronicles, for BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* attests (2001). This renewed interest in the Cazalet Chronicles began with the 2001 television adaptations and later gave rise to the publication of the fifth novel in the series, *All Change* (2013).[6] The number of country house histories published in Britain has similarly soared, many of which seek to capitalise on the popularity of Julian Fellowes's ITV period drama, *Downton Abbey* (2010-present). The cover of Michael Paterson's *Private Life in Britain's Stately Homes* (2012), for example, features Highclere Castle (where the series is filmed), while James Peill's *The English Country House* (2013) includes a foreword by Fellowes.[7] Other texts explicitly reference the programme in their title, such as Jacky Hyams's *The Real Life Downton Abbey* (2011), and the Countess of Carnarvon's tie-in works, *Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle* (2012) and *Lady Catherine and the Real Downton Abbey* (2014).[8] The extent of *Downton*'s popularity is also apparent in its accompanying merchandise and tie-in tourism. Marks and Spencer have released a *Downton* beauty range, while the jewellery

[5] Added to these are adaptations of country house classics including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847, adapted 2011), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945, adapted 2008), and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1818, adapted 2005), as well as original country house films *Gosford Park* (2001), *Quartet* (2012), and *Belle* (2014). Even the latest Bond film, *Skyfall* (2012), features a country house. There have also been a series of adaptations for ITV's *The Jane Austen Season* (2007) and BBC1's original television series, *Servants* (2003). The period has seen a wealth of country house television documentaries such as BBC1's *The Edwardian Country House* (2002), Channel 4's *Country House Rescue* (2008-present), and ITV's *Great Houses with Julian Fellowes* (2013).

[6] *The Cazalets*, BBC1, 22 June – 27 July 2001.

[7] Sian Evans's *Life Below Stairs: in the Victorian and Edwardian Country House* (2011), Dan Cruickshank's *The Country House Revealed: A Secret History of the British Ancestral Home* (2011), and Clive Aslet's *The Edwardian Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (2012) are further examples of the current vogue for country house histories.

[8] I have limited my evidence of the country house resurgence to British authors due to the national focus of my research, but it would remiss not to mention here the novel of American Wendy Wax, *While We Were Watching Downton Abbey* (2013).

company *1928* have a *Downton* jewellery collection. Highclere also runs tours based on the programme. These examples highlight the extent of the resurgence of the country house but also reveal the popularity of the setting to be a result of individual texts being appropriated by a range of cultural forms. The resurgence of the English country house setting in British culture is therefore a result of an intertextual web of inference across various media, a relationship epitomised by Julia Strachey's 1932 novella, *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*, which, being republished in 2002 and adapted for screen in 2012 and starring *Downton*'s Elizabeth McGovern, connected literature, film, and television in a way that highlights their current preoccupation with country house texts.[9] The contemporary English country house novel, then, is both symptomatic of and contributing to the current fascination with the setting in British culture.

The resurgence of the country house has occurred alongside a growing interest in domestic service. Dr Pamela Cox's BBC series, *Servants: the True Story Of Life Below Stairs*, is just one example of what Katherine Hughes refers to as 'servant porn'.[10] Although the current interest in domestic service is not limited to the country house setting, it has undoubtedly played a central role in the topic's popularity. Many servant biographies have recently been published with a country house on their front cover, underlining their common selling point.[11] Tom Quinn's *Lives of Servants* series, in particular, comprising four books

[9] Along with *Cheerful Weather*, Persephone have recently reprinted many early twentieth-century country house novels, including Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936, reprinted 2004), Jocelyn Playfair's *A House in the Country* (1943, reprinted 2006), and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Making of a Marchioness* (1901, reprinted 2009).

[10] Kathryn Hughes, '*Upstairs, Downstairs* and servant porn', *Guardian TV and Radio Blog* (26 December 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/26/upstairs-downstairs-servant-porn?guni=Article:in%20body%20link> [accessed 16 June 2014].

[11] Examples include Rosina Harrison's *The Lady's Maid: My Life in Service* (2011) (originally published as *Rose: My Life in Service* (London: Cassell and Company, 1975)), Flo Wadlow's *Over a Hot Stove: A Kitchen Maid's Story* (2013), and Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-Century Britain* (2013). Victoria Coren has noted a similar taste for servant biographies in America ('Nostalgia is such old hat', *Observer* (22 January 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/22/victoria-coren-downton-abbey-

since 2011, evidences the continued appetite among contemporary readers for servant narratives in a country house setting. Responding to and fuelling the appetite for country house servant narratives, British historic houses have increased access to and interpretation of servant spaces at properties such as Audley End, Harewood House, and Beningbrough Hall.

The interest in the upstairs/downstairs dynamic has re-emerged in a socio-economic climate in which the growing gap between rich and poor has made the master/servant relationship increasingly pertinent.[12] Research commissioned by the London School of Economics reveals that social mobility in the UK has 'declined and is low compared to other leading countries'.[13] Highlighting the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, the Rowntree report (2007) revealed that the number of households below the standard poverty line has increased since 1998, peaking in 2004.[14] There is 'evidence of increasing polarization', both economically and geographically, in which already-wealthy areas have become 'disproportionately wealthier'.[15] Therefore, according to Paul Krugman, the West thinks of itself as living in a second Gilded Age or Belle Époque defined by the rise of the

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nostalgia> [accessed 7 July 2015]). Service has also received significant academic attention of late (Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain, 1900-1950', *Past and Present*, 203 (2009), 181-204; Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past: The Manor House Amnersfield, 1933-1945* [1984] (London: Verso, 2010); Lucy Delap, 'Housework, Housewives and Domestic Workers: Twentieth Century Dilemmas of Domesticity', *Home Cultures*, 8 (2011), 189-210).

[12] Britain's obsession with extremities of class is also visible in television programmes such as Channel 4's *Made in Chelsea* (2011-present) and the BBC's *Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain* (2011), or Laura Wade's play, *Posh* (2010), later adapted for the screen as *The Riot Club*, dir. by Lone Scherfig (Universal Pictures International, 2014). Alongside programmes such as *Benefits Street* (2014) and *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* (2014-2015), these texts reveal a preoccupation with extreme ends of the social spectrum, and a general shift of the margins to the centre in British culture.

[13] 'Social mobility "declining" in UK', *BBC News* (11 May 2006) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4762431.stm> [accessed 18 March 2015].

[14] Daniel Dorling et al., 'Poverty and Wealth across Britain from 1968 to 2005' (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007).

[15] Dorling et al., p. 14.

'one percent'.[16] The increasing divide between rich and poor is understood in terms of national regression: statistics suggest that 'Britain is moving back towards levels of inequality in wealth and poverty last seen more than 30 years ago'.[17] The Western economy as a whole, according to Thomas Piketty, is not only returning to nineteenth-century levels of income inequality but also to patrimonial capitalism in which family dynasties dominate over talented individuals.[18] This research suggests that, economically at least, Britain is returning to a period in which the country house, inherited by the rich and maintained by the poor, represents a social microcosm. Britain's increasing inequality is thus understood to be a return to the social hierarchy embodied in the country house.

Joe Moran views the increasing extremity of Britain's social hierarchy as fostering a master/servant social dynamic related to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's (2010-2015) ideology of social deference:

> today's arguments about the "slave labour" of unpaid work experience and "job snobs" are strangely reminiscent of what used to be called the servant problem. On last Thursday's edition of *This Week*, Michael Portillo argued that "people have to be willing to do things right at the bottom". He claimed that a tenth of Americans begin their working lives "flipping a hamburger" and that in Spain, unlike in Britain, waiting on tables was seen as a profession. For years, young people in this country have been fed the rhetoric of meritocratic elitism and social aspiration. Now, older notions of the dignified, vocational nature of "service" are being revived.[19]

Moran here highlights a growing tendency to endorse rather than critique economic disparity as a fact of life. Britons at the bottom of the nation's economic hierarchy are encouraged to accept rather than challenge this archaic dynamic with the deference of servants. Thus David

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[16] Paul Krugman, 'Why We're in a New Gilded Age', *New York Books* (8 May 2014) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/may/08/thomas-piketty-new-gilded-age/> [accessed 4 July 2014].

[17] Dorling et al., p. 18.

[18] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

[19] Joe Moran, '*Upstairs Downstairs* and the politics of work', *Guardian* (26 February 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/26/downton-abbey-politics-work-servant-problem> [accessed 4 June 2014].

Cannadine asserts that, contrary to the political rhetoric of meritocracy, '[t]here has been no "fall of class" at all': 'Britain retains intact an elaborate, formal system of rank and precedence, culminating in the monarchy'.[20] Indeed, Laurence Driscoll has identified the recent development of an underclass named the 'Servant Class' that has 'sprung into being to serve the needs of the now (more) rich and (more) powerful super class'.[21] There have even been reports that the 'posh aspirations of the newly rich have led to a butler drought – just as they did in the 1800s'.[22] Britain's growing inequality is thus widely conceptualised as a regression to the social extremes embodied in the country house's spatialised dynamic of upstairs/downstairs.

While recent debates about Britain's housing crisis as well as the mansion and bedroom taxes have positioned the house as a space in which the nation's social, political, and economic situation is manifested, the widening gap between rich and poor is often represented in country house imagery. Britain's social inequality is widely portrayed as a binaristic dynamic between a ruling class and their employees. At the 2014 Trades Union Congress conference, for example, the general secretary, Frances O'Grady, described Britain as becoming 'a *Downton Abbey*-style society, in which living standards of the vast majority are sacrificed to protect the high living of the well-to-do. […] Under this [coalition] government, class prejudice is becoming respectable once again'.[23] Paul Kenny, acting general secretary of the GMB, has similarly referred to 'the "upstairs-downstairs" nature of the labour market in Britain today' in which the highest-earning employees are paid 16 times more than 'those at

[20] David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 22.

[21] Laurence Driscoll, *Evading Class in Contemporary British Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 13.

[22] Kathryn Hughes, 'Downstairs upstairs', *Guardian* (31 May 2007) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/may/31/comment.comment1> [accessed 4th June 2014].

[23] O'Grady, cited in Inman, 'TUC'.

the bottom of the ladder'.[24] Trade unions have taken issue with 'upstairs-downstairs' policies that protect directors while forcing workers to accept huge cuts to retirement incomes.[25] The country house, then, is repeatedly conflated with Britain's master/servant dynamic of economic inequality as a way of critiquing the conservatism of austerity. The widespread approach of likening contemporary Britain to period dramas not only underlines the extent of the setting's resurgence and cultural diffusion but also suggests that Prime Minister David Cameron's government is taking Britain backwards and romanticising an archaic social hierarchy. As I explore in the following section, as the proposed creators of this *Downton-Abbey*-style society, Cameron's '*Downton Abbey* government' has been repeatedly aligned with the country house.[26]

Country House Conservatism?

As Terry Eagleton observes, political contestations occur through 'a fierce conflict over signs and meanings, as the newly emergent class strives to wrest the most cherished symbols from the grip of its rivals and redefine them in its own image'.[27] The country house has become one of the symbols to which Eagleton refers, invested with a new political significance in recent years that is linked to Britain's increasing conservatism. In fact, the image recently voted most reflective of the Tory party was of 'a well-to-do family in front of

[24] Press Association, 'Report reveals "upstairs-downstairs" workforce', *Guardian* (23 May 2005) <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2005/may/23/executivesalaries.executivepay> [accessed 4 June 2014]

[25] Phillip Inman, 'Unions attack "upstairs-downstairs" pensions divide', *Guardian* (6 September 2006) <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2006/sep/06/executivesalaries.executivepay> [accessed 8 June 2015]. A similar rhetoric was employed during 1970s when, like today, Britain faced economic recession and was enthralled by a master/servant television programme, *Upstairs Downstairs*. Anthony Sampson, for example, described Britain as '*Upstairs, Downstairs*, Inc.' and claimed that old hierarchies had been re-established in the offices of large companies where former country house servants found alternative work ('Upstairs, Downstairs, Inc', *Observer*, 4 January 1976, p. 7).

[26] Jonathan Freedland, 'David Cameron's *Downton Abbey* Government', *Guardian Short Cuts Blog* (26 March 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/shortcuts/2012/mar/26/david-cameron-downton-abbey-government> [accessed 29 July 2014].

[27] Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p. 2.

a stately home'.[28] As a result of the party's reputation for traditional social values and increasing the divide between rich and poor, contemporary Conservatism is widely presented as producing an archaic society befitting Fellowes's nostalgic country house period drama. Both *Private Eye*'s 'Downturn Abbey' cover and Unite's 'Please, no second series' poster Photoshopped MPs from the coalition into Downton's poster, aligning them with its aristocratic characters (see figures 1 and 2). Former leader of the opposition, Ed Miliband, similarly berated Tory MPs through reference to the programme: 'We all think it's a costume drama, they think it's a fly-on-the-wall documentary'.[29] The *Guardian*, too, has linked the coalition government to country house texts in a poll about 'toff TV'.[30] Eighty-four percent of respondents agreed that 'in times of recession we need all the escapism we can get', while sixteen percent thought 'the toffs we have in the cabinet are more than enough'.[31] This poll presents country house texts as either mindless 'escapism' or products of Conservative ideology, suggesting that the resurgence of the country house is a result of the nation's political shift to the right in recent years. Indeed, David Priestland identifies in the current taste for costume dramas 'evidence of a yearning for Gentle Toryism', while Mark Lawson predicts that

> [f]uture historians of television and of Britain more generally will note with interest that the return of toff TV followed shortly after the formation of the poshest government in the country since Harold Macmillan in the 1950s, featuring more alumni of the country's top schools than a shooting weekend at *Downton Abbey*. […] With uncanny regularity, costume drama on British TV has flourished while Tory governments are managing a recession: Thatcher and Lawson in 1981 had *Brideshead Revisited*, Major and Clarke in 1995 got the wet-shirted Colin

[28] Freedland.

[29] Freedland; Stephanie Merritt, 'Did Ed Miliband steal Sarah Millican's gag during Budget 2012?', *Guardian* (21 March 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/mar/21/ed-miliband-sarah-millican-joke> [accessed 4 June 2014].

[30] '*Downton Abbey* was a hit. Now *Upstairs Downstairs* is looming. Do you welcome the return of 'toff TV'?', *Guardian Arts Diary* (11 November 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/poll/2010/nov/11/downton-abbey> [accessed 4 June 2014].

[31] '*Downton Abbey* was a hit'.

> Firth in *Pride and Prejudice* and now Cameron and Osborne cut public spending to the backdrop of the Granthams and Crawleys.[32]

Lawson reductively presumes that any country house text produced during a Conservative premiership must itself be inherently conservative. The conflation of the Conservative-led government responsible for creating inequality and the country house setting widely conceptualised as signifying a master/servant social dynamic implies a presumption that country house texts breed nostalgia for Britain's pre-war social hierarchy with its combined extremes of wealth and poverty.

Figure 1: 'Please No Second Series': Unite poster (2014)[33]

[32] David Priestland, 'The Gentle Tory is alive and well – on television', *Guardian* (3 September 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/03/gentle-tory-parades-end-yearning> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Mark Lawson, '*Downton Abbey* triumphs as toff television takes orff, again', *Guardian* (8 November 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2010/nov/08/downton-abbey-itv-ratings-winner> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[33] Maisie McCabe, 'Unite mocks wealth of cabinet in Downton ad', *Campaign* (30 September 2013) <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/1214117/> [accessed 12 November 2014].

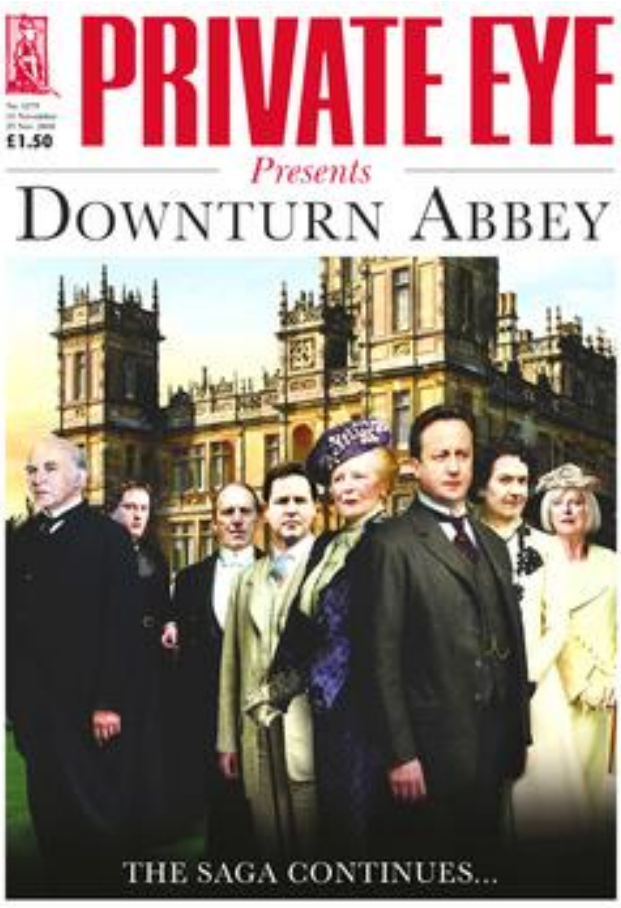

Figure 2: 'Downturn Abbey', *Private Eye* cover (2010)[34]

The presumption that country house texts are derivative of Tory ideology is further implied in the genre's shifting critical reception following the coalition's rise to power in 2010. Many country house novels published before this time were well-received. *Atonement*, for example, was a bestseller and nominated for the Man Booker, as was Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009). *The Thirteenth Tale*, too, was 'one of the biggest fiction debuts of the year' and was later adapted for the BBC.[35] Even *Gosford Park* (2001), Fellowes's first country house script, was critically acclaimed. For all commentators recognised the politics of the country house setting as problematic, they did not let this colour their responses to

[34] *Private Eye*, 1275 (12 November 2010) <http://www.private-eye.co.uk/covers/cover-1275> [accessed 20 August 2015].

[35] Ian Herbert, 'Teacher secures £1.3 million advance for her debut novel', *Independent* (24 December 2005) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/teacher-secures-16313m-advance-for-her-debut-novel-520588.html> [accessed 12 August 2015].

contemporary country house texts – that is, until the texts were produced under a Conservative-led government. Since 2010, then, cultural commentators have increasingly regarded country house texts as conservative nostalgia unworthy of intelligent readers. Hari Kunzru, for example, regards Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* as 'frank conservatism' and 'profoundly nostalgic', while Blake Morrison suggests that contemporary English country house novels are descended from the nostalgia of P. G. Wodehouse and Evelyn Waugh, a view corroborated by Nicola Humble.[36] Emma Parker similarly writes of the 'contemporary preoccupation with the country house and the conservative tradition of country house literature'.[37] The resurgence of the genre is thus widely conceptualised as a return to a conservative form.

2010 was, notably, also the year that *Downton* first aired and *Upstairs Downstairs* returned to BBC1. As with the shift in reception to the country house novel, the reception of *Downton* is far more negative than the reception of Fellowes's earlier country house film, *Gosford Park,* and the response to the revived *Upstairs Downstairs* is also more critical than that evoked by its 1970s predecessor.[38] A similar critical shift occurred in response to British

[36] Hari Kunzru, '*The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst – review', *Observer* (25 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/25/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-kunzru> [accessed 17 November 2014]; Blake Morrison, 'The country house and the English novel', *Guardian* (11 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/11/country-house-novels-blake-morrison> [accessed 17 November 2014]; Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[37] Emma Parker, 'The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*', in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 99-113, (p. 99).

[38] *Gosford*, of course, is directed and co-written by the American Robert Altman, known for his satire of generic conventions and social norms, and therefore differs from *Downton* in both its production and form. However, as another of Fellowes's recent pieces on the country house, it serves as a useful comparison to evidence the shift in reception of British country house texts. On the subject of *Gosford* vs. *Downton*, compare Tom Dewe Mathews, 'The insider', *Guardian* (24 January 2002) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/jan/24/artsfeatures.awardsandprizes> [accessed 8 June 2015] and Peter Bradshaw, 'It's a wonderful death', *Guardian* (1 February 2002) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/feb/01/artsfeatures> [accessed 7 July 2015] to Martin Pengelly, 'Spoiler alert: *Downton Abbey* is a waste of America's precious TV binge time', *Guardian* (23 February 2014)

heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s which, originally well-received and commercially successful, were later deemed derivative of Thatcherism's commodification of history in Britain's 'heritage industry'.[39] Chastised as 'Thatcherism in period dress', heritage films suffered what Claire Monk terms an 'off-the-peg critique' which cast them as conservative, objectionable *because* they showed the bourgeoisie rather than because of *how* they showed them.[40] Andrew Higson, for example, argued that such films exhibited 'a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged classes'.[41] The similarities between the anti-heritage-film rhetoric of the 1980s and 90s and the critical suspicion of country house texts since 2010 is underlined by the media's response to *Downton*, which directly references this rhetoric. Viv Groskop, for example, aligns *Downton* with British heritage films, denouncing *Downton*'s 'class nostalgia' as 'the latest conservative cultural product to peddle our outdated national stereotypes' from 'a long line of conservative

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/downton-abbey-season-4-us-spoilers> [accessed 8 June 2015]. On the topic of *Upstairs Downstairs*, see Kenneth Gosling, 'Windlesham BBC tribute', *The Times*, 26 October 1974; PHS, 'The Times Diary', *The Times*, 10 May 1977; Alan Coren, 'The great series dies at last', *The Times*, 22 December 1975; Janet Watts, 'Behind the stairway to a hundred million hearts', *Guardian*, 28 August 1974; Viv Groskop, '*Upstairs Downstairs* is axed, but did it really have to die?', *Guardian TV and Radio Blog* (23 April 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/apr/23/upstairs-downstairs-axed> [accessed 16 June 2014]; Steven Fielding, 'The new *Upstairs, Downstairs* is more period than drama', *Guardian TV and Radio Blog* (27 December 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/27/upstairs-downstairs-period-drama> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Barbara Ellen, '*Downton Abbey*'s just the opiate of the middle classes', *Guardian Comment is Free* <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/01/barbara-ellen-downton-abbey-shopping> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[39] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, vol. I (London: Verso, 1994).

[40] Claire Monk, 'The Heritage-Film Debate Revisited', in *British Historical Cinema*, ed. by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 176-98, (p. 187).

[41] Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12.

cultural phenomena' dating back to 'Merchant Ivory'.[42] Jerome de Groot similarly pronounces *Downton* 'heritage television' based on Higson's critique.[43] In fact, Katherine Byrne draws direct parallels between Higson's arguments and her reading of *Downton*, describing the show as 'in many ways a classic example of what Andrew Higson and other critics have termed a heritage production'.[44] Byrne therefore describes the series as 'a return to the more traditional notion of heritage' because it follows, 'albeit self-consciously, in the tradition of costume drama from the 1980s'.[45] The resurgence of the country house across many cultural forms, then, has prompted commentators to align contemporary texts with the conservative heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s in which the setting was central. As such, many have presumed that these contemporary texts must be similarly conservative. The reception of country house texts, then, is often biased by the political culture in which they emerge.

'Printed Television': The Cultural Value of the Country House Text

The cultural diffusion of the country house resurgence, and the suggestion that contemporary country house texts are derivative of both Tory ideology and the nostalgia of period drama, have led to perception of the contemporary English country house novel as conservative and escapist entertainment. In his 1959 preface to *Brideshead*, Waugh refers to the genre's perceived lack of cultural value. He emphasises the perceived popularity of the

[42] Viv Groskop, '*Downton Abbey*'s class nostalgia is another toxic British export', *Guardian* (17 September 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/17/downton-abbey-nostalgia-british-export-stereotypes> [accessed 17 November 2014].

[43] Jerome de Groot, '*Downton Abbey*: Nostalgia For An Idealised Past?', *History Today* (19 September 2011) <http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/09/downton-abbey-nostalgia-idealised-past> [accessed 17 November 2014].

[44] Katherine Byrne, 'Adapting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in *Downton Abbey*', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 18 (2013), 311-327, (p. 312).

[45] Byrne, p. 5. *Downton* is notably the most successful British period drama since the ITV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981).

country house novel, claiming *Brideshead* 'lost me such esteem as I once enjoyed among my contemporaries and led me into an unfamiliar world of fan-mail and press photographers'.[46] Critically disparaged and yet enjoyed by a wide readership, Waugh's conservative and nostalgic novel set the tone for the reception of the genre after World War Two. The genre's lack of esteem has since been amplified by the critical hostility towards British heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s. Contemporary English country house novels are often compared to country house period dramas in their marketing and reception. In fact, some popular texts seek to capitalise on the wide audience of these period drama intertexts. Fellowes's 2005 novel, *Snobs*, for instance, has recently been re-released by Phoenix with a cover featuring servant bells and the strap line 'from the writer and creator of *Downton Abbey*' (2012). Underscoring Fellowes's links to popular entertainment, the novel features on its cover a quotation from Stephen Fry (presumably solicited because of his appearance in country house intertexts, *Jeeves and Wooster* (1990-3) and *Gosford*) describing the text as 'everything you would hope for from the writer of "Gosford Park."' [47] Similarly, Jennie Walters's *Swallowcliffe* series is described on her website as 'Perfect for *Downton Abbey* fans', much like the cover of Jane Sanderson's *Netherwood* (2011) deems her novel 'Perfect for fans of *Downton Abbey*'.[48] Sanderson's website even lists 'a few links that ought to be of interest to anyone who enjoys a good period drama'.[49] Indeed, many reviewers of *Netherwood* on Good Reads are quick to compare the novel to *Downton* and *Upstairs Downstairs*.[50] The authors

[46] Evelyn Waugh, Preface to *Brideshead Revisited* [1959] (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. ix.

[47] Julian Fellowes, *Snobs* (London: Phoenix, 2012).

[48] *Jennie Walters* <http://www.jenniewalters.com/> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Jane Sanderson, *Netherwood* (London: Sphere, 2011).

[49] 'Links', *Jane Sanderson* <http://www.jane-sanderson.com/extras/links/> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[50] Lucinda (7 March 2013) and QNPoohBear (21 October 2014) on 'Netherwood', *Good Reads* <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11566459-netherwood> [accessed 21 October 2014]. The 2004 edition of Isabel Colegate's *The Shooting Party* (1981) includes an introduction by Fellowes to crediting the novel as the inspiration behind *Gosford*, while a recent *Guardian* article cited the novel as the inspiration behind *Downton* (Isabel Colegate, *The Shooting Party* [1981] (London: Penguin, 2004); Beulah Maud Devaney, 'Tracing *Downton Abbey*'s lineage: the novel that inspired a TV hit', *Guardian* (11 November 2013)

and readers of the contemporary English country house novel therefore position the text in relation to the mounting populism of the country house and its cultural diffusion.

Aware of the critical hostility towards popular country house texts, positive reviews of some contemporary English country house novels occasionally distance the texts from British period drama. Keith Miller's review of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011), for example, claims that although '[t]here is […] something filmic in the book's enveloping embrace', that is 'not the "heritage cinema" of Merchant Ivory et al, but the more experimental, argumentative efforts of the Sixties and Seventies'.[51] Miller distinguishes Hollinghurst's use of the country house setting from that of Merchant Ivory because of the latter's perception as producers of conservative entertainment. Instead, he allies the novel with the period dramas of the sixties and seventies which were deemed more 'argumentative'; that is to say, more critical of the social structures upheld by their central settings. Hollinghurst, too, feels the need to address his novel's intertextual connection to *Downton* in broadsheet interviews in which he claims that, although there 'have been big Victorian country houses in my last three novels', 'I had to be careful this book wasn't marketed as a *Downton Abbey*-type thing'.[52] Judith Kinghorn has similarly distanced her novel, *The Last Summer* (2012), from the programme on her website, insisting that it came into being 'long before *Downton Abbey* hit our screens!'[53] The fact that these authors feel the need to justify their use of the country house post-*Downton*, particularly Hollinghurst who has employed it

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<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/nov/11/downton-abbey-novel-tv-isabel-colegate-shooting-party> [accessed 8 June 2015]).

[51] Keith Miller, '*The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst: review', *Telegraph* (17 June 2011) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8579150/The-Strangers-Child-by-Alan-Hollinghurst-review.html> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[52] Stephen Moss, 'Alan Hollinghurst: Sex on the brain', *Guardian* (18 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/18/alan-hollinghurst-interview> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[53] Judith Kinghorn, 'Judith', *Judith Kinghorn Writer* <http://www.judithkinghornwriter.com/about/> [accessed 8 June 2015].

several times before, highlights a self-conscious awareness of the country house's perceived drop in cultural value in recent years as a result of its use in popular entertainment.

The cultural diffusion of the country house resurgence, then, poses a unique issue to contemporary authors in terms of the perceived value of the country house novel. As Malcolm Bradbury highlights, contemporary literature has been 'challenged and transformed by new technological media – film, television, Internet'.[54] Indeed, Dominic Head argues that the serious novel is 'compromised' by the 'pressures' exerted by competing forms of entertainment such as reality television, chick lit, and lad lit.[55] He alludes to Rod Liddle's article mourning novelist's suppressed imagination in a bid to make the novel 'relevant and attuned to the times' and 'shamelessly… middlebrow'.[56] As the above reviews suggest, English country house novels are often perceived to be popular entertainment merely by virtue of containing a setting currently pervasive in popular cultural forms. Indeed, the cross-cultural resurgence of the setting reflects Clive Bloom's description of the 'great popular work' as opening out 'into a need for translation into other media'.[57] The English country house novel's links with television and popular forms have therefore contributed to its perception as escapist entertainment unworthy of critical attention. This may be the reason why McEwan's website fails to mention his screenplays such as *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1985), or that eight of his works have been adapted into film.[58] McEwan is marketed as an

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[54] Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xiii.

[55] Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 13.

[56] Rod Liddle, 'Comment', *The Sunday Times*, 14 January 2007, pp. 6-7, cited in Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

[57] Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 21; Morrison.

[58] *IanMcEwan.com* <http://www.ianmcewan.com/> [accessed 8 June 2015]. *Last Day of Summer*, dir. by Derek Banham (Film 4, 1984); *The Cement Garden*, dir. by Andrew Birkin (Neue Constantin Film, 1993); *The Comfort of Strangers*, dir. by Paul Schrader (Skouras Pictures, 1990); *The Innocent*, dir. by John Schlesinger (Miramax, 1993); *Solid Geometry*, dir. by Dennis Lawson (Grampian Television, 2002); *Enduring Love*, dir. by Roger Michell (Pathe Pictures, 2004). According to Barbara Chai, *Sweet Tooth* (2012) will also be adapted soon

exclusively *literary* and therefore high art figure. As a form highly ingratiated in the crossover between page and screen, the contemporary English country house novel has often been characterised as a frivolous form of escapist entertainment opposed to the intellectualism of highbrow literature. The association between contemporary English country house novels and popular entertainment has been exacerbated through its links to the television book club. *The Little Stranger*, Fellowes's *Past Imperfect* (2009), Katherine Webb's *The Legacy* (2011), and Essie Fox's *The Somnambulist* (2011) have all been selected by television book clubs, which Richard Todd describes as 'unacademic'.[59] Proudly presented as commercial entertainment, Channel 4's *Richard and Judy's Book Club* (2004-2009) and its subsequent reading lists in partnership with WH Smith's have featured numerous country house novels. The show's producer, Amanda Ross, rejects any associations with high art; she describes the programme as 'entertainment' and 'openly declares that she doesn't like the word literary'.[60] The contemporary English country house novel, then, is ingratiated within an intertextual web of popular entertainment. As a result, its intellectual and literary value is questioned.

Recent debates in literary culture reveal anxieties regarding a text's ability to be simultaneously entertaining and intellectual. It is presumed that texts that appeal to the masses must lack literary sophistication. The Booker shortlist of 2011, which notoriously overlooked the long-listed favourite country house novel, *The Stranger's Child*, was the most popular shortlist with the public since records began, yet widely attacked by literary

('Working Title Secures Rights to Ian McEwan's New Novel, "Sweet Tooth"', *Wall Street Journal Blog* (27 October 2012) <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/10/27/working-title-options-ian-mcewans-new-novel-sweet-tooth/> [accessed 6 July 2015]).

[59] Richard Todd, 'Literary Fiction and the Book Trade', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 19-38, (p. 34). *The Thirteenth Tale* (London: Orion, 2006), *The Last Summer* (London: Headline, 2012), and Sanderson's *Netherwood* (London: Sphere, 2012) and *Ravenscliffe* (London: Sphere, 2012) also include questions for reading group discussion.

[60] Alex Clark, 'The queen of TV bookclubs Amanda Ross', *Guardian* (16 January 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/16/amanda-ross-tv-bookclub-interview> [accessed 12 November 2013].

personalities for valuing 'readability' above all else.[61] One publisher highlighted the expectation of 'at least a few impenetrable, dark, tricky novels' on the shortlist because 'the whole thing needs to be an utter snobfest, otherwise how is it different from the Costas?'[62] Jeanette Winterson similarly complained that the shortlisted books demanded a kind of 'no-frills novel-reading experience that goes from A to B and does not tax the brain'.[63] Winterson claims that the recent emphasis on readability arose because '[w]e are nervous about anything that seems elitist or inaccessible' and desire 'a kind of printed television'.[64] She thereby suggests that serious literature must be distinct from television in a way that the contemporary English country house novel can never be.

The perception of the country house text as escapist is exacerbated by readers who describe their engagement with the texts as mindless indulgence, often employing metaphors of comfort eating. Thus Fellowes's *Snobs* is deemed by Fry 'a guilty treat' and, by an *Amazon* reviewer, who claims to have 'devoured *Snobs* […], lapping up the details of privilege and wealth', 'delicious'.[65] The same trend is visible in *Downton* reviews in which viewers are described as having 'over-indulged'.[66] Sarah Millican, for example, has described

[61] Alison Flood, 'Booker prize divides quality from readability, says Andrew Motion', *Guardian* (16 October 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/16/booker-prize-cricitism-andrew-motion> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[62] Flood.

[63] Jeanette Winterson, 'Ignore the Booker brouhaha. Readability is no test for literature', *Guardian* (18 October 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-readability-test-literature> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[64] Winterson.

[65] Stephen Fry, cited on *Amazon* <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Snobs-Novel-Lord-Julian-Fellowes/dp/1780224419> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Anne Maxwell-Stevenson, 'A delicious insight into the upper classes', *Amazon* review (18 April 2010) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Snobs-novel-Lord-Julian-Fellowes/dp/1780224419> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[66] Ellen.

the programme as a 'sorbet between busy weeks'.[67] Reading country house texts is therefore construed as a passive process, uncritical and consequently conservative, as exemplified by the following response to a *Guardian* article about the fascination with the country house in English literature:

> I do not find it at all mysterious that these houses are both a literary and national obssession [sic]. Especially in a class obssessed [sic] country full of under-funded, under-educated, under skilled, media brainfucked, cap doffing, do as your [sic] told royal fart catchers. Living in the past is a fuckin [sic] luxury to the poor, aimless sods.[68]

This comment suggests that the country house novel continues to be popular because its 'under-educated', 'aimless', and 'brainfucked' readers are conforming to the deference of the historical class system it represents rather than questioning it. The writer fails to consider the possibility that contemporary authors and readers might view the country house as a space in which to critically examine England's conservatism and social inequality, an argument I explore in this thesis.

The supposition that the contemporary English country house novel's associations with television indicate a lack of intellectualism or political reflection is misleading. For example, in response to Groskop's article in which she suggested that *Downton* was out to 'kill every radical bone in your body as you yearn for the return of dowagers, entails and primogeniture', one reader retorted that this argument dismisses working-class viewers and their preferences, presuming them 'dupes, shills and mindless cattle'.[69] The reader thus accuses Groskop of the same class-prejudice with which she took issue in the programme. The view of country house readers as mindless consumers of printed television, then, is reductive; reviews reveal them to be aware of the ideological negotiation at work in these texts. Similarly, when *Richard and Judy* viewers voted David Mitchell's famously

[67] Sarah Millican, '*Downton Abbey* lost me forever', *Radio Times* (20 October 2013) <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2013-10-20/sarah-millican-downton-abbey-lost-me-for-ever> [accessed 8 June 2015]. Humble has linked these consumptive metaphors with the feminine middlebrow.

[68] TREDEGARtom2, in response to Blake (11 June 2011).

[69] Brandybaby in response to Groskop, '*Downton Abbey*'s class nostalgia' (17 September 2014).

demanding Booker-shortlisted *Cloud Atlas* their favourite in 2005, the accusations of dumbing-down for the sake of television viewers were silenced.[70] Yet the popularity of the country house setting on television, as well as the association between country house novels and television book clubs, seems to have inhibited the academic study of these texts by literary scholars, who are themselves invested in the hierarchy of cultural forms which privileges film over television and distinguishes literature from Literature. Drawing on evidence provided by readers in online reviews and comments, this thesis argues that the contemporary English country house novel invites readings that are politically conscious and critical of the social structures the setting appears to uphold.

The genre, much like the houses it depicts, is evolving, opening up, and spreading across the cultural spectrum. As such, it incorporates both popular and highbrow elements. Head suggests that this 'cultural blurring' and 'drift towards the middlebrow' has occurred in the British novel generally in recent years.[71] Steven Connor, too, notes that 'both the reading and readerships of fiction have become more complex, hybrid and mobile'.[72] In this thesis, I will be examining the contemporary English country house novel as an example of this wider literary trend, exploring how the genre uses self-conscious reflection and inherited generic expectations to negotiate the cultural value of the English country house novel in contemporary culture. The contemporary English country house novel, I argue, is highly self-conscious of its form, its lineage, and its reception in contemporary British culture. Before analysing these novels in detail in the four chapters that follow, I will conclude this General Introduction by briefly outlining the key generic features and how these have evolved from the often overlooked postwar country house novel.

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[70] Indeed, the programme has featured numerous critically-acclaimed books such as Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005), Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) (both shortlisted for the Booker Prize) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) (winner of the Orange Prize).

[71] Head, *Cambridge*, p. 12.

[72] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 12.

The Contemporary English Country House Novel

The country house novel has no specific definition or even a consistent term of reference. This terminological inconsistency arises from the differing descriptions of the genre's central setting: Hugo G. Walter, for example, writes of 'magnificent houses' as a European literary trope, while scholars of Irish literature refer to the Big House novel.[73] Su, meanwhile, refers to *Brideshead* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) as 'British estate novels'.[74] What is more, critics' usage of the term 'country house novel' slips between novels featuring country houses and country house novels proper. Morrison, for example, considers Ned Beauman's *Boxer Beetle* (2010) a 'country-house novel' (the hyphen representing yet another name for the genre), despite the setting being used very briefly and described little.[75] This thesis focuses on novels in which the country house setting plays a central and figurative role. My investigation begins in September 2001 with the publication of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* and encompasses Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* (2003), Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005), Julian Fellowes's *Snobs* (2004) and *Past Imperfect* (2008), Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009), Katherine Webb's *The Legacy* (2010), Jane Sanderson's *Netherwood* (2011), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011), and Jennie Walters's *Swallowcliffe Hall* series (2005, 2006, 2008).[76]

This is a very fluid literary category and the above texts do not necessarily belong exclusively to the country house novel genre; that is to say, they are read, appropriated, and

[73] Hugo G. Walter, *Magnificent Houses in Twentieth Century European Literature* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2012); Kreilkamp.

[74] John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[75] Morrison.

[76] Other examples beyond the scope of this project include Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), James Herbert's *The Secret of Crickley Hall* (2006), Lucie Whitehouse's *The House at Midnight* (2008), Essie Fox's *The Somnambulist* (2011), Katie Ward's *Girl Reading* (2011), Rachel Hore's *A Gathering Storm* (2011), Amanda Brooke's *Yesterday's Sun* (2012), P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2012), Jane Sanderson's *Ravenscliffe* (2012), and Judith Kinghorn's *The Last Summer* (2012) and *The Memory of Lost Senses* (2013).

marketed in other ways.[77] Nonetheless, newspaper articles and online reviews draw these novels together and regard them as a related, though not hegemonic, category of texts closely linked to similar trends in other cultural forms.[78] Indeed, *Waterstones* has a free downloadable reading guide on 'country house fiction' and *Good Reads* reviewers have compiled a list of 'English country house novels' on which many of the novels in this study feature.[79] Even the authors themselves refer to their texts as country house novels.[80] My intellectual rationale for studying these novels together, then, stems less from a definitive taxonomy of shared generic tropes, and more from a recognition that these texts are widely understood to comprise the literary component of a wider cultural engagement with the country house setting. The novels in this study span the cultural spectrum from highbrow and popular, capturing the genre's cultural diffusion. The combination of mass-market paperbacks by authors such as Fellowes and literary texts by writers such as Hollinghurst is intended to emphasize commonalities among popular and highbrow examples within the genre. As a group these texts highlight the ongoing negotiation of the cultural value and meaning of the English country house setting in British culture.

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[77] *The Last Summer*, for example, might be read as a romance, while *The Little Stranger* can be viewed as a neo-Gothic ghost story. *The Thirteenth Tale* and *Misfortune* have also been regarded by scholars as neo-Victorian novels (Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)).

[78] See, for example, Morrison; John Lucas, 'The deep foundations of the country-house novel', *Guardian Book Blog* (1 February 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/feb/01/country-house-novel> [accessed 8 June 2015]; 'English country house novels', *Good Reads* <http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/19597.English_Country_House_Novels> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[79] 'English Country House Fiction', *Waterstones* <www.waterstones.com/waterstonesweb/pages/content/200001651/> [accessed 7 June 2014]; 'English Country House Novels', *Good Reads* <http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/19597.English_Country_House_Novels> [accessed 7 June 2014].

[80] McEwan referred to *Atonement* as his 'country house novel', while Litt classifies *Finding Myself* as belonging to the country house novel genre (Ian McEwan in Kate Kellaway, 'At Home with his Worries', *Observer* (16 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/16/fiction.ianmcewan> [accessed 1 November 2012]; Toby Litt in interview with Richard Marshall, 'The New Bawdy', *3am Magazine* <http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/oct/interview_toby_litt.html> [accessed 8 June 2015]).

I have focused on depictions of English country houses by English authors to increase the validity of my discussions about the figurative significance of the setting.[81] The Irish Big House has a very different history and literary tradition linked to religion and landlordism that is largely irrelevant to its English counterpart. My focus on representations of English settings by English authors is also motivated by the increasing sense of devolution within the British Isles and the growth of English nationalism to which the resurgence of the country house setting is no doubt related. While the rise of the country house setting has occurred across *British* cultural forms, the setting has remained a specifically English one in most of these forms.[82] The boundaries of nationhood remain contentious in British culture, particularly in light of the recent debates about the UK's membership of the European Union, Cameron's proposed curriculum of British values, and Scotland's referendum on independence and the landslide election of SNP MPs in 2015.[83] Britain's definition of nationhood, then, is becoming increasingly insular, particularly in light of the country's politically-dubious involvement in the Middle East. Indeed, the resurgence of the country house in British culture began around the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and has continued in the wake of the Iraq war (2003-2011), the occupation of Afghanistan (2001-2014), and the on-going war against terror (2001-present). In the midst of the centenary of World War I (2014-2018), then, many contemporary English country house novels have returned to periods of war when the UK's internal boundaries were less prominent, and thus represent a retreat

[81] Though Waters is Welsh, I have included *The Little Stranger* because it is set in England and is a rewrite of English forerunner, Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948). Indeed Waters is largely influenced by English writers and has studied for three English Literature degrees in England, living here since she was 19.

[82] That said, the scholarly field could greatly benefit from readings of country house novels from other nations both within and beyond the British Isles.

[83] 'David Cameron – A Britain that gives every child the best start in life', *CCHQ Press* (2 February 2015) <http://press.conservatives.com/post/109906886845/david-cameron-a-britain-that-gives-every-child> [accessed 10 August 2015].

from global politics, reflecting a preoccupation with the nation's internal social structures instead.[84]

While I have limited my study to English authors, however, the nationality of the genre's readership is less contained. My own readings of these texts are informed by the ways in which they speak to contemporary British culture and its history, particularly with regard to class and gender, because I situate these contemporary novels within a wider cultural resurgence in Britain particularly. Yet the readership of these novels extends beyond the British Isles and, in some cases, beyond English speakers, who no doubt bring their own cultural schemas to their readings of the texts. My research method of consulting online reviews and comments on websites such as *Amazon* and *Good Reads* unavoidably draws on readers that may not necessarily be English. The result of this is that my readings of the novels are largely specific to the UK but are informed by and to an extent generalisable to readers beyond the British Isles.

The novels in this study are connected not only through their focus on England's internal structures but through an intertextual web of reference that draws on a common lineage of canonical generic forerunners. The contemporary English country house novel is descended from seventeenth-century country house poetry by canonical writers such as Ben Jonson, Amelia Lanyer, and Alexander Pope. According to Kelsall, this poetry gradually diffused itself into 'a plethora of second-rate poems in praise of estates' in a process of cultural blurring later mirrored in the country house novel.[85] Thus for all country house was initially adopted by canonical eighteenth-century novelists such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Jane Austen, from the twentieth century onward the genre was increasingly appropriated by middlebrow authors such as Wodehouse and Dodie Smith. Reading this

[84] Examples include *Atonement*, *The Stranger's Child*, *The Last Summer*, *A Gathering Storm*, and *Swallowcliffe Hall: Shelter from the Storm* (2007). The prevalence of images of military service and its hierarchy of authority resonate with the country house's hierarchy of domestic servants in a particularly British way.

[85] Kelsall, *Great*, p. 8.

transition from highbrow to middlebrow as a trajectory toward conservatism, Humble suggests that country house novels by middlebrow authors such as Josephine Tey and Ivy Compton-Burnett either dislocated the country house setting from class politics or exhibited an 'elegiac tone' that 'tap[ped] into a middle-class nostalgia for a largely fantasised aristocratic past'.[86] *Brideshead* is an obvious example of this conservative nostalgia. Waugh's novel seemingly marks the point at which the genre becomes less prevalent in English literature as scholarly accounts of the English country house novel generally focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and usually end with *Brideshead*.[87] The decline of the country house novel was interpreted as corresponding to the decline of the houses and landed gentry on which the texts centre. Raymond Williams views the middlebrow novels of the early- to mid-twentieth century, in which, he claims, the country house setting has no meaning and serves merely as a space on to which the problems of the city are transposed, as a 'fitting end' to the country house genre that corresponds to the decline of England's country houses.[88] In fact, in his article on modernism's use of the setting, Mark D. Larabee claims that, as a literary setting, 'the country house had its heyday in the seventeenth century'.[89] As such, the English country house novel represents something of a decadent genre, connected to the decline of both England's pre-war social hierarchy and the literary value of this typically English fiction of which, critics suggest, *Brideshead* marks the end. I will return to this idea of decadence in my conclusion. However, before assessing these critical accounts of the country house genre in more detail, I will first briefly outline how the genre has evolved since *Brideshead*, underlining the shared preoccupations between postwar and contemporary texts that form the foundation of this thesis.

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[86] Humble, pp. 62, 190-1.

[87] Kelsall, *Great*; Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: the English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1972).

[88] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 249.

[89] Mark D. Larabee, 'Modernism and the Country House in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 53 (2010) 75-94, (p. 75).

The key theme present in the English country house novel since its conception is lineage. Central to *Brideshead*, it continued to be pivotal in the postwar country house novel. Both Michael Innes's *Christmas at Candleshoe* (1953) and Compton-Burnett's *A Heritage and Its History* (1959), for example, detail the search for the rightful heir to the family seat. However, it is Compton-Burnett's consideration of women's relationship to primogeniture that has been taken up by most contemporary country house novelists, as I explore in chapter one. In *A Heritage and its History*, Marcia questions her right to her husband's family seat: 'Someone younger and more dependent would fit the part'.[90] Emotionally unattached to the house, Marica lives a disconnected existence:

> I shall live in it, an alien, in the end I daresay a slave, but never drawn into it, always apart in myself. […] My hope is to fear and serve it, and hand it on to people who love the bond. I could never join them (*Heritage*, p. 204).

When Marcia's son inherits the house, his wife echoes Marcia's disconnection from the country house: 'I have no roots here, no rights here, only the right of occupation and service until my use is past' (*Heritage*, p. 211). Compton-Burnett's female characters view themselves as stewards of a property to which only men can lay claim. In their examination of the country house setting in popular romance novels, Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood suggest that the country house genre offers women a unique opportunity for social ascension by placing them at the helm of a national icon.[91] In contrast, my examination of contemporary novels by Setterfield and Beauman reveal that the genre counters women's exclusion from male primogeniture by switching focus from material to textual inheritance. They present the country house as an inherited symbol of a female literary matrilineage. The focus on lineage in the contemporary English country house novel is now less concerned with who will inherit the country house and more preoccupied with who has been excluded from

[90] Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A Heritage and its History* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1959), p. 203 (hereafter '*Heritage*').

[91] Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood, 'Half-Crown Houses: The Crisis of the Country House in the Postwar Romance', in *Brave New Causes: Women in British Postwar Fictions* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), pp. 41– 57.

the canonical house of fiction in the country house tradition. *The Stranger's Child*, for example, engages with the muted representation of homosexuality in the canon, using missing texts as a metaphor for this absence (see chapter one).

As a result of this shift from material to literary inheritance, the contemporary English country house novel is often filled with self-conscious intertextual references to earlier texts in the genre. This trope began in the postwar period; *Candleshoe*, for example, makes somewhat heavy-handed references to canonical English writers such as Chaucer, Milton, and Byron. But the novels in this study mostly draw specifically on country house predecessors. For example, Waters reworks Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948) in *The Little Stranger*, while Beauman rewrites Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1932) in *Rebecca's Tale*. *The Thirteenth Tale*, in particular, builds a strong connection with common intertext, *Jane Eyre* (1847), while *Atonement* draws on Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), and L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), to name but a few. The self-consciousness of the country house tradition implicit in this intertextual web of reference is made explicit in the paratextual emphasis on such texts in author interviews and marketing, as chapter one reveals. In contrast to postmodernism's 'random cannibalization of all the styles of the past', the contemporary English country house novel's use of intertextuality represents a purposeful, focussed channelling of a literary lineage that reflects on the tradition's evolution.[92] Unlike their predecessors, then, contemporary English country house novels do not employ intertextuality merely as a means of signalling and securing the cultural capital of the implied author and reader, nor as merely a postmodern rejection of metanarratives, although both of these are still at work. Since 2000, the trope of intertextuality has mostly been a matter of genre-consolidation: the novels I explore in chapters one and three are engaged in a self-reflexive negotiation of generic boundaries.

[92] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 18.

This self-reflexivity is relatively new, but can be traced back to early glimpses in novels such as *Candleshoe* and *A Heritage and its History.* The narrator of *Candleshoe* acts as a tour guide through the novel, which closes by reflecting on how 'the denouement of our comedy' has been 'touched by the canons of eighteenth-century romance'.[93] Innes's protagonist, Jay, is described as 'the hero – after a fashion – of this story', just as, at the end of *A Heritage and its History*, the characters debate which of them is the novel's hero: '"Father," said Ralph. "It can be no one else. And if we think, it is no one else. Unless my saying it makes me the hero myself."'(*Candleshoe*, p. 38; *Heritage*, p. 240). The characters' awareness of themselves as inhabiting a fictional world is underlined when Emma expresses her pleasure at a cracked teapot because '[i]t is like a book' and Graham agrees: 'It is true that teapots in books are out of repair' (*Heritage*, p. 178). These, however, are the few instances of self-consciousness in these respective novels and in the postwar English country house novel generally. As in British literature as a whole, self-reflexivity has since become more common in the genre. *Atonement*, *Finding Myself*, and *The Thirteenth Tale*, for example, feature characters that are novelists, while the characters in *Misfortune*, *Rebecca's Tale*, and *The Stranger's Child* create poetry and (auto)biographies. *Finding Myself* is particularly self-reflexive as it takes the form of a typed manuscript edited by hand, while *Atonement* ends on a metafictional twist with a note from a surprising implied author. In chapter three, I argue that the motif of authorship in the genre is a self-reflexive way of foregrounding the work of writing and thereby signalling cultural value. This is a self-conscious response to the genre's decreasing literary value due to the popularisation of the country house setting through television and film.

As well as characters who write, characters who read have also become integral to the contemporary English country house novel. The genre is populated by characters that are

[93] Michael Innes, *Christmas at Candleshoe* [1953] (Cornwall: House of Stratus, 2001), p. 179 (hereafter '*Candleshoe*').

literature scholars, biographers, and historians. As David Leon Higdon suggests, the interest in such characters is a 'significant development in post-war fiction' generally.[94] The research expertises of these characters are often pivotal in uncovering secrets to further the plot, but are also integral in drawing the margins to the centre in the country house setting. In chapter two I explore how an eye for detail is often a metaphor for class consciousness in the genre. Thus while considerations of detail in country house texts have chiefly regarded the trope as merely decorative, contemporary authors such as McEwan and Stace have recuperated the trope to political ends. In their novels, reading detail is a way of recognising those traditionally marginalised by the social hierarchy the country house embodies.

Despite the increasing focus on the social margins in the genre, the characters of the contemporary English country house novel are predominantly white and English. In contrast to postwar novels such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), and *The Remains of the Day*, which explored the country house from a postcolonial perspective, the Englishness of the English country house novel in its current form is strikingly narrow in terms of race.[95] Although the backdrop of war creates a context of imperialism in *The Last Summer*, *The Stranger's Child*, *Atonement*, and *Swallowcliffe Hall: Shelter from the Storm* (2007), it is always explored through a white perspective. In fact, the whiteness of the English country house novel has become so prolific that it is an object of satire in Litt's *Finding Myself*. His implied author, Victoria, invites people to a country house so that she can novelise the events. Drawing up her 'cast' of her friends and family, Victoria leaves room for 'a representative of as many minorities as I can find (Simona [her editor] insists we "at least make an attempt to reflect the diversity of Britain

[94] David Leon Higdon, *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 11.

[95] Head offers a brief postcolonial reading of the country house in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), which features a village named Big House (*Cambridge*). The term 'Big House' is also used in the novel to refer to Harinda P. Singh's house, suggesting the interchangability of the village and the country house reminiscent of Gill's view of the country house as a symbol of community. While much has been written on the postcolonial elements of earlier novels such as Austen's *Mansfield Park*, there is much scope for further work on the postcolonial in contemporary novels such *The Secret of Crickley Hall* (Edward W. Said, 'Jane Austen and Empire', *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf 1993), pp. 80-97; Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara, 'Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Property, and the British Empire', *Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 17 (1995), 106-110; John Wiltshire, 'Decolonising *Mansfield Park*', *Essays in Criticism*, 53 (2003), 303-22).

today")'.[96] Litt here pokes fun at the narrow range of characters typically represented in English country house fiction – Victoria's guests include just one token non-white person.[97] She also problematically equates 'England' with the entirety of the British Isles: '[b]y England I mean Great Britain/the United Kingdom, etc., whatever you call it – so don't go getting uppity' (*Finding*, p. 23). Through his implied author, Litt suggests that contemporary country house novelists are aware of their problematic representation of Britishness but unwilling to alter it.[98]

In this regard, particularly, the contemporary English country house novel echoes the conservatism of its generic predecessors; as Head suggests, a lack of cosmopolitanism is the privilege of the powerful and can be the sign of a worrying form of elitism.[99] The lack of racial diversity amongst servant characters is underlined by a contemporary context in which ethnic minority workers are highly condensed in poorly paid service sector jobs. The UK labour market generally is moving towards more low-paid, less secure, and more exploitative forms of employment, but Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) workers have been disproportionately affected by the growth in part-time, insecure and low-paid employment.[100] Indeed, there is more poverty in every ethnic minority group than among the white British

[96] Toby Litt, *Finding Myself* [2003] (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9 (hereafter '*Finding*').

[97] Indeed, white, middle-class adults are generally more likely than working-class and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) adults to participate in heritage related activities, and stately homes 'are of little interest to BME groups who view them to be of little relevance to their culture and associated with an England which predates their presence in the country' (English Heritage, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Heritage Lottery Fund, MORI report, 'Making Heritage Count?' (2003) <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fhc.historicengland.org.uk%2Fcontent%2Fpub%2FMORI_report_Making_Heritage_Count.doc&ei=UxmcVeb9DYugsAGJ-JqoBw&usg=AFQjCNFVMBFljJ8vP5pVqjyyzHf7luZ6KA&bvm=bv.96952980,d.ZGU> [accessed 7 July 2015], p. 32, 37.) In English heritage tourism, the average country house visitor is a white, middle-class female over 40 (Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 131).

[98] Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013) has to some extent countered the whiteness of the genre and explored the racial dimension of service, though the novel contains only one black manservant.

[99] Head, *State*, p. 151.

[100] TUC, 'Living on the margins: Black workers and casualisation' (Equality and Employment Rights Department, 2015), pp. 1-2.

population, leaving many BME workers 'living on the margins of the labour market'.[101] Trades Union Congress (TUC) research suggests that there has been an increase in the number of BME workers employed in low-paid jobs, particularly in the service and social care sectors in which black workers tend to be concentrated in lower graded occupations.[102] Thus in contemporary Britain, the servant class is peopled by both white *and* BME workers. The relegation of ethnic minorities to poorly-paid jobs means they are an integral element of today's social margins not reflected in the contemporary English country house novel which focuses on the exclusively white margins of the working-class or women.

Indeed, while the contemporary English country house novel is problematically elitist in its depiction of race, it often gives voice to female and working-class characters traditionally marginalised by the genre and its setting, particularly servants. Each novel in the *Swallowcliffe* series is narrated by a servant character, while *Atonement, The Stranger's Child*, and *Netherwood* use free indirect discourse to portray working-class viewpoints. *Swallowcliffe* and *Atonement*, in particular, grant those traditionally and generically silent the same narrative authority and depth of characterisation as the upper-middle-class characters who have historically dominated the genre. With the exception of *The Remains of the Day*, servant narrators are a new development in the genre. This more democratic approach to narration is one of the key indicators that the contemporary interest in the country house is not simply born of a conservative fantasy of privileged luxury as the media suggests, but rather indicative of a taste for marginal narratives, like those surfacing at historical houses and in non-fiction.

The final notable development in the genre since 2000 is the erosion of the country house as a domestic, homely space. While the country house continues to function as a home in most postwar novels, more recent texts depict alternative fates for the setting. Country

[101] TUC, 'Living', pp. 1, 3.

[102] TUC, 'Living', p. 9.

houses become museums (*Misfortune, The Thirteenth Tale*), hotels (*Atonement*), and schools (*The Stranger's Child*), or are subject to dilapidation, destruction, or financial ruin (*Rebecca's Tale, The Little Stranger, The Thirteenth Tale,* and *The Stranger's Child*). Increasingly presented as a decaying structure, the English country house in contemporary literature is opening up, changing its function, and casting off old assumptions. The trope of ruin, explored in chapter four, signals a renegotiation of the significance of the country house setting in a culture simultaneously fascinated and frustrated with the setting. Setterfield and Waters deconstruct the country house as a way of exposing and addressing the conservatism it has traditionally represented.[103]

Surveying the Field

Despite the current resurgence of the English country house novel and recent interest in the country house from scholars of fine art, architecture, and history, literary scholarship on the genre, particularly its postwar and contemporary forms, is limited.[104] Existing research by Kelsall, Gill, and Larabee portrays the form as historical, focusing on works from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century.[105] Gill and Kelsall make only fleeting reference to postwar novels in the final chapters of their monographs on the topic.[106] Humble briefly mentions the genre in her work on the feminine middlebrow novels of the 1920s-50s, though she positions it as merely a subgenre of feminine middlebrow novels. The genre has also

[103] My consideration of the postwar country house novel here is regrettably brief and is narrowly focussed on how it relates to the contemporary evolution of the form. The scholarly field would greatly benefit from an extended study that compares novels such as *Candleshoe*, *Heritage*, *Remains*, and *Enigma*.

[104] David Long, *English Country House Eccentrics* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011); Jeremy Musson and Paul Barker, *English Country House Interiors* (London: Random House, 2011); Joanna Martin, *Wives and Daughters: Women and Children in the Georgian Country House* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004); Dana Arnold, *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003); J. T. Cliffe, *The World of the Country House in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[105] Kelsall, *Great*; Gill; Larabee.

[106] Gill; Kelsall, *Great*.

been regarded as a branch of Neo-Victorian or historical fiction, overlooking the country house's use as a contemporary setting.[107] Philips and Haywood have studied the country house in postwar British romance novels, however this is less a study of the English country house novel genre and more a study of the setting in romance fiction, and therefore overlooks the range of uses of the country house in literary and middlebrow novels.[108] As of yet, there is no definitive account of the country house novel in its postwar form.

The English country house novel rarely features in studies of postwar and contemporary British literature, contributing to the misconception that the form somewhat waned during the postwar period.[109] Morrison has briefly reflected on the recent resurgence of the English country house novel in an article for the *Guardian*, though his explanation of the resurgence as due to the genre's provision of a convenient setting in which characters can interact is reductive and considers the genre from the perspective of writers rather than readers.[110] Parker has recently written on the relationship between *The Little Stranger* and the postwar English country house novel.[111] Whilst her chapter is an important recognition of the contemporary attempt to modernise a conservative tradition, it misleadingly presents Waters as the only author to do so and fails to contextualise *The Little Stranger* within the wider resurgence of country house fiction which achieves similar ends. Of course, Parker's discussion is somewhat restricted in focus because it appears in a collection on Waters, but the lack of consideration given to other contemporary English country house novels reveals the amount of work still do to in the field of contemporary fiction.

Kelsall's *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (1993) and Gill's *Happy Rural Seat: the English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (1972)

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[107] Heilmann and Llewellyn; *Conjuring the Real: The Role of Architecture in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. by Rumiko Handa and James Potter (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

[108] Philips and Haywood.

[109] Williams; Kelsall suggests *Brideshead* signals the form's demise (*Great*).

[110] Morrison.

[111] Parker.

remain the pivotal works on the English country house novel and both characterise the genre as conservative. Kelsall conceptualises the English country house novel tradition as a conservative 'chronicle of ideal representation', 'a narrative of decline and fall'.[112] Gill offers a similar interpretation of the genre, arguing that the country house symbolises enduring communal values, particularly in the fiction of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.[113] Though he highlights some ambivalent and satirical uses of the country house, he moderates this reading by conceding that even 'when the satirists reigned [in the early 1920s], literary obeisance was still being paid' to other novels in the same genre.[114] In fact, he argues, in the late 1930s, the setting 'recovered its former potency as a symbol of order and continuity. Satire now modulated into elegy'.[115] Gill concludes that now 'animosity has given way to nostalgia'.[116] I counter these readings of the form as nostalgic idealism by arguing that today's English country house novel is politically ambivalent, combining both conservative and radical approaches to its preoccupation with class and gender. As far back as the turn of the twentieth century, as Simon Joyce has argued, country house novels such as E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) both 'affirmed and critiqued the nostalgic longing for the past'.[117] Joyce's reading offers a more measured evaluation of the ambivalence of the country house text on which my own work builds.

My work, then, expands the existing scholarly field by highlighting that the English country house novel is more complex than Kelsall and Gill anticipate.[118] Su has recognised the difference between Waugh's conservative conception of 'an essentialistic idea of national

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[112] Kelsall, *Great*, p. 7.

[113] Gill, p. 7. M. Boccardi similarly argues that *Possession* uses the country house to present a desire for nostalgic national unity (M. Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 178).

[114] Gill, p. 167.

[115] Gill, p. 167.

[116] Gill, p. 17.

[117] Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 52.

[118] Kelsall, *Great*, p. 7.

identity' in *Brideshead* and Ishiguro's more progressive use of nostalgia in *The Remains of the Day* to 'reject such essentialisms and to redefine key terms associated with national character', suggesting a more ambiguous use of the setting than these earlier accounts allow.[119] In fact, Su's account is a key turning point in English country house novel scholarship as it recognises that nostalgia is not intrinsically conservative but, rather, one of the defining features of the postwar era.[120] My own work will therefore build on and expand this reading of the country house as a complex signifier that offers more than conservatism. For example, Kelsall suggests that the idealisation in the country house tradition 'suppresses the element of labour' on which they were founded, in chapter two I complicate this reading by examining novels in which the country house aesthetic critiques the social hierarchies embodied in the setting.[121]

The ambivalent politics of the country house setting has long been acknowledged by heritage scholars, who have discredited the idea that people visit country houses solely due to nostalgia or a longing to belong to the aristocracy. As early as 1994, Raphael Samuel noted that the 'new version of the national past' offered by England's heritage industry 'is inconceivably more democratic than earlier ones, offering more points of access to "ordinary people", and a wider form of belonging' through attention to servant spaces.[122] The country house, then, is increasingly understood as both an upper- and working-class space. Indeed, research by Laurajane Smith has revealed that some country house visitors approach the space critically and mindful of its problematic history, motivated by the desire to see where their ancestors worked and understand where they would have belonged in the country house's social hierarchy.[123] Yet, despite a similar movement towards servant narratives in the country

[119] Su, *Ethics*, p 122.

[120] Su, *Ethics*, p. 3.

[121] Kelsall, p. 139.

[122] Samuel, p. 160.

[123] Smith.

house novel, the form continues to be regarded by most literary scholars and cultural commentators as one which fetishises social inequality.

Kreilkamp's reading of the Big House novel, however, recognises the Irish variant of the genre as 'a complex and ambivalent form that is, generally, neither elegiac nor nostalgic', demonstrating 'cultural ambivalence and self-irony'.[124] She suggests that the genre offers 'moral judgements of the landlord class far more often than idealization and nostalgia', recognising the form's political reflections.[125] In fact, Kreilkamp argues that the success (or indeed failure) of the genre is partly due to the complexity of its 'confrontations with […] political […] matter'.[126] Yet scholarship on the Irish Big House novel has only recently overcome a critical anxiety about the genre dating back to the nineteenth century.[127] Kreilkamp suggests that the critical anxiety towards the Big House novel stemmed from the tendency to 'mistakenly sentimentalise what is, for the most part, a fiercely self-lacerating genre', an error frequently made in discussions of English country house texts, as this thesis will reveal.[128] Recent research by Joe Cleary and Margaret Kelleher, among others, is therefore readdressing the negative image of the Big House novel in a renewed scholarly focus Yuri Yoshino dates back to 2005.[129] The same action is required for the contemporary English country house novel, and my thesis is one of the first steps towards filling this critical lacuna.

My own work provides a vital English counterpoint to Kreilkamp's discussion of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel. We both focus on four main generic features, two of which are the same. While Kreilkamp examines lineage in terms of the family, I explore how textual

[124] Kreilkamp, pp. 2, 265.

[125] Kreilkamp, p. 20.

[126] Kreilkamp, p. 3.

[127] Yuri Yoshino, 'The Big House Novel' and Recent Irish literary Criticism', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 22 (2007), 48-54, (p. 48). The *Journal of Irish Studies* has since devoted an entire issue to the genre.

[128] Kreilkamp, p. 61.

[129] Yoshino, p. 50.

metaphors have shifted the focus away from family seats and towards family and literary history in the English country house novel. Kreilkamp's reading of decay as a symbol for the declining landed class resonates with my discussion of *The Little Stranger* in chapter four. However, because the aristocracy rarely feature in the contemporary English country house novel, I argue that the trope of decay in the English form more often signals a redefinition of the cultural significance of the country house for contemporary readers. Kreilkamp's focus on the tropes of 'the deracinated or alienated landlord' and the threat of 'outsiders to the snobbish social insularity and economic stability of Anglo-Ireland' are specific to Irish (literary) history and not relevant to the contemporary English country house novel.[130] Instead, I focus on the detailed country house aesthetic (chapter two) and the preoccupation with authenticity in the English form (chapter three), both of which are common focuses in scholarship and reviews.

There are several limitations to Kreilkamp's study that I wish to address in my own work. Firstly, like Kelsall and Gill, she focuses mostly on historical novels and novels written before the twenty-first century. Indeed, although Tetsuko Nakamura recognises that the Big House novel is 'still under construction', much of the scholarship on the form focuses on earlier novels than my study.[131] My work investigates contemporary novels set in both the past and the present. Secondly, Kreilkamp's discussion offers little reflection on what she briefly refers to at the end of her monograph as '[t]he avid commodification of country house imagery in recent years'.[132] This undeveloped point equates to only one American example in a footnote. This General Introduction has offered a more detailed account of the cultural currency of the country house in contemporary British culture that is expanded throughout this thesis. Finally, while Kreilkamp pays little attention to the reception and historical

[130] Kreilkamp, pp. 23, 24.

[131] Tetsuko Nakamura, 'Introduction: The Big House as a Problematic Space in Irish Fiction', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 22 (2007), 3-6, (p. 6).

[132] Kreilkamp, p. 261.

context in which the novels in her study were published, my own work constantly reflects on these factors through reference to contemporary newspaper articles, online reviews, and academic scholarship. As such, my work reflects the genre's cultural diffusion in a method most scholars have overlooked.

As the English country house becomes increasingly predominant in British cultural forms, academic interest in the English country house novel appears to be resurfacing, as summer schools on English country house fiction at both Oxford and Sheffield universities in 2014 attest. Kristen Kelly Ames has recently completed a thesis on the early-twentieth-century English country house novel that recognises the ambivalence of the genre beyond the 'nostalgia and idealization that typically characterizes representations of the country house'.[133] Ames agrees with my reading of 2000 as the beginning of a cultural preoccupation with the country house, though she positions it as a decade-long trend, which my research refutes by suggesting it is still ongoing. We also agree that the enduring popularity of the country house novel is likely due to its troubling of the distinctions between centre and margin.[134] Though Ames offers new approaches to the genre, particularly her chapter that reads early twentieth-century novels through the lens of camp nostalgia, she focuses on well-studied and well-read novels such as *Brideshead*, *Rebecca*, and Virginia's Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) in a scholarly bias that my own work seeks to overcome through reference to works that have received little critical attention and have not attracted the wide readerships of bestsellers.

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[133] Kristen Kelly Ames, 'Conventions Were Outraged: Country, House, Fiction' (doctoral thesis, York University, Toronto, 2014), p. 99 <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKEwjX1bHSr5fHAhWFvRQKHbKQBws&url=http%3A%2F%2Fyorkspace.library.yorku.ca%2Fxmlui%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F10315%2F28184%2FAmes_Kristen_K_2014_PhD.pdf%3Fsequence%3D2&ei=MNrEVdf9FYX7UrKhnlg&usg=AFQjCNHl2wNa-OyIzl9U6okZofqeWMTCUw&bvm=bv.99804247,d.ZGU> [accessed 7 July 2015].

[134] Ames, p. 262.

This thesis directs attention to a specifically English form in a scholarly field that regularly assesses the contemporary *British* novel, or indeed *the novel in English*, in a context of globalisation. James F. English's edited collection on contemporary British fiction (2006) includes essays on Scottish and Northern Irish fiction, yet contextualises English fiction within 'British fiction in a Global Frame', an outlook Head replicates in the subtitle to *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (2008).[135] Head adopts this perspective because of globalisation and 9/11 which, he argues, obliged us all 'to reorient ourselves as global citizens'.[136] In contrast, I have opted for English parameters to reflect the increasing English nationalism and devolution in this period as well as the genre's largely insular notion of nationhood. While Head and Sinfield have suggested that contemporary literary culture is dominated by American literature, they overlook what the contemporary English country house novel offers to the contemporary literary marketplace as a nationally-distinct form.[137] My study therefore complicates *Granta*'s claim that 1979 marked 'the end of the English novel [and] the beginning of British fiction' and English's similar view of the contemporary English novel as 'dwindling into inconsequence' following the strong emergence of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish fiction in the 1980s and 90s.[138] In the same way as Jed Etsy argues that representations of Englishness in novels from the 1950s 'aim not so much to fetishize national tradition as to recognize and come to terms with its limitations', I suggest that many contemporary English country house novels are returning to a problematic national literary tradition in a self-conscious and evaluative way.[139] My work also extends the scholarly field

[135] English; Head, *State*.

[136] Head, *State*, p. 2.

[137] Head, *State*; Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 2nd edn. (London: Continuum, 2004).

[138] James F. English, 'Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame', in *A Concise Companion*, ed. by English, pp. 1-15, (pp. 3, 4).

[139] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 21.

of contemporary fiction by considering more recent novels than those analysed by English, Tew, and Head, for example, who examine novels published from 1979 onward.

This thesis builds on Head's assertion of a 'discernible shift [in contemporary literature] towards the domestic sphere' post-9/11.[140] It explores the seemingly obsessive fascination with rural Englishness that Paul Gilroy identifies as 'postcolonial melancholia' by suggesting that the return to the country house represents an interrogation of England's internal social structures of gender, sexuality and class.[141] On the whole, contemporary English country house novels are less concerned than their predecessors with the aristocracy and their capabilities as landlords to an estate of workers. More often, they contrast the social mobility of the (upper) middle classes with the restriction of working-class and female characters, mostly because many are set in the present or recent past when the aristocracy no longer monopolise the country house (see chapter two).

This preoccupation with class undermines many accounts of postwar British fiction which imply that the issue was mostly limited to novels of the 1950s and 60s, particularly the Angry Young Man movement, after which it was usurped by considerations of postmodernism and postcolonialism.[142] These accounts of the postwar British novel imply that class is only explored through working-class characters and settings, rather than through the social contrasts the country house setting provides. In fact, English suggests that contemporary British fiction is marked by 'the eclipse' of working-class fiction, while Head suggests that class consciousness is waning in contemporary British fiction.[143] While Head suggests that provincial realism and its considerations of class live on in the contemporary 'seaside novel', he fails to consider the role of the English country house novel as a genre in

[140] Head, *State*, p. 100.

[141] Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[142] D. J. Taylor, *After the War* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); Dominic Head, 'The Demise of Class Fiction', in *A Concise Companion*, ed. by English, pp. 229-247.

[143] English, 'Introduction', p. 13; Head, 'Demise'.

which these topics are also sustained.[144] This thesis presents the contemporary English country house novel as a key space for the examination of England's class structures.

Methodology and Structure

The misconception that the contemporary English country house novel is merely conservative and escapist entertainment arises from generalised critiques that fail to attend to the detail of individual texts. To counter this narrative, this thesis pays close attention to the novels themselves and the responses of their respective readers. I interrogate these sources using the tools of close reading in order to add nuance to the reductive and generalised account of the country house resurgence.[145] This method produces an important extension to existing close readings of the Anglo-Irish Big House novel and earlier novels in the English country house tradition by Kreilkamp, Kelsall, and Gill. Thus while recent literary scholarship has seen a 'turn away from the singularity and richness of individual texts' in a mode of reading that is reliant on description rather than interpretation, I employ an analytical and interpretive approach that attends to similarities and differences between texts in a very fluid genre .[146] In doing so, I adopt the same attention to detail and reading between the lines celebrated in these novels (see chapter two). In online reviews, too, textual interpretation

[144] Head, *State*. Head briefly considers of the function of the country house in Nigel Dennis's *Cards of Identity* (1955) and V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction*, suggesting that the latter represents the post-imperial movement as a decayed, dissolved version of an earlier Englishness (p. 176). However this is a limited discussion of the setting rather than the genre and therefore underestimates its significance to English literary tradition.

[145] According to Monk, the critical prejudice encountered by heritage films was the result of a 'lack of rigour' in scholarship due to limited textual analysis; Sheldon Hall, too, has identified within this body of work a tendency 'to favour broad generalisations over close analysis of particulars' and 'questionable' observational and analytical skills. My work aims to avoid the 'lack of rigour' Monk identifies in anti-heritage film scholarship and conduct the 'close analysis of particulars' Hall advocates (Monk, p. 188; Sheldon Hall, 'The Wrong Sort of Cinema: Refashioning the Heritage Film Debate' in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. by Richard Murphy (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 191-199, (p. 197)).

[146] Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371-91, (pp. 374, 375).

appears to be the chief form of engagement with these texts and is therefore one of the reasons for the populism of these novels. In order to understand this resurgence, then, these novels need to be analysed in a way that explores what they offer to contemporary readers. As Roland Barthes highlights, 'to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it'.[147] An interpretative approach recognises the genre's ambivalent politics in a way that descriptive methods do not allow.

I afford contemporary and non-canonical texts the same academic attention granted to earlier novels in the same genre, recognising them as more than the literary elements of a popular cross-cultural resurgence. Though I briefly allude to material considerations where relevant, I have maintained a close reading approach throughout because many readers now engage with books electronically, and come to a book through its cultural appropriation (in film adaptations, television book clubs, etc), rather than selecting a novel based on its cover. As Todd highlights, '[w]ord of mouth, in however odd and unexpected a manifestation, has come of age', and literary fiction is consequently 'opening, democratizing, and in general extending the customer's imaginative and societal franchise'.[148] Many online reviewers on *Amazon*, for example, point readers in the direction of similar country house novels and have read or go on to read the other novels in the series where applicable. Through reference to these online reviews, I consider the varying opinions of the readers often overlooked by academic scholarship and suggest that the texts and their readers provide readings more complex and self-aware than the depictions of consumptive readers outlined above. In a field that is preoccupied with 'serious literary fiction' even as it recognises that academic scholarship presumes its own readings are more authoritative than those of the average reader, I produce the kind of account Head deems is lacking in contemporary literary scholarship, one

[147] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller [1970] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p. 5, original emphasis.
[148] Todd, p. 36.

that takes 'due cognisance of the sophistication evident in the novel, and in the expectations placed on readers', staging 'a dialogue between academic and non-academic enthusiasms'.[149]

Each chapter of this thesis examines how a different generic trope enables the contemporary English country house novel to self-consciously negotiate its position in modern Britain. Chapter one examines the shifting focus from material inheritance to textual inheritance in *Rebecca's Tale*, *The Thirteenth Tale*, and *The Stranger's Child*. Focusing on the genre's self-conscious (inter)textuality, I explore how the metaphor of missing texts and family histories represents the exclusion of women and homosexual men from the literary canon. Building on the theme of marginalisation, chapter two explores how the country house aesthetic is used to ideological ends by aligning a character's eye for detail with their willingness to engage with society's margins in *Atonement* and *Misfortune*. In chapter three, expanding on this preoccupation with detail, I explore the tension between realism and metafiction in *Finding Myself*, *Atonement*, and *Misfortune*. I argue that these novels foreground the work of writing to signal the cultural value of the contemporary English country house novel in a literary marketplace saturated with country house texts. Chapter four examines how the process of ruin in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger* is a metaphor for the deconstruction and reformulation of a traditionally conservative genre. Following on from this consideration of decay, I conclude by considering to what extent the contemporary English country house novel might constitute a decadent literary form.

The contemporary English country house novel is a highly intertextual genre. As a result, the above outline is by no means an exhaustive list of the texts analysed in each chapter, nor are the listed texts exclusively discussed in their respective chapters. Just as the English country house has permeated the cultural spectrum, the novels in this study permeate boundaries between chapters, highlighting revealing contrasts and similarities. I have used most novels in multiple chapters in order to highlight shared tropes and key differences. In

[149] Head, *State*, pp. 6, 8.

doing so, I hope to substantiate the sketchy existing definition of the English country house novel. Each chapter also replicates the genre's cultural diffusion, referring to sources from highbrow novels and academic scholarship to popular novels and review websites. What follows, then, is a detailed examination of how the evolving traditions of the English country house novel allow the genre to self-consciously negotiate its position within contemporary British culture.

Chapter 1. Literary Heritage: Lineage, (Inter) Textuality, and the House of Fiction

'Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem' – Harold Bloom[1]

The English country house constitutes what Tim Edensor refers to as an 'iconic site' of national identity which connotes 'evidence of past cultures' and 'antecedence'.[2] It therefore embodies a traceable, national lineage, which is the topic of this chapter. With particular reference to Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001), Diane Setterfield's *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006), and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011), I aim to do two things. Firstly, I will explore the ways in which the generic trope of family lineage has shifted focus since the turn of the millennium to place emphasis on textual rather than material inheritance. Highlighting the self-consciously genre-specific intertextuality which distinguishes this contemporary form from its generic predecessors, I argue that a protagonist's quest to situate him/herself within a family line reflects the author's process of positioning the contemporary English country house novel within a national literary tradition.[3] Secondly, this chapter will examine how the country house setting operates as a metaphoric canonical house of fiction in which female and homosexual narratives have traditionally been suppressed. Agreeing with Emma Parker's suggestion that '[t]raditionally, the country house demands the regulation of the norms of gender as well as sexuality', I argue that contemporary novelists present the country house as an exclusionary house of fiction.[4] The

[1] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 96.

[2] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), p. 47.

[3] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn similarly argue that one of the prototypical preoccupations of the neo-Victorian novel is 'a retracing and piecing together of the protagonist's roots which reflects, metafictionally, on the literary "origins" of the neo-Victorian genre and the narratological traditions it seeks to reshape' (Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 34).

[4] Emma Parker, 'The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*', in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 99-113, (p. 111).

shift of focus from material to textual inheritance, then, gives voice to those traditionally under-represented in the genre.[5] While Dominic Head argues that the period 1950-2000 has witnessed 'the gradual democratization of narrative fiction' in general, my work evidences the centrality of the English country house novel genre in this process post-2000.[6] These three novels are some of the most self-consciously intertextual in the genre and, as a group, reflect the genre's span from popular to highbrow, suggesting that this theme is a generic preoccupation for many contemporary country house authors.

Literary Lineage in the Contemporary English Country House Novel

The theme of lineage has always been central to the English country house novel. As far back as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1818), the entail of the family estate has been a key plot component. Throughout the postwar period, too, the plots of English country house novels such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Michael Innes's *Christmas at Candleshoe* (1953), and Ivy Compton-Burnett's *A Heritage and its History* (1959) have centred on lineage through the search for an heir. In most cases, the rightful heir is a male familiar with the family and the running of the estate. That the theme continues to be pivotal to contemporary English country house novels is unsurprising since family history is Britain's fastest growing hobby, second only to gardening in terms of popularity.[7] This trend, according to industry professionals, is due to the invention of the personal computer and the internet, advancements in scanning technology, the creation of genealogy websites, and television programmes such as ITV's *Long Lost Family* (2011-present), or BBC1's *Who Do*

[5] Parker, p. 111.

[6] Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

[7] Simon Fowler, 'Ancestral Tourism', *Tourism Insights* (VisitBritain and Tourism Together, March 2003) <http://www.insights.org.uk/articleitem.aspx?title=Ancestral+Tourism>; Jonathan Freedland, 'We All Need a Story', *Guardian* (14 April 2007) <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/apr/14/guardianspecial4.guardianspecial231> [accessed 8 June 2015].

You Think You Are? (2004-present).[8] The current interest in genealogy, Chris Arnot argues, is due to a yearning for stability in an ever-developing world: 'Thanks to technology and globalisation, the world around us is changing so fast; it's reassuring to find some constancy. Modern life may be whizzing all around, but at least you have a family tree to stand under'.[9] Though family history has always been central to the English country house novel, then, it bears a particularly contemporary relevance to modern life, particularly in Britain.

Although genealogy is increasingly popular in many countries, in Britain its popularity is unprecedented. For example, statistics suggest that UK awareness of family history is twice the level in the U.S. and that the UK's 'online genealogy spend and overall penetration is roughly two times that in the US on a per-capita basis'.[10] Indeed, the concept of lineage is particularly contentious in contemporary British culture, as Queen Elizabeth II's diamond jubilee (2012) prompted questions as to whether her son or grandson will succeed her.[11] The birth of Prince George in 2014 raised similar issues. As the first royal baby to inherit the throne regardless of gender, Prince George represents a more democratic approach to lineage in terms of gender. In fact, as Eric Gardner notes, since the 1970s identity and belonging have supplanted status and honour as core values in genealogy; the emphasis has changed

[8] Julie Hill, 'Online Family History Trends', *Archives.com* (2 February 2011) <http://www.archives.com/blog/miscellaneous/online-family-history-trends-1.html> [accessed 1 March 2013]; Chris Arnot, 'Family history boom fuelled by internet and TV', *Guardian* (6 July 2006) <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/jul/06/family-history-genealogy-popularity> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[9] Arnot.

[10] Jeffries & Company, Inc analyst report (February 2010) cited in Hill.

[11] 'Prince Charles at 65: Will he ever become King?', *The Week* (16 October 2013) <http://www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/55612/prince-charles-65-will-he-ever-become-king> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Andrew Pierce, 'Prince Charles may never be king', *Telegraph* (9 November 2008) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/3413430/Prince-Charles-may-never-be-King-Charles.html> [accessed 11 June 2015].

from 'tracing down' from one important ancestor to many descendants 'tracing up' to many ancestors.[12] According to Raphael Samuel,

> Family history societies, practising do-it-yourself scholarship and filling the record offices and the local history libraries with searches, have democratized genealogy, treating apprenticeship indentures as a symbolic equivalent of the coat of arms, baptismal certificates as that of title deeds. They encourage people to look down rather than up in reconstituting their roots, […] to celebrate humble origins.[13]

Family history now uncovers the stories of socially-marginal figures rather than focusing on the stories of the powerful. Britain's growing passion for family history, then, is symptomatic of the current interest in figures missing from the historical record (as the growing number of servant narratives discussed in the General Introduction suggest). The idea of the family is, as sociologist Anne-Marie Kramer highlights, 'still damned important to most people's sense of self […]. The crux of it is a need to feel rooted and connected'.[14] Understanding oneself, Kramer suggests, arises from knowledge of one's ancestry and relationships to other people, a process contemporary English country house novelists dramatise in the generic trope of lineage. While family trees outline connections between ancestors, the contemporary English country house novel highlights intertextual relationships to earlier novels in the same genre.

Indeed, intertextuality is often discussed using familial rhetoric. Susan Hill, for example, suggests that '[b]ooks breed books' resulting in texts which are 'multi-parented'.[15] Harold Bloom similarly describes literature as 'Family Romance' which holds 'the

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[12] Eric Gardner, 'Blank and White: American Genealogy, Race, and Popular Response', *The Midwest Quarterly*, 44 (2003), 148-60, (p. 2). Nonetheless, there remains an elitist element to the contemporary fascination with genealogy. For example, the College of Arms in London offers to trace a client's male line to see whether any of his/her ancestors had the right to arms, thereby allowing them to bear a coat of arms. Failing that, provided that the client is 'a British subject and of a "certain professional standing", the college will give a new grant of arms for a fee of £960' ('Genealogy: Knowing Yourself from Adam', *The Economist*, 8 August 1987, reproduced in *North Irish Roots*, 5 (1994), 8-12, (p. 11)).

[13] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, vol. I (London: Verso, 1994), p. 160.

[14] Anne-Marie Kramer, cited in Arnot.

[15] Susan Hill, 'The egg collectors', *Guardian* (11 February 2006) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview19> [accessed 8 June 2015].

enchantment of incest' and creates a dialogue between literary 'fathers' and their successors.[16] Just as the nation's approach to genealogy has changed, so too has the approach to lineage in the English country house novel, shifting from material to textual inheritance. This trend is evident in Emma Tennant's *Pemberley: A Sequel to Pride and Prejudice* (1993), which begins thus: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a married man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of an heir'.[17] This opening sentence references the famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* and modifies it to focus on the theme of inheritance, thereby neatly combining the strands of family and literary lineage in the genre. Detailing the struggle and eventual success of Elizabeth Darcy (née Bennett) to conceive an heir, the text itself might be described as the coveted offspring of *Pride and Prejudice* for Austen fans. In simultaneously continuing both Darcy's and Austen's lineage, Tennant's novel establishes an important link between family and literary heritage in the contemporary English country house novel. Before exploring this relationship in contemporary novels, I will examine how the idea of literary heritage has recently become central to the promotion and reception of the contemporary English country house novel.

Contemporary English country house novels are highly conscious of their relationship to other texts. Many, such as *Rebecca's Tale* and P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), are responses to earlier country house novels, or are part of a novel sequence, and are thereby consciously situated within an intertextual network of other country house texts. Contemporary country house novelists highlight their awareness of generic tradition in paratextual commentaries in which they discuss the influence of these literary predecessors on their work. Sarah Waters, for example, revealed in an interview with the *Guardian* that her novel, *The Little Stranger* (2009), evolved from her plan to rewrite Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948), an intertext she references by naming one of her characters after

[16] Bloom, p. 95. Bloom's metaphor for lineage as descending from 'fathers' highlights the prevalence of the perception of the English literary canon as a male tradition, an issue critiqued by the novelists in this chapter.

[17] Emma Tennant, *Pemberley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p. 3.

Tey's protagonist, Betty.[18] Waters also lists a number of Gothic influences, claiming that 'each new Gothic narrative somehow recalls the ones before it. Writing *The Little Stranger*, I found myself […] giving little nods to Dickens, to Poe, to Shirley Jackson and Henry James', as well as to Charlotte Perkins Gilman and M R James.[19] Alongside those authors to which Waters explicitly refers, Katharina Boehm has identified in *The Little Stranger* a further 'deluge of intertextual allusions' to the likes of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, William Blake, the Brontës, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.[20] As a result, Tracy Chevalier posits, the novel has a 'slightly second hand feel to it'.[21] Referred to as the most 'remarkable storyteller since Daphne du Maurier', Waters's work is self-consciously positioned within and reacting to an English literary heritage.[22]

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) is similarly conscious of its literary lineage. In fact, Richard Robinson describes the novel as 'clearly designed to raise the ghosts of the English canon'.[23] He argues that the novel is 'distinct from the rest of Ian McEwan's work in the sheer literariness of its self-fashioning' and that 'its sense of canonical ancestry' signals a 'directly genealogical relationship with modernism and twentieth-century literary history [that] culminates in the publication of *Atonement* at that century's end'.[24] Robinson's distinction between *Atonement* and the rest of McEwan's work suggests that the English country house genre is implicated in this highly intertextual approach, a suggestion McEwan

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[18] Sarah Waters, 'The Lost Girl', *Guardian* (30 May 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/30/sarah-waters-books> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[19] Waters, 'Lost'.

[20] Katharina Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters', *Studies in the Novel*, 43 (2011), 237-257, (p. 250).

[21] Tracy Chevalier, 'Class-ridden Britain gives up the ghost', *Observer* (31 May 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/31/sarah-waters-the-little-stranger> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[22] Robert McCrum, 'What lies beneath', *Observer* (10 May 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/10/books-sarah-waters> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[23] Richard Robinson, 'The Modernism of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *MFS*, 56 (2010), 473-495, (p. 491).

[24] Robinson, pp. 473, 475.

confirms when referring to *Atonement* as 'my Jane Austen novel, my country house novel, my one-hot-day novel'.[25] Indeed, the influences identified in the novel by Maria Margaronis – including E. M. Forster, L. P. Hartley, and D. H. Lawrence – are all authors of country house novels, suggesting that McEwan deliberately draws on generically-specific literary ancestors.[26] The English country house novel tradition cannot be entered into, it seems, without acknowledging one's literary ancestors.

Like Waters and McEwan, Hollinghurst references many country house predecessors in *The Stranger's Child*. Peter Parker deems Hollinghurst 'our most literary contemporary novelist, in the sense that his books are steeped in references to other writers and their works', and suggests that his role as editor of Nemo's Almanac (an annual publication which invites readers to identify literary quotations) contributes to the allusive nature of his writing.[27] As Keith Miller suggests, the novel's 'love-in-great-houses theme […] evoke[s] several past avatars'.[28] Richard Canning compares the novel to *Middlemarch*, while Amanda Craig suggests that '*The Stranger's Child* feels like the kind of novel that Forster might have written

[25] Ian McEwan in Kate Kellaway, 'At home with his worries', *Observer* (16 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/16/fiction.ianmcewan> [accessed 8 June 2015]. McEwan underlines Austen's influence by including an epigraph from *Northanger Abbey* (1817) which, as a parody of eighteenth-century Gothic romances, is itself self-consciously intertextual.

[26] Maria Margaronis, 'The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century', *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008), 138-160, (p. 142). McEwan has even been accused of plagiarising Lucilla Andrews's *No Time for Romance* (1977), an accusation he refutes having recognised his debt to the author in his acknowledgements (Julia Langdon, 'Ian McEwan accused of stealing ideas from romance novelist', *Mail on Sunday* (25 November 2006) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-418598/Ian-McEwan-accused-stealing-ideas-romance-novelist.html> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Ian McEwan, 'An inspiration, yes. Did I copy from another author? No', *Guardian* (27 November 2006) <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3> [accessed 8 June 2015]).

[27] Peter Parker, 'Alan Hollinghurst's allusive art', *TLS* (23 August 2011) <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article760303.ece> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[28] Keith Miller, '*The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst: Review', *Telegraph* (17 June 2011) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8579150/The-Strangers-Child-by-Alan-Hollinghurst-review.html> [accessed 22 April 2013].

had he continued'.[29] Highlighting obvious links between the novel and *Atonement*, *Brideshead*, and *Downton Abbey*, Margaronis views *The Stranger's Child* as 'an elegant, gently parodic re-creation of a world much revisited on page and screen', underlining Hollinghurst's consciousness of the country house genre of his novel.[30] Indeed, James Wood argues that the novel recalls Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and, echoing Margaronis's reading of the novel as intertextual to the extent of parody, suggests that Hollinghurst's stylistic emulation of Henry James 'runs the risk of pastiching a parodist', 'with all the English ancestors – in particular, Shakespeare, Keats, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Philip Larkin—ripening the sentences to bursting'.[31]

Comprised of parodies of Edwardian verse, letters, diaries, and memoirs, and set in various periods throughout English history since 1913, *The Stranger's Child* concentrates a century of English national and literary history into one volume. The characters' own publications even create an interior literary lineage in the novel: Dudley, for example, writes 'a satirical country-house novel, in the tradition of Peacock' entitled *The Long Gallery*, a title later parodied by his ex-wife's memoir, *The Short Gallery*.[32] Hollinghurst maps this literary pastiche on to the two country houses in his novel. Two Acres is built in the Arts and Crafts style of the Edwardian era, a fashion Jon Hegglund describes as 'fetishi[sing] an idea of "old

[29] Richard Canning, '*The Stranger's Child*, By Alan Hollinghurst', *Telegraph* (17 June 2011) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2298468.html?origin=internalSearch> [accessed 22 April 2013]; Amanda Craig, '*The Stranger's Child*, By Alan Hollinghurst', *Telegraph* (Sunday 26 June 2011) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2302755.html> [accessed 22 April 2013].

[30] Maria Margaronis, 'Secret Paragraphs: On Alan Hollinghurst', *The Nation* (30 November 2011) <http://www.thenation.com/article/164878/secret-paragraphs-alan-hollinghurst#> [accessed April 6 2013].

[31] James Wood, 'Sons and Lovers', *The New Yorker* (17 October 2011) <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/10/17/111017crbo_books_wood?currentPage=1> [accessed 23 April 2013].

[32] Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011), p. 396 (hereafter '*Child*').

England" through its skilful simulation of past styles'.[33] The house therefore embodies Hollinghurst's pastiche of earlier novels in the genre not only by reflecting his pastiche of literary styles but also by creating an intertextual connection to Forster's *Howards End* (1910) which shares its Arts and Crafts architectural style. Hollinghurst's pastiche is also reflected in the décor of the Valances' country house, Corley Court, which, with its Oriental dining room and Victorian jelly-mould ceiling, is a pastiche of country house architecture. At Corley, past and present styles clash in a 'funeral fairground': 'The gaudy little shields […] cheerfully at odds with the cold modernity of the room' (*Child*, pp. 147, 124). The clash of aesthetics and periods within the country house setting mirrors the hodgepodge of influences in Hollinghurst's novel.

Of course, reviewers and critics of all novels highlight parallels with other texts and this self-conscious intertextuality is partly a result of postmodern literary techniques popularised since the late 1970s.[34] However, the number of influences identified in these contemporary English country house novels is unusually high and genre-focussed, suggesting that this is more than simply a postmodern literary trait and rather a trope exclusive to the genre and linked to its theme of lineage. The plethora of country house intertexts identified by scholars, literary critics, and the authors themselves evidences the self-conscious intertextuality of the contemporary English country house novel that, ironically, sets it apart from its less intertextual generic forerunners. The emphasis on generic lineage in paratextual discussions of the novels invites readers to compare the contemporary English country house novel to its earlier form, asking how and why it differs. One of the key differences, as my close readings will reveal, is that contemporary English country house novelists are interested in not only

[33] Jon Hegglund, 'Defending the Realm: Domestic Space and Mass Cultural Contamination in *Howards End* and *An Englishman's Home*', *English Literature in Transition, 1990-1920*, 40 (1997), 398-421, (p. 404).

[34] Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* [1979] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988).

resurrecting canonical predecessors but also critiquing the house of fiction for excluding women writers and depictions of gay men.

Family History as Feminist Historiography

Genealogy is generally regarded as a feminine and feminist approach to historiography. Data from Archives.com and broader industry analyses indicate that users of genealogy websites tend to be women. Gayle Greene claims that women's historiography occurs through 'diaries, journals, family records, and photograph albums' and suggests that women 'live more in the past' through these reflective activities.[35] What Greene fails to highlight is that they are the work of the present, and that while they utilise the past they do so to preserve it for future use. Diary keeping and researching family history are therefore not necessarily wholly retrospective pursuits, but rather activities that allow women to represent history in exclusively feminine ways and to address the absence of women in official accounts. Family history literally puts women on the map and is regarded by Greene and Sally Alexander as a feminist approach to history because it recognises gaps and silences.[36] According to Alexander, feminist history prioritises family history because it has so often been the only place for the historical mention of women.[37] She contrasts feminist historiography to the totalising approach of traditional historiography or, as she terms it, 'his history':

> His history wants to connect everything to everything else; it searches for the totality of a culture, or for the reproduction of culture as a whole way of life. Feminist history on the other hand seeks to identify the gaps, the silences in histories – not only in the hope of restoring a fuller past (though that might be something of the effect) but to write a history which might begin from somewhere else.[38]

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[35] Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', *Signs*, 14 (1991), 290-321, (pp. 295-6).

[36] However, the extent of this representation is sometimes limited, as the family trees in Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), hereafter '*Misfortune*', and Jennie Walters, *Shelter from the Storm* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007), hereafter '*Shelter*', highlight later in this chapter.

[37] Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman* [1976] (Virago: London, 1994), p. 277.

[38] Alexander, p. 234.

These feminist forms of historiography will be the focus of this chapter, which examines how *Rebecca's Tale*, *The Thirteenth Tale*, and *The Stranger's Child* explore the textual lineage of women and gay men through diaries, oral testimonies, and (auto)biographies.

Many contemporary English country house novels acknowledge the bias of traditional approaches to lineage which, particularly in the case of the country house, have been preoccupied with the male heir. Both Jennie Walters's *Swallowcliffe* series (2005-2007) and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) include pictorial representations of fictional family trees which align missing text with missing relatives (figures 3 and 4). Posing a counter narrative to the traditional generic preoccupation with the male aristocratic line, the *Swallowcliffe* series is narrated by three generations of Perkins women who serve the Vye family at Swallowcliffe Hall.[39] The series features two family trees. The first, at the beginning of *Standing in the Shadows* (2006), focuses on the Vyes. Its title, 'The Vye Family Tree in 1914', signals its unfinished nature.[40] The second is at the end of *Shelter from the Storm* (2007) and differs from the earlier version in that it features the Perkins family tree (see figure 3). Unusually beginning with two sets of ancestors (Charles Vye and Sarah Willey and Mr and Mrs Perkins), it grants both families equal situ, suggesting a radically inclusive approach to lineage replicated in the amended title, 'Swallowcliffe Family Tree'. Placing this tree at the end of not only the novel but the novel series, Walters suggests that it represents finality and closure. Indeed, the straight, bold lines and simple font present both trees as useful tools to help the reader understand the relationships between the characters as the generations expand with the series. This straight-forward presentation, however, is misleading. This second family tree is missing Lord Vye's second wife and fifth child which are featured on the earlier tree. As such, for all the tree represents a democratic approach to lineage in terms of class, it also represents the exclusion of women (and children) from historical accounts. These

[39] The series has recently expanded to include aristocratic narrators (*Eugenie's Story* (2012)).

[40] Jennie Walters, *Standing in the Shadows* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

missing details are only apparent to those familiar with the novel's serial predecessors, linking the genre's preoccupation with family and literary lineage. Walters suggests that only those versed in country house predecessors can recognise the country house novel's tendency to marginalise women. As such, she positions the contemporary English country house novel as a form which critically examines its ancestry.

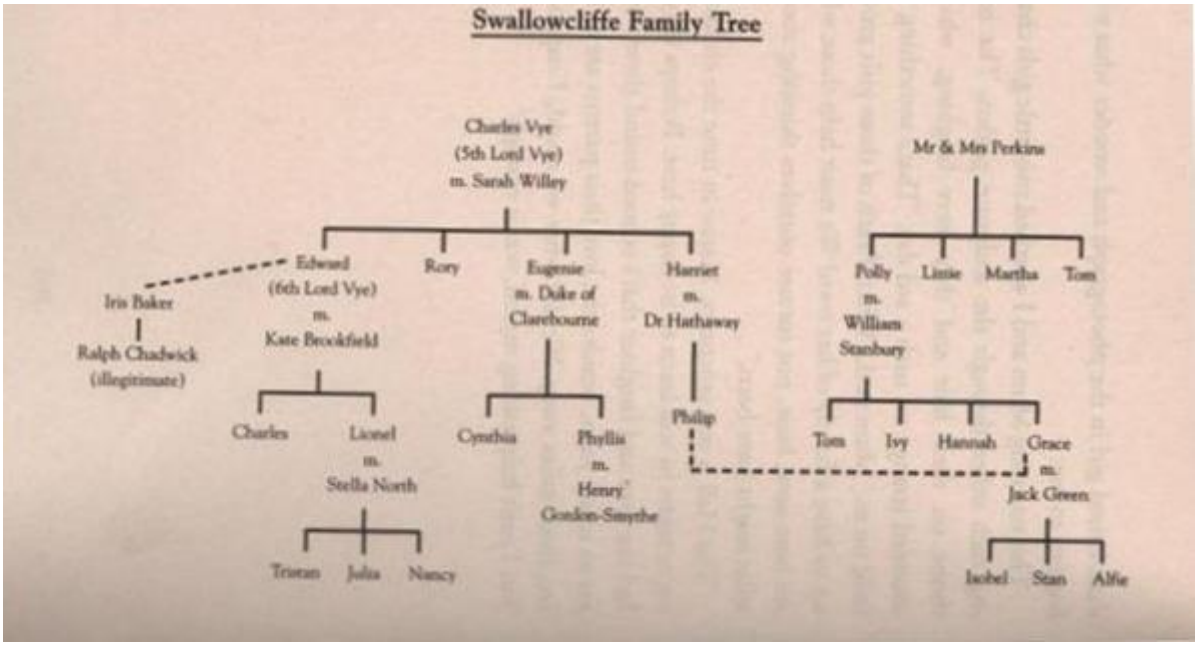

Figure 3: The Swallowcliffe family tree in *Shelter from the Storm*

The Loveall family tree in *Misfortune* contains similar lacunas and inaccuracies. Stace's image positions the Lovealls around the hero of the novel and heir of Love Hall, Rose, whose name is carved at the bottom of the illustrated tree (see figure 4). However, Rose is not actually the biological child of Geoffroy Loveall and Anonyma Wood as the tree suggests, but rather a foundling, the unlikely survivor of his mother's backstreet abortion. As we discover near the end of the novel, his father is actually the Bad Lord Loveall. Rose's right to the Loveall estate therefore arises not from his descent from Geoffroy and Anonyma, as the tree suggests, but because his real mother, Marguerite d'Eustache, 'was secretly married to the Bad Lord Loveall between Catherine Aston and Isabella Anthony', both of whom feature

on the family tree while Marguerite is noticeably lacking (*Misfortune,* pp. 483-4). Also missing from the family tree are Rose's wife and children. As in the Swallowcliffe family tree, then, women and their progeny are written out of the authoritative record of Loveall family history, as is any suggestion of homosexual love between Rose (raised female) and his wife. The Loveall family crest, as a mark of legitimacy, suggests that the image represents an official, public history of the Lovealls, contrary to Rose's personal account detailed in the novel. The family trees in *Misfortune* and *Swallowcliffe* present traditional approaches to lineage as unrepresentative. While they are largely inclusive with regards to class, including servant characters like the Perkinses and Geoffroy's governess-turned-wife, Anonyma, they highlight issues of suppression for female characters by striking them from the historical record.

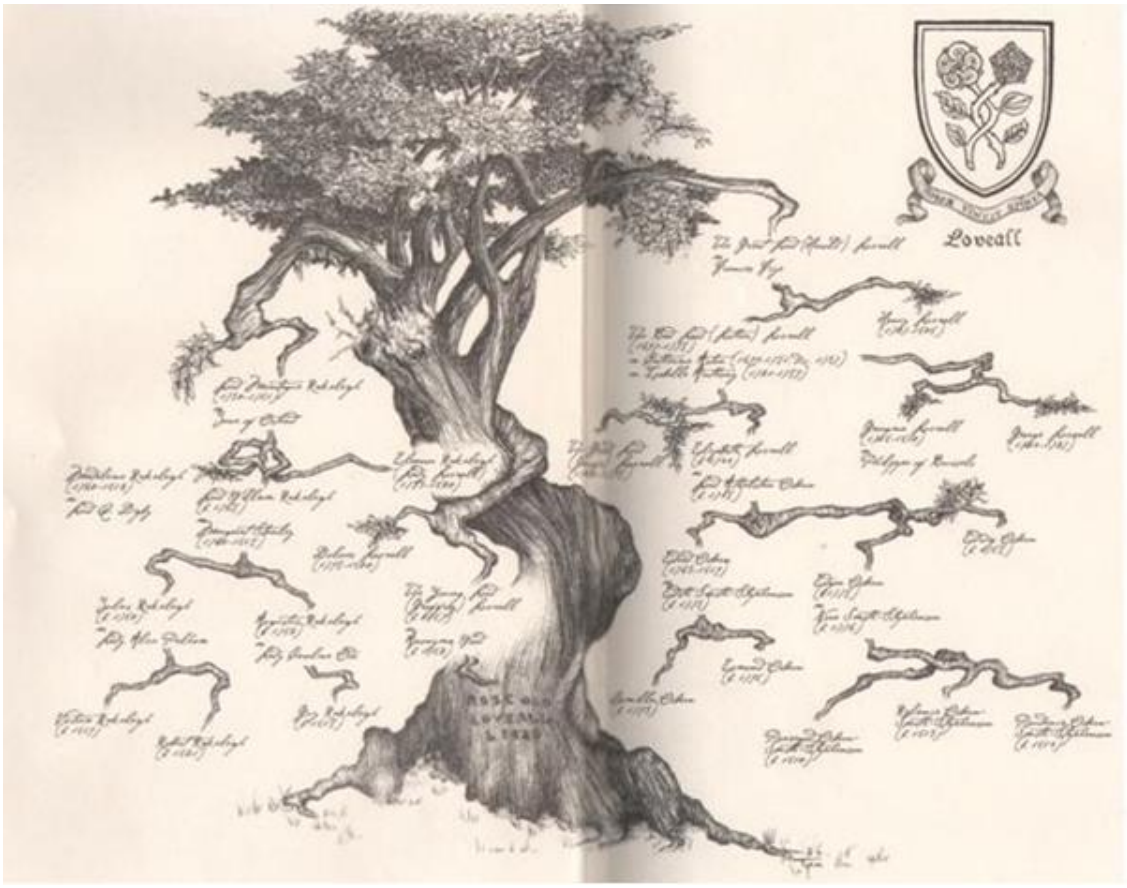

Figure 4: The Loveall family tree in *Misfortune*

In *The Thirteenth Tale*, Margaret encounters a similar issue when researching her biography of Vida Winter. Margaret is invited to stay with the aging author and write the official account of her life that Vida has thus far suppressed. In order to assess the validity of Vida's story before agreeing to write her biography, Margaret undertakes research in the almanacs in her father's bookshop, searching for traces of the people Vida has mentioned. During her research, Margaret is struck by the lack of reference to Isabelle March, the mother of the twins in Vida's story, in these historical records:

> Roland March [her husband] had died, and with his death the paper trail for Isabelle came to an end. […] In the real world, families branched like trees, […] making an ever wider net of connections. Titles on the other hand passed from one man to one man, and it was this narrow, linear progression that the almanac liked to highlight. […] After a certain number of branchings in the family tree, the names fell out of the margins and into the ether. […] [Isabelle] was a woman; her babies were girls; her husband (not a lord) was dead; her father (not a lord) was dead. The almanac cut her and her babies adrift; she and they fell into the vast ocean of ordinary people, […] too insignificant to be worth recording for posterity.[41]

Margaret here contrasts the complexity of real family trees to the 'narrow, linear progression' recorded in the almanac as a result of male primogeniture. Setterfield uses scale to convey women's marginal position in historical records: in contrast to the 'narrow linear progression' of male primogeniture, those excluded from the almanac are described as inhabiting large, uncontrollable spaces such as 'the vast ocean' and 'the ether', suggesting detachment and decontextualisation. The violent vocabulary describing those who 'fell out of the margins' or were 'cut […] adrift' conveys the damaging the effect of this unrepresentative history to future generations. Margaret therefore subverts this approach to historiography in her own work by focussing on the three women at the heart of Vida's story. Setterfield's novel and Margaret's biography therefore constitute a different kind of family history that offers female-centred counterpoint to the process of male primogeniture typically recorded in historical records.

[41] Diane Setterfield, *The Thirteenth Tale* (London: Orion, 2006), pp. 134-5 (hereafter '*Thirteenth*').

The patriarchal norms of the English country house novel tradition have given rise to a contemporary preoccupation with childless women and gaps in family trees. The contemporary English country house novel features a considerable number of infertile or childless women, marking a distinction from earlier novels in the genre in which the struggle for an heir or the issue of infertility is reserved for men. For example, in *Rebecca's Tale*, Rebecca believes that she is pregnant but is actually dying; she thereby doubly embodies the end of her family line. In *The Thirteenth Tale*, a Miss-Havisham-like Vida and her half-sister, Adeline, are the end of their family line, much like 'the Missus' who, as their servant, devoted her life to bringing them up rather than having children of her own. Similarly, *Misfortune* opens with a backstreet abortion and details Anonyma's childless marriage to Lord Loveall as they raise his adopted son, Rose. The masculine, ironically-named Caroline Ayres in *The Little Stranger* ends all possibility of children by calling off her wedding to Dr. Faraday, while in *The Legacy,* Erica's Aunt Caroline struggles to conceive a baby in her first marriage and therefore kidnaps the child of a friend. Finally in *Atonement*, Cecilia dies without having had the chance to start a family with Robbie, while Briony condemns herself to a life of spinsterhood out of guilt. The names of female characters in the genre often underscore their childlessness: Rebecca *de Winter,* Vida *Winter,* and *Anonyma Wood* signify a barren family tree. Added to this are a number of dead children such the eponymous 'Little Stranger' who haunts Waters's novel, Rose's aunt Dolly in *Misfortune*, and Clarissa's daughter, Emily, in *The Last Summer*, all of whom are, notably, female.[42]

The end of the family line, then, is commonly presented as a female issue narrated and orchestrated (intentionally or not) by women. By not continuing the family line or providing a male heir, the women (and homosexual men) in these novels go some way to subverting the patriarchy of male primogeniture. The association between women and a stunted legacy is a

[42] Lucie Whitehouse's *The House at Midnight* (2008) presents a salient counterpoint to this barren presentation of femininity as the male Heathfields who inherit Stoneborough wipe out the family line through murder and suicide.

comment on the suppression of not only women's representation in English history but, more specifically, a female literary tradition within the English canon. Family history operates as a pertinent metaphor for a missing female presence in the English canon in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *Rebecca's Tale*. In both novels, women assert their voice by authoring their family history. Contemporary women writers use the trope of genealogy, then, as a feminist metaphor for the female narratives missing from the historical literary record. Before examining how Setterfield and Beauman present the country house as a canonical house of fiction from which women have been excluded, I will highlight the conflation of literary history and family history in their respective novels by comparing their uses of metaphors of missing texts.

Missing Parents as Missing Texts

Both Setterfield and Beauman use missing text to represent missing ancestors. In *The Thirteenth Tale*, characters' parentage and family relations generally are mostly obscure and suggested implicitly rather than authoritatively. As a foundling, Aurelius Love's unknown family history is one of the central mysteries of the novel. He was found on the doorstep of Mrs Love who 'took me in. She gave me her name. She gave me her recipe book. She gave me everything, really' (*Thirteenth*, p. 156). In Aurelius's view, Mrs Love became his mother through the things he inherited from her, from her name to her books, both of which are textual signifiers of their relationship. Later in the novel, Aurelius shows Margaret what he refers to as his 'inheritance': the things that accompanied him on Mrs Love's doorstep. Aurelius's inheritance is partly material – the bag he was found in and the nightgown he was wearing – and partly textual – a page from *Jane Eyre*, and a piece of paper bearing an indecipherable word beginning with an 'A' and seeming to end in 'S'. Mrs Love supposes this to be his name and hazards a guess at 'Aurelius'. The textual clues to Aurelius's family history are notably scrappy and messy and are therefore representative of the character's, and

indeed the reader's, knowledge of his family history. Like Aurelius, the reader spends the book trying to piece together textual clues to solve the mystery. The indecipherable word on the scrap of paper transpires to have been the name of his father, Ambrose, its elusiveness underlining Aurelius's lack of knowledge about his parentage. The illegible text results in Aurelius being given a name that removes him from one family tree and places him in another because his father cannot be identified. Vida later reveals to Margaret that Aurelius is the son of her half-sister, Emmeline, whose jealous twin, Adeline, tried to burn him alive on a fire kindled by pages from novels. Thus the page from *Jane Eyre* which accompanies Aurelius is a clue to his roots and a missing piece of the puzzle in his life story. As a small excerpt from a larger story, it signifies Aurelius's limited knowledge of his ancestry. *Jane Eyre* is a key intertext for Setterfield, referred to throughout *The Thirteenth Tale*. As a pivotal clue in Aurelius's family history, Setterfield uses *Jane Eyre* to align family history with literary history so that the text leading back to his parentage also leads back to the tradition to which Setterfield's novel belongs.

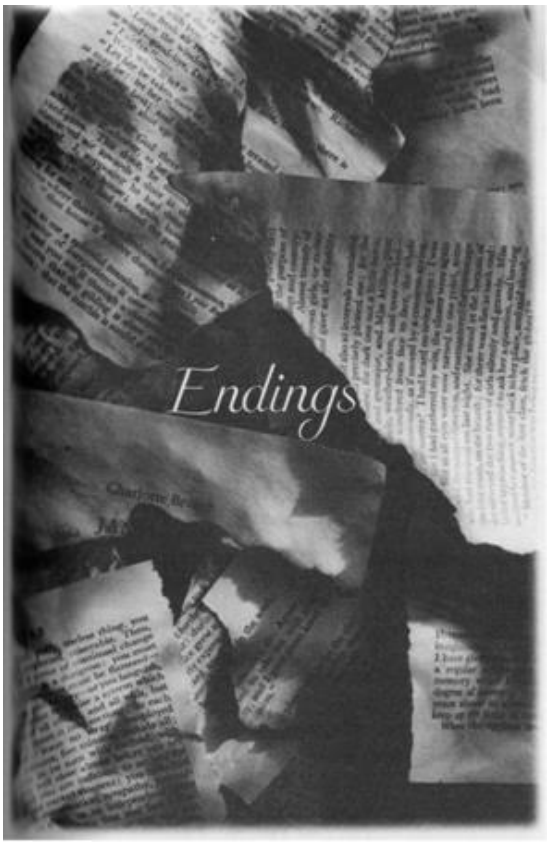

Figure 5: A scrappy textual inheritance and family tree in *The Thirteenth Tale*

Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale*, a revisioning of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), also represents a missing parent through metaphors of missing text. Historian Terence Grey arrives in Kerrith in 1951, twenty years since the death of Rebecca de Winter, under the guise of academic study to discover the truth about her death. However, later in the novel, Grey reveals himself as Tom Galbraith who, having suspected that Rebecca was his mother, discovers that she was actually his half-sister. Beauman couples family and literary lineage in her novel by aligning Grey's quest to uncover his family identity with the reader's quest to uncover the truth about Rebecca by reading Beauman's novel. Like Grey, the reader has returned to Kerrith to reopen Rebecca's story in the hope of a discovery that will inform lacunas in his/her knowledge. Grey's parentage therefore represents the literary parentage of Beauman's novel as both derive their identity from their ancestry. Grey's crisis of identity as a result of his unknown parentage is thus presented in textual terms:

> on my birth certificate there is a blank and the word 'unknown' in the spaces where a father's name and a mother's should be written. A blank, my lord: I have the illegitimate child's fatal weakness – a longing to discover identity and lineage, in myself, and in others.[43]

Grey employs both missing text and text that is unable to signify to represent his crisis of identity as an illegitimate, adopted child. His uncertain identity is underscored through his borrowing words from Shakespeare rather than using his own to take agency of his situation: '[a] blank, my lord' is taken from *Twelfth Night* when Viola, disguised as her brother, declares her love to Orsino. Through this intertext, Grey not only casts himself as a Shakespearean hero with a 'fatal weakness' for lineage but also reminds the reader of his own disguise – it is only when he discovers the truth about his family history that Grey reveals himself to his Kerrith acquaintances as Tom. Uncovering his lineage, Grey relinquishes his alias denoting obscurity and indecipherability and embraces his true identity. [44]

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[43] Sally Beauman, *Rebecca's Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 277 (hereafter '*Rebecca'*).

[44] This *Twelfth Night* reference also links Grey and Rebecca through the theme of disguise. Elinor Briggs recalls that Rebecca dressed as 'that girl-boy in *Twelfth Night'* at one of Manderley's fancy-dress balls (*Rebecca*, p.

Grey employs the same Shakespearean intertext of blankness when Colonel Julyan receives a blank notebook entitled 'Rebecca's Tale'. The notebook has a photograph of Rebecca as a child glued to the first page and a photograph of Manderley glued to the last. Uttering the phrase, 'a blank, lord', Grey uses the image of blankness to describe Rebecca's elusive story which fails to inform his own identity (*Rebecca*, p. 147). Later in the novel, in another notebook from 1931 also entitled 'Rebecca's Tale', Rebecca reveals that she had intended to write 'Maman's story and mine' in the blank notebook in order to 'make her [ill mother] well again' but failed to find the words (*Rebecca*, pp. 431-2). Rebecca wonders whether her 'failure [to write] caused Maman's death' (*Rebecca*, p. 432). Again Beauman uses the image of blank textual space to represent a missing parent. For Rebecca, the blank notebook represents her loss and helplessness over the death of her mother; for Grey, it upholds the mystery around the elusive woman he believes to be his mother. Grey's search for his ancestry is a quest to address the blankness of his family history: only by filling in Rebecca's tale can he uncover his own. In the same way, Beauman addresses her literary heritage by filling in the blanks of du Maurier's novel which allowed the memory of Rebecca to survive as an unsolved enigma in the mind of her readers. By conflating missing texts with missing parents, both Beauman and Setterfield suggest that the literary tradition of the English country house novel has excluded significant authors and works. The remainder of this chapter will explore how contemporary authors develop the generic combination of family and literary lineage beyond a useful metaphor for inheritance and into a more complex consideration of the limitations of a canonical English literary tradition as lost family histories become metaphors for lost literary predecessors.

A Concealed Homosexual Heritage in *The Stranger's Child*

198). Beauman underlines the link between family and literary lineage in the novel as brother and sister draw on the same literary references.

Hollinghurst, Beauman, and Setterfield present the exclusive country house setting and its accompanying social hierarchy as reflective of social and canonical suppression, particularly with regard to women and homosexual men. As Rita Felski highlights, the Western cultural and philosophical tradition, rooted as it is in 'patriarchal interests' has sought to 'repress difference', and the literary canon is one area in which multiplicity has been suppressed.[45] Stressing the canon's exclusivity, Alan Sinfield has highlighted that the 'silencing' of women and homosexual men is 'a matter of ideology, not output':

> First, women writers have difficulty seeing the scope of their oppression and finding ways of articulating it (this is true of homosexual men also, who have published a lot but only sometimes articulated their oppression). Second, it is difficult to gain serious notice for women's writing, and specially when it implies a critical stance on gender politics. This has worked most potently in the institutions of literature; the issue there is not why women write less literature, but how literature has been defined so as to marginalize, or present from male points of view, women's lives and gender politics.[46]

Contemporary authors use metaphors of genealogy to engage with the under-representation of the views and experiences of women and homosexual men in the literary canon that Sinfield outlines. Indeed, genealogy is a process of constructing a narrative around gaps. As Ronald D. Lambert notes, by juxtaposing birth, marriage, and death dates, and casting ancestors as 'subjects' in historical narratives, genealogists possess the necessary ingredients for 'the most humble of stories, however unoriginal, boasting discernible beginnings, middles, and ends'.[47] Genealogy is an imaginative process of reconstructing marginal figures and therefore a pertinent motif for the contemporary English country house novelist. The motif of lineage in the contemporary English country house novel thus presents the English canon as unrepresentative.

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[45] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.5.

[46] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 2nd edn. (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 240.

[47] Ronald D. Lambert, 'Descriptive, Narrative, and Experiential Pathways to Symbolic Ancestors', *Mortality*, 11 (2006), 317-335, (p. 318).

Like *Rebecca's Tale* and *The Thirteenth Tale*, *The Stranger's Child* employs metaphors of textual blanks. While Beauman and Setterfield use this imagery to signify a lost family heritage, Hollinghurst uses it to explore a muted homosexual English literary tradition. The novel begins in 1913 when Cecil Valance, a character loosely based on Rupert Brooke, visits his Cambridge friend and secret lover, George Sawles, at his family seat, Two Acres. Cecil writes a poem inspired by the country house in the autograph book of George's younger sister, Daphne. Adding another section to the poem during World War One, Cecil becomes a canonical British war poet (*Child*, p. 162). The rest of the novel details various attempts by biographers, historians, bookshop owners and academics to piece together Cecil's life through text. Demonstrating the generic combination of family and literary heritage, the novel explores what it means to be the family member of a dead poet.

The Stranger's Child is haunted by events that remain untextualised in the novel. Structured around absences, the text is divided into five sections set in 1913, 1926, 1967, 1979-80, and 2008, each of which predates significant historical events such as the First World War, the Great Strike, the passing of the parliamentary bill legalizing homosexual encounters, the AIDS epidemic, and the recession. Each of these events, as well as the births, marriages and deaths of the main characters, occur off-stage, as it were, and are referenced only indirectly. Structuring the novel so that each section occurs just *before* rather than just *after* each event emphasises the theme of absence in the novel: each section is overshadowed by what has not yet occurred, and the chronological distance of the following section from the missing historic event underlines how much has passed without reference. Adding to this sense of omission, Hollinghurst rarely spells out the exact period of each section, leaving it up to the reader to decipher implicit clues. The absence of clear markers of time in the novel has, Hollinghurst reveals, a queer agenda:

> It's partly a question of what the shape of one's life is if one doesn't settle down and have children. Some people do have those clear markers of the passage of time and generations, which a lot of gay people are less bound by.[48]

Unlike most country house novels, Hollinghurst's deliberately unsettles notions of family lineage: in the words of the author, it is 'a multi-generational family saga with all the multi-generational family saga bit left out'.[49]

Rather than highlighting generational lineage, then, Hollinghurst uses familial terms as a discourse that masks homosexuality. Informing his family that he and Cecil met through an ancient society at Cambridge, George explains, '"Cecil was my Father." It was striking, and useful, how one set of secrets nested inside another' (*Child*, p. 160). Cecil is cast in a fatherly role in George's homosexual awakening because he initiated and educated George in the ways of the society. Hollinghurst's metaphor for secrets as 'nesting' is similarly familial, evoking home-building and, ironically, reproduction. George's homosexuality is thus given precedence through his society ancestors, who provide the safe space for him to develop as a gay man that his existence in his family seat has thus far inhibited. Hollinghurst uses the rhetoric of family and domesticity to allude to a concealed homosexual undercurrent. Cecil's surname, Valance, combines the homely with the secretive and, as Christopher Tayler notes, 'has suitably martial echoes but also means a bed skirt, an item associated with old-fashioned coverings-up'.[50] The novel thus toys with the heteronormative discourse of family life to suggest a muted homosexuality.

Hollinghurst equates silenced representations of homosexuality with textual lacunas. The homosexual character of the Society at Cambridge remains a secret because it is 'unspeakable'; George describes the society as operating under 'strict secrecy': 'candour is

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[48] Hollinghurst, cited in Stokes.

[49] Alan Hollinghurst, cited in James Mullinger, 'Alan Hollinghurst Exclusive!', *GQ* (1 July 2011) <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2011-07/01/gq-books-alan-hollinghurst-the-stranger-child-review-the-line-of-beauty> [accessed 22 April 2013].

[50] Christopher Tayler, 'The Rupert Trunk', *London Review of Books*, 33 (2011), 9-10, (p. 10) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/christopher-tayler/the-rupert-trunk> [accessed 22 April 2013].

our watch-word' (*Child*, p. 25). Some of the pivotal texts in the novel, Cecil's 'Two Acres', for example, feature lacunas intended to maintain such secrecy. Jonah, a servant at Two Acres, happens across the following draft of the poem:

> the ~~secret~~ ~~long~~ ~~dark~~ wild dark path of love,
> Whose secrets none shall ever hear […]
> Love as vital as the spring
> And secret as – XXX (something!)
> Hearty, lusty, true and bold,
> Yet shy to have its honour told –
> Here there was a very dense crossing out, as if not only Cecil's words but his very ideas had had to be obliterated (*Child*, p. 52).

Secrecy is not only a pivotal theme in Cecil's poem about homosexual love, but also integral to his editing process. The 'XXX (something!)' represents an untextualised thought, as impenetrable to the reader as Cecil's 'obliterated' lines and ideas below. Reflecting on the distinctions between the first edition of the poem and that which became a canonical, sanitised war poem, George notes that 'there were parts of [the poem] unpublished, unpublishable, that Cecil had read to him – now lost forever, probably' (*Child*, p. 159). Hollinghurst thus draws parallels between the 'unspeakable' nature of the society and the untextualised 'something' 'obliterated' from Cecil's poem. Through metaphors of missing text, then, *The Stranger's Child* reflects on a censored homosexual tradition within the English canon and the homosexual writers whose work, like that of Dudley Valance, is 'interestingly "gay", in a suppressed English fashion – "deniable" as Dudley would say' (*Child*, p. 397). Indeed, Hollinghurst wrote his Master's thesis on how Forster, Hartley, and Ronald Firbank 'dealt with their homosexuality without openly writing about it. I was interested in the concealment'. [51] The novel's imagery of missing texts and familial signifiers of homosexuality represent Hollinghurst's interest in the omission of frank representations of homosexuality in the English canon.

The novel centres on missing texts. The various attempts of biographers to textualise Cecil's life, for example, are often curtailed by withheld information. For example, while

[51] Alan Hollinghurst, cited in Peter Parker.

George is working in intelligence – 'matters she couldn't be told about' – his mother, Freda, discovers letters sent between him and Cecil when they were lovers during the war (*Child*, p. 187). They 'become her guilty secret, as they had once been George's' and she deliberately keeps them from Sebby Stokes, the first of Cecil's posthumous biographers (*Child*, p. 190). Similarly, near the end of the novel, another character, Rob, discovers a letter from Cecil to Harry Hewitt suggesting the existence of poems which reveal a relationship between the two. Cecil describes the poems as 'for [Hewitt's] eyes only – you will see they are not publishable in my life-time – or England's!', suggesting their frank homosexual content is at odds with English literary style (*Child*, p. 558). Believing they might be in Hewitt's 'secret room', which had 'kept one secret pretty closely, for ninety years', Rob races to the house to stop the on-going clear out ahead of its demolition, but the poems are never found (*Child*, p. 563). Even technology seems to conspire against the biographers: when Paul attempts to record an interview with Daphne, the tape recorder fails. These missing texts and fragmented narratives represent a suppressed homosexual narrative in English culture generally, and English literary culture in particular.

Hollinghurst explores the literary suppression of homosexuality though the character of Paul Bryant in particular. Living in 1960s Britain where homosexuality is outlawed and representations of it are censored, Paul resorts to searching for people he can relate to in literature: he takes 'the new Angus Wilson' out of the library and reads 'with a restless eye running ahead for the appearances of Marcus, the queer son, whose antics he pondered as if for portents or advice' (*Child*, pp. 264-5). Paul keeps his reading a secret: 'He didn't want to read this at home and risk his mother asking questions' (*Child*, p. 265). This section of the novel is set immediately before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, which decriminalised homosexual acts in private between two men over twenty-one years of age, excepting those in the merchant navy and armed forces. It is also just before the 1968 Theatres Act which banished the Lord Chamberlain's role of censorship, something which had previously

suppressed open representations of homosexuality on the English stage. Living in a culture of censorship, Paul craves a more blatant representation of homosexuality, imagining a 'scene more thrilling and scandalous than anything described in *Films and Filming* – in fact a scene that, as far as he knew, had never been described at all' (*Child*, p. 287). His search for a missing homosexual text represents a longing for a more visible homosexual tradition in English literature. Thus in his career as a biographer, Paul searches for confirmation of Cecil's homosexuality merely hinted at in published versions of his poetry and becomes the first biographer to out the poet, directly addressing the suppression of homosexuality in English literary history.

Sinfield notes that, in contrast to a reclaimed lesbian tradition from romance writers of the 1950s and 1960s, 'gay men seem doomed to wrestle with the canon', little of which 'actually affirm[s] our sexualities'.[52] Indeed, Robert L. Caserio and Head argue that queer fiction 'only emerged as an identifiable and important literary category in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s' in a self-contained trend with 'a distinctive character' 'born of the need to strengthen the independent tradition of gay writing'.[53] The supposition here is that, in order to found a gay tradition, one must write outside of the canon that has for so long excluded explicitly gay narratives. Hollinghurst's use of the country house form, however, suggests that the English literary canon contains a gay authorial lineage, but one that is muted in its representation of homosexuality.

Hollinghurst suggests a link between the country house form and canonical suppression. The country house settings of the novel replicate the secrets and missing texts in the novel. The Valance family seat, Corley Court, is constantly undergoing redecoration and modernisation. Like the details of Cecil's sexuality, its jelly-mould ceilings are repressively boxed in and covered up. As Miller suggests, 'there's a sudden, and itself quite violent, sense

[52] Sinfield, p. 64.

[53] Robert L. Caserio, 'Queer Fiction: The Ambiguous Emergence of a Genre', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 209-228; Head, *Cambridge*, p. 113.

of absence and change each time we return to Corley'.[54] Indeed, Daphne notes that 'everything was always tidied, all traces of confrontations tidily removed' (*Child*, p. 217). Hollinghurst's country houses, then, 'secluded, labyrinthine, [and] faintly menacing', are secretive places in which the truth is constantly covered up' (*Child*, p. 269).[55] Thus Two Acres is 'condemned by its own urge for privacy', and hides behind a 'defensive wall of conifers' (*Child*, p. 385). As George reflects, '[t]he English idyll had its secret paragraphs, priapic figures in the trees and bushes…' (*Child*, pp. 385, 159). Presenting the country house as a secretive text, George alludes to its ability to hide sexuality. The subtext of sexuality in the country house setting is dramatised through Daphne's perusal of the foliage at Two Acres. As the sun sets, she identifies a 'hint of mystery' about Two Acres as 'the hedges and borders turned dusky and vague, but anything she looked at closely, a rose, a begonia, a glossy laurel leaf, seemed to give itself back to the day with a secret throb of colour' (*Child*, pp. 3, 4). The trees and hedges in the country house grounds create a 'vague' 'mystery' that conceals the 'secret throb' of sexuality unless 'looked at closely'. The country house setting, then, as a remote, enclosed, and secretive space, represents the suppression of representations of homosexuality in the English canon. In mapping both secrecy and intertextual pastiche on to the country house setting, Hollinghurst underscores the concealed homosexual narratives in the house of fiction.

Hollinghurst's use of the English country house novel genre, as a nationally distinct form, suggests that this suppression of representations of homosexuality is a typically English trait. Indeed, repression is historically allied to English culture, and the English house in particular, Roger Scruton argues:

> Repression caused [the English] to value privacy more than any other social gift. To the English there was no more valuable freedom than the freedom to close a

[54] Miller.

[55] The importance of the labyrinth to the novel is evidenced by the cover of the Picador edition of *The Stranger's Child* (2011).

> door. The Englishman's home was not just a castle, but an island of 'mine' in an ocean of 'ours'.[56]

English houses, then, are imbued with notions of privacy and secrecy because of the nation's repression. As Scruton suggests, the English have long been caricatured as repressed, and their fiction is historically known for its irony, that is to say, the indirect approach to a subject. By using the country house novel genre, then, Hollinghurst draws on a distinctly English literary style to reflect this repression. This style is signalled, firstly, Wood argues, in the high frequency of the word 'muddle'. Wood argues that this 'quintessential postwar English word' is a nationally-specific rhetoric of secrecy offering 'a nice English blur where a nasty clarity might be preferable'.[57] Hollinghurst's use of the word 'muddle' is therefore similar to Beauman's use of the name 'Grey', as both denote obscurity and uncertainty. However, in being 'quintessential[ly] […] English', Hollinghurst's use of 'muddle' conveys a nationally-specific discourse of evasion, suggesting a criticism of English forms of representation.

The second typically English element of Hollinghurst's writing style in *The Stranger's Child* is the muted representations of homosexual relationships. As such, *The Stranger's Child* is a drastic change of style for Hollinghurst. Compared to his previous work, the sexual content of *The Stranger's Child* is notably tame.[58] This is especially obvious as the explicit nature of Hollinghurst's earlier novels – described by one critic as 'carnal' – has become one of the defining features of the author's literary style.[59] Head, for example, identifies in Hollinghurst's earlier novel, *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), 'a determination to deal frankly with that which was concealed in previous decades'.[60] Hollinghurst's distinctive frankness however, is missing from *The Stranger's Child*. In fact, the novel represents an

[56] Roger Scruton, *England: an Elegy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), p. 51.

[57] Wood.

[58] Wood; Craig.

[59] Wood.

[60] Head, *Cambridge*, p. 115.

inversion of this approach as it is written within the canonical style of discretion and suppression. In order to reflect the suppression of homosexual representation in the English canon, Hollinghurst uncharacteristically censors his own representation of sex. The muted descriptions of the encounters between George and Cecil in the woods and the other gay characters for whom sex remains an experience 'never […] described at all' create a notable absence to readers familiar with Hollinghurst's work (*Child*, p. 287).

This tradition of censorship is one Hollinghurst views as an integral forerunner to contemporary gay literature; in his review of Stephen Coote's *Anthology of Homosexual Verse* (1982), for example, Hollinghurst complained that it ignored a large amount of poetry that is 'predominantly indirect' in its representation of homosexual love: 'the unspeakable love demands metaphor, and conscripts other ways of seeing to its purpose'.[61] *The Stranger's Child* thus creates intertextual connections to novels such as *Brideshead* and Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), in which homosexual relationships are subtextually inferred rather than explicitly stated.[62] By representing homosexuality in terms of familial discourse and a suppressive canon, then, Hollinghurst highlights the issues of inheritance and continuance for gay literature: just as homosexuality inhibits the continuance of a biological family line, censorship hinders a historic homosexual literary tradition. In the final section of this chapter, I will be exploring how Beauman and Setterfield employ the country house genre to signal a similar canonical suppression of women's writing and experiences.

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[61] Alan Hollinghurst, 'The unspeakable spoken', *TLS*, 22 April 1983, p. 397.

[62] Parker suggests that Waters's *The Little Stranger* similarly indicts 'the unspeakability of homosexuality when Faraday and Roderick both refer to desire between men simply as "that"'. In both *The Stranger's Child* and *The Little Stranger*, 'a sister functions as a substitute for her brother', as Cecil's feelings for George are projected on to Daphne in the same way that Faraday's feelings for Roderick (according to Parker) are projected on to his sister, Caroline. Like Hollinghurst, Waters is known for her frank representation of homosexuality suggesting that, as with *The Stranger's Child*, the newly closeted approach to same-sex desire arises from the country house novel genre (Parker, p. 110).

A Marginalised Literary Matrilineage

Canonical hostility to women writers continues in contemporary literary culture. As recently as 2011, V. S. Naipaul claimed that literature produced by women was 'unequal' to his own, critiquing country house novelist, Austen, in particular.[63] As Francine Prose noted in response, '[t]he notion of women's inferiority apparently won't go away'.[64] Germaine Greer suggests that female literary tradition is lacking due to 'the transience of female literary fame': 'almost uninterruptedly since the Interregnum, a small group of women have enjoyed dazzling literary prestige during their own lifetimes, only to vanish without trace from the records of posterity'.[65] Thus each generation of women writers has found itself in the words of Elaine Showalter, 'without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex'.[66] However, despite what authoritative records might suggest, Showalter argues, 'women have had a literature of their own all along', and contemporary writers are aware of their 'connectedness to other women'.[67] Felski has identified a similar notion of community in feminist literature, in which the individual subject 'is viewed in relation to and as a representative of a gendered collective which self-consciously defines itself against society as a whole' and rejects the 'universality of male bourgeois experience.[68] The idea of a collective female literary tradition, then, poses an opposition to an English canon historically dominated by men.

As Showalter suggests, one of the main intertextual signifiers of this connectedness in contemporary women's writing is a 'rejection of male society and masculine culture' through

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[63] Amy Fallon, 'VS Naipaul finds no woman writer his literary match – not even Jane Austen', *Guardian* (2 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/02/vs-naipaul-jane-austen-women-writers> [accessed 20 December 2014].

[64] Francine Prose, 'On Women Writers and V. S. Naipaul', *Harper's Blog* (9 June 2011) <http://harpers.org/blog/2011/06/on-women-writers-and-v-s-naipaul/> [accessed 20 December 2014].

[65] Germaine Greer, 'Flying Pigs and Double Standards', *TLS*, 26 July 1974.

[66] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 11-12.

[67] Showalter, pp. 10, 35.

[68] Felski, p. 155.

a ‘separatist literature of inner space’: ‘Its favourite symbol’, inherited from nineteenth-century women writers, is ‘the enclosed and secret room’ which presents ‘fantasies of enclosure […] [and] came to stand for a separate world’.[69] The country house setting represents one such ‘inner space’ in contemporary English fiction. The return to the country house setting since 2000 therefore marks not only a rejection of a masculine literary culture but also a connection to the canonical nineteenth-century texts by women Showalter identifies (*Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Pride and Prejudice*).[70] In this way, the country house represents an inherited literary symbol of female suppression. In fact, the novel form itself is born of women’s exclusion from the canon: as Showalter highlights, ‘excluded by custom and education from achieving distinction in poetry, history, or drama’, women writers ‘defin[ed] their literary culture in the novel’.[71] The English country house novel therefore represents a literary form of empowerment through which women have addressed the issue of their suppressed influence. However, while Showalter claims the intertextual symbol of ‘inner space’ represents ‘fantasies of enclosure’ and ‘a separate world’, contemporary authors are, I argue, using the country house to demand entry to the world from which they have traditionally been excluded: the house of fiction.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that the confinement of Victorian women to their houses is one of the most influential factors on their lives and writing:

> not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored. […] [T]he striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement.[72]

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[69] Showalter, p. 33.

[70] This is not an approach exclusive to women’s writing – Stace, McEwan, and Hollinghurst are also indebted to canonical generic forerunners. However, only in women’s writing does the country house constitute an inherited symbol of ‘inner space’, gendered oppression, and gendered community.

[71] Showalter, p. 4.

[72] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [1979] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. xi–xii.

Although the country house is a site of wealth and privilege, for women and homosexual men, it is a symbol of restriction, for these benefits can only be obtained through marriage, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. The advantages of the country house lifestyle, then, are conditional on compliance with obedience to conservative social norms and the understanding that the house and title will only ever belong to male heirs. The return of the nineteenth-century trope of the ancestral mansion as a site of entrapment in contemporary women's writing signals a conscious engagement with a female literary tradition that highlights women's ongoing battle to be heard. Female characters therefore turn to writing to exercise their voice. My examination of *Rebecca's Tale*, *The Thirteenth Tale*, and *The Stranger's Child* reflects Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's argument that the ancestral home in contemporary novels 'serves as an important link to the generational past of the protagonists, and this in itself marks out the potential for a core sense of the matrilineal nature of the inheritances at risk'.[73] They make similar connections between women's relationship to the ancestral house and the issue of literary influence, though through the lens of neo-Victorianism: 'the mother and the maternal home, acting as they do as sites of both alienation and ultimate reconciliation, constitute central metaphors of the legacy of Victorianism in neo-Victorian fiction'.[74] However, as my examination of these novels will highlight, the country house is not regarded as an exclusively Victorian space in the contemporary English country house novel, for all Victorian intertexts are often influential. In their genre-specific intertextuality, contemporary country house novelists also recall later uses of the setting by later country house authors, such as du Maurier, as well as male authors, such as Hartley, suggesting that the alignment of the country house and literary lineage is less to do with Victorian women's writing and more likely a reflection of the country house tradition. What is more, while Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that the ancestral house and its library 'embody

[73] Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 28.

[74] Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 65.

womb and tomb in one: a maternal legacy for both male and female heirs', I suggest that the library is more often a male-dominated space representing women's historical exclusion from the house of fiction.[75]

To Beauman's Rebecca, Manderley is a symbol of patriarchal oppression. She marries Max to become mistress of Manderley, planning to wrest the house from its patriarchal lineage as an act of revenge for her mother, who was seduced then abandoned by Max's father. Rebecca redecorates the house so that it becomes almost an extension of herself – 'the cool flagstones caressed my feet […]; the banister fitted my hand' – and claims the house

> on behalf of all the women who sacrificed their names, and lost their identities, who were subsumed, who were relegated to the portrait gallery, a footnote in a family's history. I claim it for women long dead, and women who have died recently, women who lie in the de Winter crypt, and whose voices speak to me. […] I speak for a long, long line of the dispossessed. (*Rebecca*, pp. 451, 438, 411-2).

Unwilling to become 'a footnote in a family's history' – another of Beauman's textual metaphors for a lack of identity – Rebecca, so long silenced by both Max and du Maurier, speaks through her diary and Beauman's novel on behalf of women whose voices have been silenced. In Beauman's novel, then, claiming the country house is synonymous with reclaiming generations of lost women's voices.

Manderley's suppressed female voices are most pertinent in the library, a space of silence and the only room that Rebecca has not decorated. It 'smells male' and houses the work of '[p]recious few females, [but] a tonnage of male authors' who threaten to overpower the female minority, much like the country house novel tradition (*Rebecca,* pp. 440-1). It is in the country house library that Rebecca reflects on her position within a lineage of de Winter wives:

> Poor Virginia [Rebecca's aunt, also seduced by Max's father] will have sat in this chair; Max's grandmother sat here […]. Maybe Max's mother alighted here once, and another mother before her. All those de Winter wives: the line stretched back

[75] Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 36.

> to the crack of doom – and just as I was thinking that, the strange thing happened. There was a new ghost […]. Such a secretive, bloodless mouse-squeak of a ghost! Sweet as sugar, innocent as a school girl, not a scrap of make-up, wearing no scent, lank hair (*Rebecca*, p. 441).

The 'new ghost' is, of course, the narrator of du Maurier's original novel, the nameless Mrs de Winter who replaces Rebecca as Max's wife. Surrounded by male voices in the literal seat of patriarchal oppression that Manderley has housed for centuries, Rebecca is aware of her position in a line of Mrs de Winters quashed by their husbands, and the ghost of the future Mrs de Winter foreshadows that she will not be the last. This episode in the library thus exposes both the exclusivity of a male-dominated canon and the patriarchal primogeniture which dispossesses women, yet Rebecca is ultimately powerless to effect change, dying before she can claim Manderley for herself or her ancestors. Beauman's English country house novel therefore critiques women's exclusion from both textual and material heritage.

Nevertheless, although Rebecca is silenced by both Max and du Maurier, *Rebecca's Tale* gives her the voice the character has so long been denied in a feminist revision of its literary ancestor. Beauman refracts the conservative metaphor of woman as a blank space in the historical record that is implicit in du Maurier's text by giving Rebecca a voice to address the blank spaces in *Rebecca*, on Grey's birth certificate, and in patriarchal history, taking agency of her own identity at last. As a rejoinder to England's patriarchal traditions which suppress wives and women writers alike, both Rebecca and Beauman create a literary matrilineage through the country house as an intertextual symbol of women's writing and suppression. Just as Rebecca's tale is Grey's inheritance, *Rebecca's Tale* is the nation's literary inheritance as the descendant of du Maurier's classic. Thus while Beauman's country house represents a house of fiction from which women have hitherto been largely excluded, her use of the country house in depicting that exclusion creates a community between past and present women writers and a literary matrilineage often overlooked in the country house novel tradition.

The Thirteenth Tale similarly employs the country house as an inherited literary symbol of female enclosure. In fact, the sisters who grow up in Angelfield are so confined within its walls that the villagers believe there to be only two twins, Adeline and Emmeline, and are oblivious to the existence of their half-sister, Shadow, who later becomes Vida. Setterfield stresses the literary lineage of the country house setting as a space of female suppression through links to *Jane Eyre*: like Thornfield Hall, Angelfield hides a marginalised woman and, later, another is killed in a fire at the house fuelled by pages of *Jane Eyre*. In a chapter named 'Jane Eyre and the Furnace', in which Vida plays a hypothetical game with Margaret, Setterfield links the imagery of fire to women's literary tradition:

> Picture a conveyor belt, a huge conveyor belt and at the end of it a massive furnace. And on the conveyor belt are books. Every copy in the world of every book you've ever loved. […] And imagine a lever with two labels, ON and OFF. At the moment the lever is off. And next to it is a human being, with his hand on the lever. About to turn it on. And you can stop it. You have a gun in your hand. All you have to do is pull the trigger. What do you do? (*Thirteenth*, pp. 266-268).

While Margaret refuses to answer, Vida taunts her by listing the names of canonical classics falling into the fire, eventually asking 'Same for *Jane Eyre*?', which makes Margaret 'suddenly dry-mouthed' (*Thirteenth*, p. 269). This image of burning books evokes the erasure of heritage and a consequently unrepresentative historical record. Notably, Vida presents the threatening persona with the power to silence as a man through 'his hand'. Like the de Winter husbands, then, this male agent of destruction represents the patriarchal English literary canonical tradition as he suppresses female voices and a literary matrilineage. Setterfield thus draws on imagery of fire and the country house to align her own representation of female suppression with an established community of women writers including Charlotte Brontë and du Maurier.

Notably, both Vida's game and Rebecca's vision of herself as a silenced de Winter wife occur in a country house library, linking women's marginal position in the country house to their exclusion from the literary canon. Setterfield stresses this connection when Margaret describes the soft-furnishings of Vida's library as creating a claustrophobic 'silence': 'Just as

blotting paper absorbs ink, so all this wool and velvet absorbed sound' (*Thirteenth*, p. 44). Margaret here equates blotted writing with silence, stressing the links between women's silenced voices and a lack of literary tradition. However, she distinguishes between the suppressed literary voice and the marginalised female role in the country house, presenting the latter as more destructive and enduring: 'where the blotting paper takes up only excess ink, the fabric of the house seemed to suck in the very essence of the words we spoke' (*Thirteenth*, p. 44). For all women's writing has been suppressed, then, it still exists, creating at least a trace of female tradition that country house primogeniture seeks to erase completely. Thus while Margaret and Vida struggle to make themselves heard in Vida's country house library, writing offers them a chance to exercise their voice beyond the confines of the country house.

In *The Stranger's Child*, Daphne experiences a similar revulsion to the library at Corley. The house is 'violently Victorian'; recalling Gilbert and Gubar's view of the ancestral mansion as indicative of female constriction, it has a generally oppressive atmosphere with its 'stained glass windows that kept out the light, the high ceilings that baffled all attempts at heating, the barely penetrable thickets of overladen tables, chairs and potted palms that filled the rooms' (*Child*, pp. 528, 504). However, to Daphne, the library is especially unwelcoming. Though a reader, 'she had never exactly taken to the library'; as in *Rebecca's Tale*, 'it was a part of the house outside her sway' (*Child*, p. 180). 'She couldn't quite shake off the feeling of being a visitor, as if in a public library, with rules and fines. As the scene of her mother-in-law's now "famous" book-tests, too, it had an unhappy air' (*Child*, p. 181). These book-tests are her mother-in-law's attempts to converse with her late son through extracts from books selected by a medium, underlining the novel's textual metaphors of legacy. Like Beauman's Rebecca, Daphne is highly aware of her place within a lineage of Corley mistresses, and feels excluded and powerless in the library. Hollinghurst's novel centres on literary lineage and particularly the country house tradition, exploring how Cecil's memory as a country house

poet evolves in successive biographies written by men. Daphne perceives female literary ambition as futile, even as her own autobiography is published: 'I was very much brought up in the understanding that the men all around me were the ones who were doing the important things. […] In [Cecil's] poem I'm merely referred to as "you". And of course in Sebby Stokes's [biography of Cecil] I'm "Miss S."!' (*Child*, pp. 476-8). Daphne here highlights the under-representation of women in both literary content and authorship; in both texts, she is anonymised or aliased so that she is, in effect, written out of the record.

Whereas Beauman and Setterfield present women's silence as a manifestation of patriarchal suppression, Hollinghurst subverts this view and suggests that women's silence actually presents a form of empowerment. He frequently depicts his female characters as withholding information from the male biographers in the novel. Debbie, for example, clears Hewitt's home and burns documents from his strong-room that Cecil's biographers have searched for, while Maud deliberately interrupts George's interview with Paul. During her interview with Stokes, Daphne deliberately withholds certain memories of Cecil: 'Well, he was never going to know about that. For now, she had to come up with something more appropriate; something that she felt wearily had already been written, and that she had merely to find and repeat' (*Child*, p. 184). Daphne also withholds information from Paul, 'I'll have to be careful what I say. […] Very careful' (*Child*, p. 472). Her mother similarly refuses to mention letters between Cecil and George which reveal their homosexual relationship. Freda is aware of 'not having said to Sebastian Stokes any of the things she could have said, and had known, in her heart, that she wouldn't. […] No one else could possibly be told, since no one keeps other people's secrets' (*Child*, pp. 185, 189). Daphne and Freda refuse to surrender their memories and experiences to the male biographers so that the male-authored text is presented as lacking as a result of its gendered perspective. Indeed, Hollinghurst describes *The Stranger's Child* as preoccupied with 'the terribly – in both senses – partial way' in

which people are remembered.[76] When writing the novel, he claims, '[w]hat I was really interested in is demonstrating how much is unknowable, irresolvable'.[77] Thus while Hollinghurst's male characters seek to uncover the truth through research and interviews, his female characters wilfully withhold information, recognising the partiality of such accounts. The women generally opt for self-censorship, an image at odds with the male hand of suppression in Setterfield's text. Hollinghurst's presentation of women's silence, then, is one which grants female characters agency in their wilful rejection of male approaches to narration and historiography.

According to Patricia Ondek Laurence, valuing the silence of women undermines patriarchal (and Western) notions of power so that blanks become 'infused with the psychic life and historical sense of a woman': 'silence points out language's mask: the uncertainties and limitations of interpretation in literature and life'.[78] The adoption of silence therefore indicates an unwillingness to employ the discourse of certainty and definitiveness Alexander associates with traditional (patriarchal) modes of historiography. Evoking a similar sense of gendered community to that suggested by Felski, Laurence claims that silence 'marks a bond between women': in novels 'written by women as a separate tradition (Austen, Brontë, Woolf)', silence is a 'ritual of truth', but in novels written by men such as Richardson, Meredith, Dickens and Hardy, women's silence is presented as a 'ritual of oppression'.[79] Laurence's binaristic approach to authorship is, of course, reductive and undermined by Hollinghurst's novel, which employs female silence to destabilise the idea of 'truth'. However, her argument that female silence can be an empowering symbol of women's

[76] Alan Hollinghurst in Emily Stokes, 'Lunch with the FT: Alan Hollinghurst', *Financial Times* (24 June 2011) <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2RPoHadiO> [accessed 22 April 2013].

[77] Hollinghurst in Stokes.

[78] Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 56, 8, 9, 12.

[79] Laurence, pp. 46, 66.

connectedness, particularly to other women writers, finds support in these contemporary English country house novels. Hollinghurst's female characters keep secrets as a rejection of male-authored history, while Setterfield and Beauman employ women's silence as a sign of their allegiance to a female matrilineage that the English canon has tried to exclude.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the contemporary English country house novel differs from other contemporary texts and generic forerunners in its prolific and generically-specific intertextuality. This mode of intertextuality, as my close readings reveal, is employed to reflect on the contemporary English country house novel's position within a generic tradition and national literary culture that has historically excluded representations of the experiences of women and gay men. By shifting the genre's preoccupation with lineage from the material to the textual, contemporary English country house authors reflect the current interest in those marginalised from traditional historical records and democratise a generic theme that once denoted exclusivity. While Hollinghurst uses familial metaphors to highlight a repressed homosexual lineage in the English canon, Beauman and Setterfield use the country house as a symbol of a literary matrilineage traditionally excluded from the house of fiction. The quest to uncover both family and literary heritage in contemporary English country house novels, then, is less to do with uncovering stable truths and more to do with recognising loss and uncertainty. The combination of intertextuality and missing texts in this contemporary genre may seem paradoxical. However, unable to achieve it alone, these contemporary novelists rely on intertextuality to draw attention to and revise the oversights of the past, adding new voices to speak for the silenced. By highlighting discontinuity and absences, contemporary English country house novelists destabilise the authority of the English canon which has marginalised women and gay men.

Chapter 2. Part of the Furniture: Country House Aesthetics and the Ideology of Detail

'Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks' – Erving Goffman[80]

'Truly, this is a ridiculous country. […] I mean, you're all so… so rigid. So stuck in your ways. So obsessed with the pecking order and so terribly, zealously vigilant about the detail' – Thea in Jane Sanderson's Ravenscliffe[81]

In the previous chapter, I established the contemporary English country house novel as a form that is conscious of the genre's tradition of upholding a conservative relationship between the margins and the centre embodied in its central setting. In this chapter, I will be looking more closely at the relationship between social hierarchy and the country house setting by exploring how different authors use detail. According to Heather Love, 'in literary studies especially, richness is an undisputed – if largely uninterrogated – good'.[82] This chapter interrogates the 'richness' of contemporary English country house novels in both senses of the word, addressing both the richly detailed country house aesthetic and its political ramifications, revealing the genre's use of detail to be more ambivalent than Love suggests. While Malcolm Kelsall argues that the quasi-scientific naturalism of the nineteenth-century country house novel 'tends to strip the country house of allegorical or symbolic signification', I posit that the detail is invested with great metaphorical significance in its contemporary form.[83] I reveal a tension within the genre between the conservative presentation of the working class as decorative details in rich descriptions of the country house in Jane Sanderson's *Netherwood* (2011) and Julian Fellowes's *Snobs* (2005) and *Past Imperfect*

[80] Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Double Day, 1961), p. 320.

[81] Thea in Jane Sanderson, *Ravenscliffe* (London: Sphere, 2012), p. 360.

[82] Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371-91, (p. 371).

[83] Malcolm Kelsall, *The Great Good Place* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 156.

(2009), and the more subversive presentation of how their labour and suppression contributes to the richness of the country house's owners in Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001).

The concepts of richness and social hierarchy are particularly resonant in contemporary Britain where the gap between rich and poor continues to widen (see General Introduction). In fact, contemporary Britain is obsessed with social extremities, particularly with regard to class, as evidenced by the recent increase in servant narratives and the accompanying academic interest in service (see General Introduction).[84] British culture generally seems to be drawing the margins to the centre. One of the chief ways of negotiating the growing disparity between Britain's social elite and socially marginal has been through the master/servant dynamic of the country house novel. Indeed, according to Peter Mandler, the country house represents 'the quintessence of Englishness' and 'epitomize[s] the English love of […] hierarchy'.[85] In light of Kristen Kelly Ames's suggestion that the enduring popularity of the country house novel 'perhaps lies in its troubling of the distinctions between centre and margin', I explore how contemporary novelists explore and destabilise the traditional social hierarchy embodied in the genre's central setting through their use of detail.[86]

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[84] Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain, 1900-1950', *Past and Present*, 203 (2009), 181-204; Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past: The Manor House Amnersfield, 1933-1945* [1984] (London: Verso, 2010); Lucy Delap, 'Housework, Housewives and Domestic Workers: Twentieth Century Dilemmas of Domesticity', *Home Cultures*, 8 (2011),189-210.

[85] Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 1.

[86] Kristen Kelly Ames, 'Conventions Were Outraged: Country, House, Fiction' (doctoral thesis, York University, Toronto, 2014), p. 262 <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKEwjX1bHSr5fHAhWFvRQKHbKQBws&url=http%3A%2F%2Fyorkspace.library.yorku.ca%2Fxmlui%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F10315%2F28184%2FAmes_Kristen_K_2014_PhD.pdf%3Fsequence%3D2&ei=MNrEVdf9FYX7UrKhnlg&usg=AFQjCNHl2wNa-OyIzl9U6okZofqeWMTCUw&bvm=bv.99804247,d.ZGU> [accessed 7 July 2015].

The Oxford English dictionary defines detail as 'a minute or *subordinate portion* of any (*esp.* a large or complex) whole'.[87] Using this definition of the detail as a subordinate part of a whole as a starting point, this chapter examines how what Susan Stewart terms 'the hierarchy of detail' is used to negotiate social dynamics within the contemporary English country house novel.[88] As Stewart highlights, '[r]ealistic genres do not mirror everyday life' but rather 'its hierarchization of information' and are therefore reflective of 'values, not of the material world'.[89] Rather than reading individual details as merely the material aspects of the rich country house aesthetic, then, I suggest that they underpin the genre's representation of social hierarchy. This chapter will argue that, in the contemporary English country house novel, socially-marginal characters are aligned with detail as subordinate elements in a hierarchy of importance. As such, the hierarchy of detail in the genre reflects the social hierarchy embodied in the country house setting with its spatialised dynamic of upstairs/downstairs.

In doing so, I analyse characterisation through the lens of the hierarchy of detail. This approach is rarely adopted in literary scholarship, though Alex Woloch has examined the relationship between minor characters and protagonists in the nineteenth-century novel which, he argues, is central to the form.[90] William H. Galperin has briefly considered similar ideas in his work on Jane Austen, but in relation to individual novels rather than the country house

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[87] 'Detail', *OED Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51168?rskey=AgXqLH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 11 August 2012], my emphasis.

[88] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 26.

[89] Stewart, p. 26.

[90] Alex Woloch, *The One vs The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). I will be returning to the nineteenth-century novel in my discussion of detail in the country house novel.

genre.[91] Neither of these studies have considered how socially-marginal characters become decorative details in politically-problematic depictions of the country house's social hierarchy, an argument I make in the first half of this chapter.

I begin this chapter by outlining the critical response to the use of detail in contemporary novels, arguing that detail is widely regarded as a generic component. Building on the work of Stewart and Naomi Schor, who argue that the hierarchy of detail reflects systems of value, I reclaim the decorative details of the country house setting as ideologically significant in representing the socially marginal, thereby rehabilitating a literary trope that, Rosalind Galt notes, 'remains largely disprized' in academic scholarship.[92] I contrast three different approaches to the hierarchy of detail in the genre. The first, in *Snobs*, *Past Imperfect*, and *Netherwood*, depicts servants as aesthetic details. The second, more subversive approach occurs in *Misfortune*, and involves a camp aesthetic that reverses the traditional social hierarchy of the country house. The third and final approach is that of McEwan in *Atonement*, in which detail becomes an indicator of class-consciousness.

Country House Aesthetics: A Crisis of Balance

In this section, I will be studying the reception of contemporary English country house novels to highlight both the widespread expectation that the genre possesses a detailed aesthetic and the accompanying underlying anxiety regarding the balance of style and content in these texts. The use of detail in the contemporary English country house novel is widely commented on by readers, and mostly praised. A *Good Reads* review of *Atonement*, for example, admires McEwan's 'exquisite, lush descriptions', while an *Amazon* reviewer awards

[91] William H. Galperin, *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). He suggests that *Emma* (1815) recalls picturesque painting techniques so that the threat posed by socially marginal characters, such as the gypsies, is always contained (p. 51).

[92] Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1989); Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Fellowes's *Past Imperfect* five stars because 'detail was what it should be – detailed'.[93] The praise of detail in these online reviews is echoed by broadsheet critics such as Keith Miller, who asserts of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011) that 'really it's the nooks and crannies that intrigue and provoke'.[94] As Miller's image of 'nooks and crannies' suggests, the use of descriptive detail in the genre is repeatedly conflated with the country house setting, as if the richness of descriptions corresponds to the rich country house aesthetic. A quotation from the *Daily Telegraph* on the dust jacket of *Misfortune*, for example, claims that 'Stace's attention to every detail is a delight, and he revels in the richly embroidered language of his period'.[95] Stace's detailed writing is presented as an 'embroidered' country house furnishing, a decorative and domestic element of the country house novel. Likewise, *Atonement* has been described by reviewers as '[o]rnate', and comprised of 'exquisitely worked entries that fit together intricately like handmade jigsaw-puzzle pieces'.[96] The vocabulary used in these reviews ('rich', 'embroidered', 'ornate', 'handmade') evokes the fittings and furnishings of the country house so that literary style is portrayed as derivative of the novel's setting. That is to say, country house novels are presumed to be written in a rich and ornate style *as a result* of their rich and ornate setting. Indeed, Blake Morrison claims that country houses 'didn't

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[93] Kate, 'Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Good Reads* (24 March 2008) <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6867.Atonement> [accessed 20 February 2014]; Cassandra, '*Past Imperfect*', *Amazon* (17 June 2009) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Past-Imperfect-Julian-Fellowes/dp/0753825414> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[94] Keith Miller, '*The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst: review', *Telegraph* (17 Jun 2011) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8579150/The-Strangers-Child-by-Alan-Hollinghurst-review.html> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[95] *Globe and Mail*, cited on the cover of Wesley Stace, *Misfortune* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), hereafter '*Misfortune*'.

[96] James Wood, 'James Wood writes about the manipulations of Ian McEwan', *London Review of Books*, 31 (2009), pp. 14-16, (p. 16) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n08/james-wood/james-wood-writes-about-the-manipulations-of-ian-mcewan> [accessed 20 February 2014]; Michiko Kakutani, 'Books of the Times: And When She Was Bad She Was…', *New York Times* (7 March 2002) <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/07/books/books-of-the-times-and-when-she-was-bad-she-was.html> [accessed 20 February 2014].

just give [Henry] James the milieu for his fiction, the great good place, they also defined its style – the decorative borders of his semi-colons, the long corridors of his sentences, the spreading parklands of his paragraphs'.[97] Both the emphasis on detail and the rhetoric used to describe it in these reviews suggest that a novel about the home of the rich and distinguished must be similarly rich and distinguished in its aesthetic, providing extensive descriptions of the country house setting and its period features. As such, the generic trope of detail is widely conceptualised as part of the descriptive depiction of the material objects that make up the country house setting.

I will return to this problematic conception of country house detail as descriptive and object-centred later in this chapter but, before doing so, it should be noted that the detailed country house aesthetic is not always praised by readers. In contrast to the praise of *Atonement* as 'ornate' and 'intricate', an online review of the novel compares McEwan's prose to a 'finely wrought, spindly, uncomfortable Louis XIV chair', suggesting that its decorative and detailed style inhibits its function.[98] As Essie Fox suggests in her paratextual interview appendixed to *The Somnambulist* (2011), 'the best novels' are not 'over-encumbered with the minutiae of too much detail', but rather use only as much detail as is necessary.[99] Fellowes in particular is repeatedly criticised for his overuse of detail. A *Good Reads* reviewer, for example, complains that *Snobs* is 'well-written, but suffered from the same problem as Fellowes' [sic] (superior) second novel *Past Imperfect*; too many digressions into intricate details of the upper echelons of the class system'.[100] These sentiments are

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[97] Blake Morrison, 'The country house and the English novel', *Guardian* (11 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/11/country-house-novels-blake-morrison> [accessed 17 November 2014].

[98] Brien Palmer, '*Atonement*', *Good Reads* (16 March 2010) <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/94339028> [accessed 9 June 2015].

[99] 'In Conversation with Essie Fox' in Essie Fox, *The Somnambulist* (London: Orion, 2011), pp. 5-11, (p. 6).

[100] Blair, '*Snobs*', *Good Reads* review (7 August 2014) <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/116793675?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1> [accessed 10 June 2015].

echoed by broadsheet reviewers such as Raffaella Barker, who concludes of *Past Imperfect* that, '[e]mbedded in the detailed descriptions of how the upper classes lived 40 years ago is a slimline plot'.[101] Barker here feels that Fellowes's detailed descriptions eclipse the point of his story so that his literary style overshadows the plot. Fellowes's novels are regarded by Kate Kellaway as reflective of the author's 'stylistic insecurity' because 'he tends to use long words where short ones would do better. […] Less would have been more'.[102] D. J. Taylor agrees with the suggestion that Fellowes's novels suffer from too much detail:

> The effect of these constant accretions of social detail, in which each briefly glimpsed interior is described down to the last chair-cover ("a rather beautiful day bed of the type that is called a duchesse brisee" etc), is rather exhausting. When Fellowes forgets to come on like the social editor of *Harper's & Queen* circa 1971, on the other hand, his touch becomes a great deal more assured.[103]

Taylor insinuates that Fellowes's preoccupation with detail (which, as in the aforementioned reviews, he links to interior decoration) detracts from his 'assured' writing style. He views Fellowes's overuse of detail (attending closely to country house furnishings such as chair covers) as a novelistic failing and more suited to *Harper's & Queen* magazine. *Harper's and Queen* is a particularly contentious parallel to Fellowes's novel, firstly because of its popular magazine format, and secondly because of its outdated high-society image from which it tried to escape by rebranding itself as fashion-glossy, *Harpers Bazaar*, in 2005. Taylor's comparison of Fellowes's 2008 novel with the magazine's 1971 image therefore implies that the novelist's attention to high-society objects is outdated and makes for light reading.[104]

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[101] Raffaella Barker, '*Past Imperfect*, By Julian Fellowes', *Independent* (16 November 2008) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/past-imperfect-by-julian-fellowes-1017480.html> [accessed 10 June 2015].

[102] Kate Kellaway, 'Class is in the eye of the beholder', *Observer*, (2 November 2008) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/02/past-imperfect-julian-fellowes> [accessed 26 October 2015].

[103] D. J. Taylor, 'Parties from the past', *Guardian* (1 November 2008) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/01/fiction> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[104] 'Name change for *Harpers & Queen*', *Telegraph* (14 November 2005) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1502947/Name-change-for-Harpers-and-Queen.html> [accessed 13 July 2015].

Many commentators have made the same link between the genre's preoccupation with descriptive details and light reading. Reviews of the novels recall the passive, consumptive reading discussed in the General Introduction as reflective of the genre's reputation as escapist entertainment. A *Good Reads* review of *Netherwood*, for example, recommends the novel to 'anyone who enjoys fat, juicy sagas rich in period detail', while an *Amazon* reviewer claims to have 'lapp[ed] up the details of privilege and wealth' in Fellowes's *Snobs*.[105] Through metaphors of comfort eating, these readers suggest that they overindulge on the country house's aesthetic details in an enjoyable but ultimately unstimulating experience in descriptions that recall Evelyn Waugh's 1959 preface to *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). In retrospection, Waugh viewed his novel as too preoccupied with the decorative details of the country house setting. He identified in his work a regrettable 'kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful'.[106] While Waugh's explanation for this 'gluttony' as resulting from the privations of war resonates with post-recession country house novels, the use of and attention to detail in country house novels before 2008 suggests that this literary approach is more likely a generic convention than a response to economic austerity. As a result of its generic preoccupation with decorative details, the English country house novel is occasionally accused of ignoring the wider social implications of its central setting.

There is a long-standing presumption amongst literary critics that detailed texts invite consumptive rather than analytical readings and readers that inhibit political reflection. The Victorian novel, in particular, is regarded as a form which, according to Elaine Freedgood,

> describes, catalogs [sic], quantifies, and in general showers us with things: post chaises, handkerchiefs, moonstones, wills, riding crops, ships' instruments of all

[105] Elizabeth, '*Netherwood*', *Good Reads* (6 November 2011) <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/229730295?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1> [accessed 10 June 2015]; Anne Maxwell-Stevenson, 'Snobs', *Amazon* (18 April 2010) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Snobs-novel-Lord-Julian-Fellowes/dp/1780224419> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[106] Evelyn Waugh, Preface to *Brideshead Revisited* [1959] (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 8.

> kinds, dresses of muslin, merino, and silk, coffee, claret, cutlers – cavalcades of objects threaten to crowd the narrative right off the page.[107]

Freedgood's conception of the Victorian novel as filled with small details that contribute to an overall aesthetic in which the reader is '[showered] with things', of course, is equally applicable to the contemporary English country house novel. Indeed, the genre's 'unconditional valuation of appearances, class status symbols, and correct behaviour' is, according to Ames, the real pleasure of the country house novel.[108] The plethora of detail in the Victorian novel has led some critics to associate the nineteenth-century novel with a passive form of reading that ignores wider social considerations. Galt highlights perceived distinction between 'the Victorian novels enjoyed by women [as] simply a form of consumption' and 'difficult texts read by men [that demand] a readerly act of production'.[109] I will be returning to this idea of gendered aesthetics, but for now I wish to stress the association between detail and consumptive reading practices. As Galt suggests, there exists a presumption among literary critics that texts filled with details, like Victorian or country house novels, are not intellectually stimulating because they require no interpretation or 'readerly production'. However, my close readings suggest that the details of the contemporary English country house novel are not as 'meaningless' as realist fiction has taught us to presume and are actually imbued with signification.[110] While Freedgood focuses on the (historical) significance of individual objects, however, I am more interested in the hierarchy of detail and what it reveals about the novel's politics.

Contemporary English country house novels are evaluated by readers and critics in terms of their ability to balance the descriptive details expected of the genre with other novelistic elements, chiefly plot and political reflection. For instance, naming *The Stranger's Child* 'one of the best novels published this year', Theo Tait praises Hollinghurst's ability to

[107] Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 1.

[108] Ames, pp. 203-4.

[109] Galt, p. 253.

[110] Freedgood, p. 1.

'follow the consciousness of an individual in amazing detail, as well as subtly dramatising the wider social and historical currents'.[111] Tait here celebrates the author's ability to balance detail with 'wider' social considerations. As the reviews in this section have highlighted, the balance between style and content is a recurring concern for country house novel readers and authors, as if the genre's characteristically rich style might inhibit its examination of the bigger issues its central themes raise.[112] However, as my close readings of the novels will demonstrate, even when it is presented as merely decorative, detail is rarely ideologically redundant and inhibitive of reflection on the 'wider social and historical currents' Tait identifies. In fact, the hierarchy of detail in the contemporary English country house novel reflects an ideological negotiation of the social hierarchy embodied in the genre's setting.

As such, detail is central to the genre's political message, particularly with regard to class. Underlining the detail's class connotations are words such as 'rich', 'fine', 'distinguished', or 'refined', which simultaneously denote social status and detail. In fact, the conflation of class and detail is understood to be a national literary characteristic of English and British writers. Emma Brockes suggests in her review of *The Stranger's Child* that 'the English see gradations of social inadequacy invisible to the rest of the world; Mr.

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[111] Theo Tait, '*The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst – review', *Guardian* (17 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/17/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-review> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[112] The same anxiety regarding the balance of aesthetic detail and political consideration was often cited in criticism of British heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s. Andrew Higson identifies a 'tension between visual splendour and narrative meaning' in British heritage films: 'the past is displayed as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films' (Andrew Higson, 'Representing the National Past' in *Fires Were Started*, ed. by Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 109-129, (p. 109)). Although in later publications Higson acknowledges that he had not 'allowed enough room for the revisionist and feminist readings' advanced by other critics, he maintains that 'the richly detailed and spectacular period *mise-en-scène*' also cues the distanced and therefore politically-detached gaze of 'admiring spectatorship' (Andrew Higson, *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996) and Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 41). Higson therefore suggests that aesthetic detail and political reflection are mutually exclusive and even inhibit one another, a suggestion I refute.

Hollinghurst separates them with a very sharp knife'.[113] Hollinghurst is praised for using detail to accurately depict England's social hierarchy. The same conflation of an eye for detail and class-consciousness in English literary tradition is also suggested by McEwan in an article posthumously honouring Saul Bellow in which he complained that 'in Britain we no longer seem able to write across the crass, and subtle distortions of class—or rather, we can't do it gracefully, without seeming to strain or caricature'.[114] Much of McEwan's praise for Bellow is rooted in the latter's use of detail 'in a literary culture that has generally favored [sic] the whole scheme of a novel against the finely crafted sentence'.[115] McEwan here suggests that literary skill arises from the ability to balance small, aesthetic details alongside wider social considerations. McEwan's article highlights not only the centrality of detail in writing about class, but also his own consciousness of the critical hostility to detail in contemporary literary culture. Authors, critics, and readers alike judge contemporary novelists on their ability to use detail to accurately reflect social hierarchy.

Rather than regarding the hierarchy of the detail as a threat to the political considerations of the plot, then, the following close readings reveal it to be integral to the country house novel's representation of class. The close readings in this chapter contest the perception of detailed country house aesthetics as merely decorative. Just as a historical aesthetic does not necessarily indicate a regressive political outlook, an aesthetic of wealth does not necessarily celebrate social inequality. In fact, as this chapter will reveal, the hierarchy of detail is just as often a rejection of social inequality as a reflection of it. In the remainder of this chapter, I attend to contemporary English country house novels and

[113] Emma Brockes, 'In an England of Certainties, Even in Its Undercurrents', *New York Times* (11 December 2011) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/books/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-review.html?_r=0> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[114] Ian McEwan, 'Master of the Universe', *New York Times* (7 April 2005) <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/07/opinion/master-of-the-universe.html?_r=0> [accessed 7 July 2015].

[115] McEwan, 'Master'.

highlight conservative, ambivalent, and subversive uses of details that have been overlooked as a result of the critical presumption that detail is ideologically redundant.

Part of the Furniture: Servants as Decorative Details

I begin my close readings with problematic representations of servants as part of the country house's fixtures and fittings in examples ranging from the conservative (by Fellowes and Sanderson) to the ambivalent (by Sarah Waters and Toby Litt). As I outlined in the previous section, Fellowes is often criticised for his preoccupation with details and objects at the expensive of their political ramifications, as the following passages reveal. In *Snobs*, social climber Edith marries Charles, the heir of Broughton, to escape the drudgery of her lower-middle-class roots. The novelty of her new surroundings, however, soon wears off, and she becomes bored by the 'details' of her new family seat, a term she applies indiscriminately to Broughton's fixtures and servants alike:

> In those early days at Broughton how much pleasure had she derived simply from the monograms on the linen, from the damask-covered bergeres in her room, from the Derby figures on her desk, from the telephone with its buttons for 'stables' and 'kitchen', from the footman, Robert, blushing with nervousness when he came to collect her emptied luggage, from the swans in the lake, from the very trees in the park.[116]

To Edith, Robert – notably introduced by his occupation before his name – is merely an aesthetic detail in a list of Broughton's interior trappings, somewhere between telephone buttons and the swans in the lake. Fellowes's technique of listing here suggests that, in Edith's view, Broughton's servants are equal to its furnishings as minor, aesthetic details which have lost their charm. Robert's marginal position in the country house, and Edith's perception of him as quite literally part of the furniture, reduces his role to that of decorative signifier of her social ascension. Edith here signals her escape from the social stratum that Robert occupies by distancing herself from him until he becomes an object – 'the footman' –

[116] Julian Fellowes, *Snobs* [2004] and *Past Imperfect* [2008] (London: Phoenix, 2009), pp. 149-50 (hereafter '*Snobs*' or '*Past*').

rather than a peer. Notably, her initial pleasure from Robert was derived from his 'nervousness' around his new superior – she enjoyed his subjugation as her social inferior. Despite Edith's mercenary approach to marriage and servants, the narrator's loyalty to her and the comic depiction of the dull Broughton family into which she marries invite the implied reader to sympathize somewhat with her view of her new life as boring. We are asked to mourn the fact that, for Edith, the novelty of her country house existence has worn off, and her familiarity with servants like Robert is presented as a pitiable development. The passage, like the novel, presents a conservative depiction of the relationship between the centre and the margins of the country house which upholds a traditional social hierarchy by presenting servants as decorative details in the lives of more important, socially-superior protagonists.

Past Imperfect similarly positions working-class characters as minor details in an upper-class aesthetic during a Halloween party at a country house at which, '[a]s a final detail, the DJ and two of the waitresses had been put into scarlet devils' outfits, so they could attend to the guests while maintaining the illusion' (*Past*, p. 757). These employees are dressed to decorate the country house and are instrumental in 'maintaining' the (hellish) country house aesthetic. The staff are overlooked by the likes of the disagreeable Lord Claremont, who gives 'little sign of being aware of that awkward, plain young man whose only use was to make up the table for bridge' (*Past*, p. 568). While the hellish décor and disagreeable Claremont provide scope to critique this disregard for the working class, *Past Imperfect*, like *Snobs*, is narrated retrospectively with nostalgia, recounting a time when social distinctions were clearer and service more common. In Fellowes's novels, then, servants are part of a country house aesthetic for which most of his protagonists, as members of the upper classes, are increasingly nostalgic:

> The cooks and the valets, the maids and the footmen who made life so sweet will never again push through the green baize door, busy with the tasks of the day. The smiling grooms who brought the horses round to the front at ten, the chauffeurs washing their gleaming vehicles, standing in deference when one strolled into the stable yard, the gardeners ducking out of sight at the sound of a house party's approach (*Past*, p. 487).

Again, Fellowes uses the list form and charts only their entrances and exits, uninterested in their lives outside of work. Their existence, then, is defined in terms of their contribution to the country house aesthetic, its 'gleaming' vehicles and 'sweet' lifestyle; beyond the setting they cease to exist. Their actions (smiling, washing, ducking out of sight) serve to maintain the country house aesthetic and the setting's dynamic of distant deference. In this passage, servants, like the DJ and waitresses above, are de-individualised into plural collective nouns and joint activities. Fellowes's narrative style therefore builds on the historical distinction between the working class and their social superiors in which 'individuality was only available to the genteel middle classes', 'defined against the lack of individuality of the masses'; individuality, Beverley Skeggs argues, is a product of white, English privilege.[117] Fellowes's narrators adopt this privileged perspective, reserving individuality for socially-elite characters. Denied detail and refinement themselves, Fellowes's two-dimensional servant characters are merely signifiers of refinement for the ruling class and the subordinate elements of the novel's hierarchy of class and detail.

In-keeping with the aforementioned reviews in which his readers claim to 'lap up the details of wealth and privilege', Fellowes's novels suggest an attention to country house aesthetics over wider political considerations. The decorative effect of the servants takes precedence over their development into three-dimensional characters. Fellowes's aesthetic approach therefore upholds the class hierarchy embodied in the country house, rather than interrogating it, offering readers detailed description over political examination. As such, his novels are marketed as popular fiction. In 2009, Phoenix Fiction published *Snobs* and *Past Imperfect* in one volume, describing them on the spine as '[t]wo fabulous *Sunday Times* bestsellers from the writer and creator of *Downton Abbey*' (*Snobs*). This allusion to the famous television series and the novel's serial form suggest that the books are marketed at a

[117] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 1997), pp. 3, 163.

popular readership. The pink accents in the cover design and Fellowes's reputation as a 'chick-lit' author position the novels as popular romance fiction.[118] According to Janice A. Radway, popular fiction minimises interpretive labour and draws on 'most common techniques associated with the nineteenth-century realist novel', such as the listing of objects Freedgood identifies.[119] Fellowes's novels conform to the expectations created by the cover of the Phoenix edition by focusing on romantic plots rather than politics. Though Fellowes's use of detail is not politically motivated or mobilised to explore the social implications of the country house's hierarchy, it reveals the conservative politics behind his nostalgic narratives of the upper-classes in the twentieth century.

Like Fellowes, Sanderson presents some of *Netherwood*'s working-class characters as de-individualised, minor details unworthy of notice, which is particularly surprising given that the novel's plot centres on the formation of a miners' union. The story is driven by working-class characters, following Eve Williams as she opens up a bakery to support her family after her husband is killed in the earl's coal mine. Eve's intelligence, work-ethic, and initiative are repeatedly contrasted with the aristocratic Hoyland family of Netherwood Hall, once her late husband's employers and now her new investors in her business. Sanderson gently criticises aristocratic irresponsibility and praises working-class ingenuity. Yet Sanderson's working-class characters are often described as a de-individualised crowd or 'the masses'.[120] For instance, arriving at the pit with other miners' wives on hearing of its collapse, Eve is 'absorbed by the mass of humanity' in an image that de-individualises her through a lack of detail (*Netherwood*, p. 56). The novel's depiction of the miners' unionisation might legitimise such imagery to an extent, but this throwaway phrase is not developed into a larger

[118] Quotation from *The Globe and Mail* (*Amazon* <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Snobs-Novel-Lord-Julian-Fellowes/dp/1780224419> [accessed 26 October 2015]). Indeed, Fellowes has published romances under the pseudonym Rebecca Greville.

[119] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd edn. (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 189.

[120] Jane Sanderson, *Netherwood* (London: Sphere, 2011), p. 22 (hereafter '*Netherwood*').

political statement about the aristocracy's disregard for its workforce or working-class collectivism. In fact, later in the novel, working-class characters are, as in Fellowes's work, presented as decorative details of the country house aesthetic:

> The earl was alone in the dining room. That is to say, he was alone at the dining table, for in fact there was rather a crowd in the room. Strategically and discreetly placed around the perimeter were four footmen in green-and-gold-livery, while Parkinson, soberly clad in his immaculate black tailcoat with silver buttons, stood motionless near the door (*Netherwood*, p. 62).

The earl is presented as 'alone' despite the 'crowd' of servants in the room in yet another example of working-class de-individualisation. The servants are overlooked details 'discreetly' assembled around the 'perimeter' of the country house setting, underlining their marginal status. Motionless and statue-like in their colourful livery and shiny buttons, the servants constitute merely decorative elements and are denied animation and agency to the extent that they are almost overlooked by both the narrator and the reader. Sanderson thus uses the hierarchy of detail to reinforce the social hierarchies of the country house. The narrator's subsequent qualification of the earl being 'alone' underlines Sanderson's portrayal of the surrounding servant characters as subordinate components in the country house hierarchy: he is only alone in so far as he is the only character of significance in the country house. Unlike Fellowes, then, Sanderson qualifies her narrative depiction of servants as marginal, adding a political ambivalence that Fellowes's conservative novels lack.

Sanderson's deindividualised depiction of Netherwood's servants differs from her portrayal of the other working-class characters in the novel, a lot of whom are well-developed and a central focus of her work, more so than aristocratic ones. As one *Good Reads* reviewer notes approvingly, '[t]he Hoylands are described with the same interest and detail as Eve and her family'.[121] The novel is thus enjoyed for Sanderson's attention to both ends of the social spectrum; indeed its blurb advertises her attention to characters from 'above stairs' and

[121] P. D. R. Lindsay, 'Netherwood', *Good Reads* (16 April 2013) <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/591836718?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1> [accessed 10 June 2015].

'below stairs', while its cover appeals to 'fans of *Downton Abbey*' (*Netherwood*). The book is therefore marketed as engaging with the social extremities that have proved popular in British television, bringing the margins to the centre in a way that has been commercially successful. However, Sanderson's maids and footmen who travel between upstairs and down in the country house and thereby subvert the boundary between upper- and working-class spaces remain underdeveloped, while characters perpetually below stairs that do not infiltrate this boundary, such as the earl's cook and the kitchen staff, are individualised and three-dimensional. Names, dialogue and characterisation, then, are privileges reserved for those who know their place and stick to it, and are not afforded to characters that circumvent the distinct barriers between the social strata. The perspective employed in the above-stairs spaces of Netherwood therefore reinforces the country house's social hierarchy by marginalising the working class. Conserving rather than subverting the ideology of social inequality, *Netherwood*'s characters are safely contained within clearly defined categories of class. The lack of individuality in Netherwood's servants and Fellowes's country house employees conveys their marginal social role in contrast to their social superiors, who remain the focus.

In *The Little Stranger* (2009), Waters critiques this privileged disinterest in servants through her unreliable and unlikable narrator, Dr. Faraday. Visiting the Ayres family at the country house where his mother served as a maid, Faraday is shown an old photograph to try to identify her:

> The picture was a small Edwardian photograph in a tortoiseshell frame. It showed, in crisp sepia detail, what I realised after a moment must be the south face of the Hall […]. Gathered on the lawn before the house was the family of the time, surrounded by a sizeable staff of servants – housekeeper, butler, footman, kitchen-girls, gardeners […]. The family itself looked most at ease, […] I looked more closely at this group. Most of them were older children, but the smallest, still an infant, was held in the arms of a fair-haired nursemaid […] and her features were blurred.[122]

[122] Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009), pp. 28-9 (hereafter '*Little*').

With Faraday's impersonal response to the photograph Waters dramatises his problematic approach to the country house setting. Despite being told by Mrs Ayres that his mother might feature in the photograph, Faraday primarily attends to it as a country house artefact, noting its Edwardian features and tortoiseshell frame. When he does examine the photograph, he gazes at the house rather than the people in front of it. Finally taking notice of them, he is primarily interested in the aristocratic subjects, whom he refers to as 'the family', a phrase Waters repeats to underline Faraday's disinterest in his mother as merely a decorative detail in this country house artefact.

Like Fellowes's narrator, Faraday lists the servants by their job title, suggesting his lack of interest in them as individuals. Through the medium of photography, the servants have been frozen into identical material objects to be archived rather than individualised as living beings. The nursemaid who might be his mother is blurred; she has blended into the country house aesthetic like the ideal servant. But the most uncomfortable moment is still to come, when Faraday belatedly notices another servant, 'also fair haired, and in an identical gown and cap' who might also be his mother (*Little*, p. 29). Faraday cannot distinguish his own mother from the other servants in the photograph because to him they are 'identical': their shared uniform has stripped them of their individuality and melded them into the peripheral furnishings of country house life. Through the presence of this clearly-captured second maid, Waters ensures that we do not excuse Faraday's inability to recognise his mother as hampered by the blurred photograph but rather understand it as connected to his obsession with his social superiors and his embarrassment of his working-class roots (which I explore in more detail in chapter four). In contrast to Fellowes and Sanderson, then, Waters invites us to critique the perception of servants as decorative details at the bottom of the country house's aesthetic hierarchy.

Like Waters, Toby Litt also criticises the perception of servants as objects in *Finding Myself* (2003), but through parody rather than poignancy. The novel documents a two-week

stay in a country house after which the guests have agreed to let their host, chick-lit author Victoria About, novelise the events. Litt portrays Victoria as a flawed and even unlikable implied author through her self-absorption and lazy approach to authorship. Her disinterest in the 'servants' she hires to cook and clean during their stay is portrayed as an extension of these negative qualities.[123] Victoria offers little description of the staff, merely introducing them as 'Maid (40ish) and Chef (25)' (*Finding*, p. 31). As in the novels of Fellowes and Sanderson, the reference to these characters by their ages and occupations signals that they will not be developed characters but will remain minor details in Victoria's country house aesthetic. However, the chef disappoints Victoria's preconceptions about servants as uninteresting and easily overlooked; he is 'unsatisfactory (too young, too attractive), but all they had available' (*Finding*, p. 31). His attractiveness underlines Victoria's depiction of him as a decorative element in her country house setting.

Victoria's inability to relate to the servants is captured in her early prediction that working-class 'Marcia gets on very well with the Maid and the Chef, perhaps; they talk about… things in which they are interested: food, sport. (Help.)' (*Finding*, p. 48). Like the narrators in *Snobs* and *Past Imperfect*, Victoria presumes the working-class are all alike. Litt contrasts Victoria's disinterest in the staff with her treatment of her new, middle-class acquaintance, Cecile, for whom she invents numerous far-fetched back stories. She fails to do the same for the staff because she is simply uninterested in them as working people. Ironically, Victoria's dismissal of the staff as minor details inhibits the detail the country house novel demands and its readers expect: she believes she '[h]ad no reason to speak to the gardener', and as a result does not know the names of plants to embellish her descriptions: 'People like that kind of detail' (*Finding*, pp. 70, 71). Victoria's disinterest in the details of the country house aesthetic thus inhibits her writing which funds her middle-class lifestyle. To ensure we recognise the conservative politics behind Victoria's disinterest, Litt uses

[123] Toby Litt, *Finding Myself* [2003] (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 31 (hereafter '*Finding*').

Victoria's editor, Simona, to critique her lack of characterisation. Seemingly conscious of the appetite for servant narratives in the contemporary literary marketplace, Simona writes, 'Don't you think your readers would like to be able to visualize the maid? I know what you were doing by not describing her, i.e., keeping the servants in their place' (*Finding*, p. 31). Litt's novel thus critiques the conservatism of authors such as Fellowes and Sanderson who relegate servants to the margins of both the text and the social hierarchy upheld by the country house.

By presenting servants as deindividualised, subordinate details, each of the narrators above fails to 'write across the subtle distortions of class' that McEwan claims contemporary British fiction lacks. While Fellowes's treatment of the working class conservatively upholds the traditional hierarchies of the country house, Sanderson's approach suggests a more nuanced depiction of social hierarchy that flags the genre's conservative tendencies even as it indulges in them. Waters and Litt are more critical of the marginalisation of servant characters, using unreliable and unlikable narrators to undermine this disregard for those on the margins of the country house. The presentations of servants as subordinate details simultaneously assimilate and exclude the working class so that they are at once part of and yet excluded from the country house as a space of power. In the next section, I read *Misfortune*'s camp aesthetic as subverting the traditional hierarchy of detail in the country house novel. I argue that Stace uses the detail's feminine associations and camp excess to address the inequality embodied in the country house.

Subversive Camp Aesthetics in *Misfortune*

In her seminal work on detail, Schor traces the critical suspicion of detail back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century understandings of it as 'gendered and doubly gendered as feminine' due to its association with the ornamental, 'with its traditional connotations of effeminacy', and the everyday, 'rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by

women'.[124] These two elements – the decorative and the domestic – are central to the country house novel. In its detailed aesthetic at least, the country house novel might therefore be said to represent a feminine form. Indeed, scholars of heritage film, in which the country house is a pivotal setting, have made similar associations between the detailed *mise-en-scène* of the genre and feminine aesthetics. Richard Dyer, for example, argues that 'attention to fixtures and fittings' in heritage films anticipates 'the skilled reading of a female spectator' while, as Galt highlights, Alan Parker's reference to British costume dramas as 'the Laura Ashley school of filmmaking' reveals a 'disdain for the feminine decorative' contained in the genre.[125] The same disdain is evident in the criticism of detail in contemporary English country house novels outlined at the beginning of this chapter; recall, for example, the spindly and uncomfortable chair analogy for *Atonement*, or the *Harper's & Queen* comparison in Taylor's review of *Past Imperfect*. Just as John Hill has suggested that 'dislike of the heritage film may be linked to a traditional suspicion of texts which primarily appeal to women (or gay men)', criticism of detail in country house novels may similarly be linked to the trope's perceived femininity.[126]

It is widely acknowledged that literary criticism has historically constructed a hierarchy of taste in which detailed texts are inferior because of their perceived femininity. Scholars such as Schor and Monique Roelofs, for example, have highlighted the frequent comparisons made by literary critics between detailed texts and overly made-up women.[127] In the nineteenth century, for instance, David Hume suggested that 'it is with books as with women, where a certain plainness of manner and of dress is more engaging than that glare of

[124] Schor, p. 4.

[125] Richard Dyer, 'Heritage Cinema', in *Encyclopaedia of European Cinema*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau (London: Cassell, 1995), pp. 204-5, (p. 205); Galt, p. 21.

[126] John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 97.

[127] Schor; Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

paint, and airs, and apparel, which may dazzle the eye, but reaches not the affections'.[128] As my earlier discussion of the nineteenth-century novel highlighted, the form's plethora of detail is similar to that of the contemporary English country house novel and therefore both forms might be described as feminine. Hume's gendered view of the detail was echoed by William L. Courtney at the turn of the twentieth century when he asserted that 'a passion for detail is the distinguishing mark of nearly every female novelist' because '[t]he feminine intellect has a passion for detail'.[129] Detailed writing, then, has long been regarded as feminine writing and consequently critically disparaged.

As McEwan suggested in his article on Bellow, British literary culture generally favours 'the whole scheme of a novel against the finely crafted sentence'. Indeed, detail remains a point of distinction between the writing of men and women. V. S. Naipaul recently claimed that women's writing was 'unequal' to his own because of its 'sentimentality, the narrow view of the world'.[130] As a particular example, he deemed himself superior to Jane Austen. Perhaps the most famous and respected female author in English literary history, Austen was known as a master miniaturist who described herself as employing a 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush'; she was, in short, a master of detail, and one of the seminal country house authors in the English canon.[131] Naipaul's comments therefore reveal an ongoing suspicion of the detail in contemporary literary culture and a continuing disdain for the feminine aesthetics of the country house novel tradition that feeds into the current suspicion of contemporary English country house texts.

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[128] David Hume, 'Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing', *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, vol. I (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1825), pp. 188-193, (p. 192).

[129] William L. Courtney, *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904), pp. x-xi, xxxii., cited in Schor, p. 20.

[130] Amy Fallon, 'VS Naipaul finds no woman writer his literary match – not even Jane Austen', *Guardian* (2 June 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/02/vs-naipaul-jane-austen-women-writers> [accessed 9 September 2014].

[131] Jane Austen, cited in Richard Jenkyns, *A Fine Brush on Ivory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. ix.

Responding to Naipaul's comments, Francine Prose highlights the perceived dichotomy between the stereotypes of male and female authorship that persist today.[132] Male writing is seen as 'gazing down from above, charting the mysterious wriggling of [...] tiny, comical humans […] not terribly engaged by [...] subtleties […] less intent on stamping a tiny foot against God than on listening for the footfall of the rather larger foot that God is stamping against us'.[133] This 'gazing down from above' on to 'tiny comical humans' is a fitting description of Fellowes and Sanderson's narrative approaches to their working-class characters, and the de-individualising gaze of the characters of Faraday and Victoria discussed above; none of these narrators are 'terribly engaged by […] subtleties'. In contrast, Prose argues, female writing is perceived as 'interior', 'charting each subtle psychic shift, each degree of damage'.[134] Thus while men write 'sweeping, phone-book-size sagas of the big city, of social class, of our national destiny' or 'visionary fiction', '[w]omen write diminutive fictions, which take place mostly in interiors, about little families with little problems', blind to 'the larger socio-political realities outside the tiny rooms in which our theatres of feelings are being enacted'.[135] Prose suggests that women's writing is perceived to be the opposite of men's in subtlety, scale, and setting, and restricted to the finer details of interior, domestic issues rather than bigger, political ones. As a result of this association between the detail and the domestic, novels with detailed aesthetics are often regarded as feminine, diminutive, and blind to 'larger socio-political realities'. As Prose highlights, these gendered distinctions are reductive and rarely applicable, but nonetheless illustrate the continuing critical disparagement of detail as a result of its connection to women's writing.

Stace transcends this gender binary in *Misfortune*, using the detail's feminine and domestic associations to explore radical ideas of class. Employing a camp aesthetic which

[132] Francine Prose, 'Scent of a Woman's Ink', *Harper's Magazine*, June 1998, pp. 61-70.

[133] Prose, p. 64. It should be noted that Prose does not endorse these distinctions, but rather relates them as the prevailing opinions in literary criticism.

[134] Prose, p. 64.

[135] Prose, p. 67.

revels in the feminine decorative to excess, his country house setting and its objects highlight social inequality and prompt his characters to redistribute wealth more evenly. His androgynous text, like his androgynous implied author, combines feminine attention to detail and the domestic with the masculine tropes of class saga, destabilising the distinction between men and women's writing, and between detail and politics. The camp tradition in the English country house novel can be traced back to writers such as P. G. Wodehouse, Nancy Mitford, and Evelyn Waugh.[136] These novelists, Ames argues, deploy queerness in a way that 'not only inflect[s] but actually reorganize[s] the gendered sphere ideology that structures the domestic novel', a reorganisation Stace adopts in *Misfortune*.[137] Though she recognises the camp tradition within the country house genre, however, Ames offers little consideration of the country house aesthetic or how country house authors use the setting to explore this reorganisation, which will be the focus of my reading of *Misfortune*. In his English country house novel, Stace employs the camp tropes of excess, theatricality, and cross-dressing. In fact, at 500 pages, the *Misfortune* might be regarded as excessive in length alone compared to many contemporary novels. Stace's text is an eclectic mix of forms including diaries, ballads, and illustrations, and pays homage for intertexts as wide ranging as Laurence Sterne's experimental *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), numerous Victorian novels, and Greek mythology.

The novel's theatrical style (explored in more depth in chapter three) induces the artifice and exaggeration of camp that is underscored through the recurring image of the pantomime dame with whom the implied author, Rose – a man raised as female and the eponymous 'Miss Fortune' – is repeatedly paralleled. As well as its camp implied author, the text is peppered with cross-dressing men. Rose's father, Geoffroy, is a 'girlish-looking boy' suspected to be 'a bit of a Lady Skimmington' and 'known privately, but affectionately,

[136] Ames, p. 1.

[137] Ames, p. 7.

among certain of the servants as "Miss Molly"' (*Misfortune*, pp. 79, 57, 25, 53). Alongside these camp protagonists are a cast of male players that visit Love Hall and play female parts. The oxymoronic Mrs Manly, in particular, leaves a lasting impression on Rose because his performance makes visible the performative nature of the gender roles that the country house seeks to naturalise.[138] Mrs Manly's unconvincing femininity foreshadows Rose's struggle to play the part of Lord Loveall's son and heir having been raised as a woman. After years of masking his femininity, Rose decides to stop 'play[ing] the pantomime dame' and returns to wearing dresses (*Misfortune*, p. 255). As well as feminine men, the novel depicts masculine women, such as Dolly, 'a boyish-looking-girl', and Caroline, 'a squat, manly woman of Swiss descent, her accent thick with pantomime' (*Misfortune*, pp. 57, 151). Stace's androgynous pantomime characters blur the distinctions between gender roles in a camp aesthetic that destabilises the conservative, traditional social hierarchy of the country house. His playful novel reflects the '[a]rtificiality, stylisation, theatricality, naivety, [and] sexual ambiguity' that Mark Booth defines as camp.[139]

Figure 6: Camp cross-dressing on the hardback, paperback, and French covers of *Misfortune*[140]

[138] I will be exploring the idea of Love Hall as a theatre in more depth in chapter three.

[139] Mark Booth, '*Campe-Toi!* On the Origins and Definitions of Camp', in *Camp*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 66-79, (p. 69).

[140] *Misfortune;* Wesley Stace, *Misfortune* (London: Vintage, 2006); Wesley Stace, *L'Infortunée* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).

In contrast to the prevailing critical presumption that feminine writing is divorced from political reflection, the campiness and femininity of Stace's implied author and his femininity are central *Misfortune*'s subversive approach to class. Through attention to feminine details such as the dollhouse and the domestic work of socially-marginal servants, Rose grows uncomfortable with his family's excessive wealth and decides to share it with his surrounding community. The following passage from early in the novel serves as a useful introduction to Stace's camp subversion of gendered writing. It resonates with Prose's imagery of male authorship as lofty and Godlike, 'gazing down from above' and charting the 'mysterious wriggling of […] tiny comical humans'. Approaching Love Hall from a hill top with his new foundling child, Rose, beside him, Geoffroy looks down on the country house which, to him, resembles 'a large crushed insect':

> The central house was the body with its armoured exoskeleton of red brick. From this grew the head, the grey gravel courtyard between the front door and the mouth-shaped portico, with stables and chapel and the beady eyes perfectly placed on each side. The driveway from the portico to the Gatehouse Lodge, which marked the front edge of the estate, was lined with elms, each row a feeler sprouting from the insect's greedy chops. Behind the body, the Great Avenue was its long, once lethal sting, and the pathways beaten through the garden were the bug's recently scurrying legs, contorted by the shoe that had just now killed it.
> He looked down at the baby.
> She was a tiny red ball (*Misfortune*, pp. 22-23)

At the beginning of the passage, like the beginning of the novel, the insect of Love Hall – and the social system it represents as an English country house – seems alive and well. The exoskeleton, its basic structure, is intact and seemingly invincible; its beady eyes 'perfectly placed'. Its 'greedy chops' evoke the consumptive lifestyle of the country house's inhabitants and a selfish desire for wealth. However, by undercutting his description of the insect with the information that it has 'just now been killed', Stace goes on to suggest the country house, as an emblem of the English class system, is outdated and damaged beyond repair: the country house, and the social structure it represents, has lost its robustness and agency. The passage foreshadows the novel's plot and Love Hall's fate; beginning as an exclusive site of

wealth and hierarchy fought over by greedy aristocrats, it becomes a more accessible site for the public as a museum.

In this passage, Geoffroy's gaze travels from the crushed insect of the hall to Rose, the 'tiny' agent of this shift towards democracy, anticipating the significant changes catalysed by Rose's arrival into the Loveall family.[141] As such, it pre-empts the shift from the third-person narrator of this first part of the novel ('let's call him God') to the feminine, first-person voice of Rose who narrates the remainder (*Misfortune,* p. 77). In moving from the lofty third-person narrator to Rose's autobiography, Stace's novel abandons what Prose characterises as the lofty male literary approach to the interiority and subtlety of feminine writing. Continuing to shift between domestic settings and Rose's epic adventure steeped in mythical references, Stace's novel undermines the idea that the detailed feminine aesthetic of the country house genre is diminutive and eradicates wider political considerations. By employing a narrator that recalls camp country house characters such as Woolf's Orlando, Waugh's Sebastian Flyte, and Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster, Stace suggests that the two approaches co-exist in the English country house novel.

A camp aesthetic revels in the trappings of the social elite that adorn the country house, much like the narrators in the previous section (Faraday's objectifying gaze towards the maids in the photograph, for example, or the repeated presentation of servants as decorative details in *Finding Myself* and *Past Imperfect*). Susan Sontag therefore asserts that '[c]amp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies'.[142] Camp is associated with symbols and spaces of material wealth, with 'preciousness and luxury': in the words of

[141] Another early passage in which Rose sits 'in state, strapped to a small throne in the middle' of a seesaw also foreshadows his role as a balancing agent in the social hierarchy at Love Hall (*Misfortune,* p. 137).

[142] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Camp,* ed. by Cleto, pp. 53-65, p. 63. Resonating with my arguments about the traditionally exclusive lineage in the genre, Andrew Ross writes of the '[p]seudoaristocratic patrilineage of camp' (Andrew Ross, 'Uses of Camp', in *Camp,* ed. by Cleto, pp. 308-329, (p. 316)).

Kenneth Williams, it is 'a great *jewel*, 22 carats'.[143] As a result of its preoccupation with wealth and the decorative, camp is often characterised as excessive. Fabio Cleto refers to camp as 'a semiotic excess', '[r]epresentational excess, heterogeneity, and *gratuitousness* of reference', while David Bergman argues that 'camp is a style […] that favors [sic] "exaggeration", "artifice", and "extremity"'.[144] As such, theories of camp resonate with the aforementioned anxieties regarding the balance of detail and politics in the English country house novel, in which excessive aesthetic detail is thought to detract from social considerations.[145] The pleasure in detail is, after all, 'a pleasure in profusion'.[146] Theories of camp therefore underline the perceived tension between aesthetics and politics in the country house genre. Sontag, for example, describes camp as 'decorative' and 'style at the expense of content'.[147] Dyer, too, describes 'the camp way of looking at things' as 'revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial'.[148] According to Dyer, camp texts employ 'style for style's sake, they don't have "serious" content […], and the actual forms taken accentuate artifice, fun and occasionally outrageousness'.[149] Camp, then, like the English country house novel, is widely regarded as privileging aestheticism over ideology. Cleto therefore characterises camp as 'aristocratic detachment', while Sontag views the camp sensibility as 'disengaged, depoliticized'.[150] Like detail, camp is presumed to be ideologically redundant.

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[143] Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp', in *Camp*, ed. by Cleto, pp. 1-42, (p. 1); Kenneth Williams in *Gay News* (1983), cited in Cleto, p. 1, original emphasis.

[144] Cleto, p. 3; David Bergman, 'Introduction' in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. by David Bergman (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 3-16, (p. 5).

[145] Richard Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going', in *Camp*, ed. by Cleto, pp. 110-116, (p. 113). Higson has notably described the heritage in British heritage cinema as 'excess' (*English*, p. 39).

[146] John Caughie, 'Small Pleasures: Adaptation and the Past in British Film and Television', *Ilha Do Desterro*, 2 (2000), 27-50, (p. 44).

[147] Sontag, p. 55.

[148] Dyer, p. 113.

[149] Dyer, p. 113.

[150] Cleto, p. 9; Sontag, p. 54.

However, in *Misfortune,* Stace subverts the frivolity of camp by using the aesthetic to explore serious issues such as gender identity, sexual abuse, and my focus in this chapter, social inequality. Sontag's description of camp as 'women's clothes of the 1920s (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)' and '[c]lothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor' resonates with the feminine, decorative details of Stace's country house aesthetic that signal Rose's desire to reconfigure the traditional social boundaries into something more fluid.[151] In fact, the affinities between English country house novels (particularly their settings and décor) and camp aesthetics leads me to dispel Sontag's characterisation of camp as specifically urban. Stace's country house is an undoubtedly camp space. When *Misfortune* begins, the hall is 'a dark world of crepe and bombazine imported monthly from Holland. The whole house shone darkly and rustled autumnally' (*Misfortune,* p. 24). The focus on the interior furnishings of the house, as well as the excessive and expensive lengths to which the family go to maintain these eccentricities, exhibits a camp preoccupation with decorative, excessive, and affluent trappings.

Lady Loveall's frivolous excesses permeate every corner of the hall, even the servants' rooms. When Anonyma Wood moves into Love Hall as governess to Geoffroy and Dolly, she finds that her bed 'had oppressive purple velvet curtains: she had never seen absurd magnificence in such an unlikely location' (*Misfortune,* p. 56). By decorating the servant quarters with markers of affluence, Love Hall and its aristocratic mistress are established as frivolous, extravagant, and camp figures in which the excessive taste for the decorative destabilises the social hierarchy embodied in the country house. Stace's Love Hall reflects Cleto's conception of camp as an aesthetic that negotiates the dynamic between the powerful and powerless in images that both 'assimilate and […] exclude, within the same gesture. [Camp] is elitist because it creates a community, an aristocracy of taste'.[152] Anonyma's

[151] Sontag, p. 55.

[152] Cleto, p. 31.

bemused reaction to the 'oppressive' curtains as 'absurd magnificence' underlines her position as simultaneously within and excluded from Love Hall's community of wealth: she benefits from the family's social position even as she remains on the margins and suffers from the inequality that accompanies their precedence. Stace's curtains embody camp subversion: they are not only decorative objects and therefore symbolic of the Loveall's excessive wealth, but they also represent moveable barriers, signalling Anonyma's potential to subvert the social hierarchy and exclusivity of Love Hall.

The Lovealls' excessive affluence is represented in another decorative fixture of Love Hall – the Hemmen House, an oversized dollhouse made for Rose's late aunt Dolly and now a family heirloom. The Hemmen House symbolises Geoffroy's fixation on his late sister, whose spirit he believes resides in the dollhouse. As a key agent in the Loveall's recognition of their economic and social monopoly, it is a metaphor for extravagant excess and the need to modernise the dynamic between the margins and the centre. It is 'an exceptional facsimile' of the hall itself with excessive attention to detail 'down to the minute encaustic tiles with the family motto inside the front door […]. Even the kitchen iron, a quarter of an inch in size, was made of real brass. In relief behind the middle hall, there was the fountain in the formal garden, spouting real water' (*Misfortune*, p. 49). Beyond this painstaking attention to detail, Stace satirises the excessive nature of the dollhouse through its tiny replica Hemmen House, 'a house within a house within a house' (*Misfortune*, p. 50). This description foreshadows Love Hall's diminishing role as a status symbol and the Lovealls' growing awareness of the wider context of their wealth in relation to the surrounding neighbourhood. This growing awareness is triggered by the camp excess of Love Hall and the camp preoccupation with decorative details.

It is the excess of the Hemmen House which forces Rose to re-evaluate the scale of his family's fortune. Staying with family friends at Twenty-four after being ejected from the

Love Hall by their evil relations, the arrival of the dollhouse demonstrates to Rose and his extended family the extreme scale of their family seat:

> Those at Twenty-four had been able to make believe they were living in a small-scale Love Hall, quite *how* miniature became clear when they took delivery of the dollhouse. The magnificent replica could not fit through the front door and had to be hoisted on ropes and lifted through the front windows. […] My father needed the Hemmen House, yet its actual value could have housed many of the people around our grounds (*Misfortune*, pp. 380-1).

The scale of the Hemmen house dwarfs Twenty-four so that, like a dollhouse, its facade must be removed to in order for the Hemmen house to enter. Twenty-four therefore becomes a mirror for the Hemmen House and its ensconced replica in a way that foregrounds the excessiveness of Love Hall. This event highlights to Rose the excessive extent of his family's wealth as he understands inequality as a problem of scale: '*There was too much wealth in the hands of a disproportionate few – and we were these few – and these disproportionate few lived in overly large houses, like ours, to which they admitted too few acquaintances*' (*Misfortune*, p. 518, original emphasis). He is supported in his conviction by his adoptive-mother, Anonyma, who, coming from more modest roots, has always viewed the Hemmen House as 'absurdly large and ridiculously ornate' (*Misfortune*, p. 59). In *Misfortune*, then, class and wealth are questions of scale and proportion, signified by Love Hall and its relation to the Hemmen House.

The decorative furnishings of the country house, then, are less semiotic excess detracting from wider political considerations and actually rather agents of social reform. They galvanise the Lovealls into opening Love Hall to the public, making its size more in proportion with those welcome to enjoy it and overturning the prevailing social order in which excessive wealth is monopolised by a small minority. Stace's camp aesthetic reveals the social hierarchy to be outdated; as Sontag highlights, 'many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*'.[153] Indeed, according to Ross, in reviving a period style, camp itself acts as 'a kind of *memento mori*, a reminder of […] future

[153] Sontag, p. 60.

oblivion'.[154] Stace's camp country house novel therefore evokes the 'future oblivion' of a swiftly vanishing landed class and the social hierarchy that revered them. If camp is, as Cleto suggests, 'a discursive resistance' that articulates 'an aesthetic of failure', then Stace's camp novel lays to rest the unsustainable and obsolete social hierarchy embodied in the country house.[155]

According to Booth, to be camp is to present oneself as '*committed to the marginal*', and the 'primary type of the marginal in society is the traditionally feminine, which camp parodies in an exhibition of stylised effeminacy'.[156] Stace's camp preoccupation with the feminine decorative therefore suggests a dedication to the social margins often presumed to be missing from both feminine writing and the country house novel. If, as many critics have suggested, camp is a 'mode of perception', a 'way of seeing [and responding to] the world as an aesthetic phenomenon', then a camp aesthetic is one that focuses on marginal elements, or detail.[157] That is to say, camp perception is an eye for detail which is often married to an interest in the margins. As Schor highlights, the detail possesses the ability to deconstruct the subordination of 'the periphery to the centre, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background'.[158] Thus effeminate Geoffroy, who grew up attending classes on embroidery, crewel and needlepoint with his sister, has a feminine eye for detail which makes him uninterested in maintaining the Lovealls' vast wealth and family seat and more invested in the domestic care of his family. His foundling son, Rose, who is raised as a female, inherits a similar eye for detail. Stace therefore suggests that a feminine eye for detail is socially progressive. Working-class Anonyma is instrumental in teaching the Lovealls this mode of perception. Often found '[f]retting over a problem posed by the marginalia' in one of her

[154] Ross, pp. 316, 320.

[155] Cleto, p. 3.

[156] Booth, p. 69, original emphasis.

[157] David Bergman, 'Camp', *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, ed. by Claude J. Summers (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1993), pp. 130-5, (p. 130); Sontag, p. 54; Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp', p. 113.

[158] Schor, p. 20.

beloved books, she has a keen eye for detail and an interest in the margins (*Misfortune*, p. 86). Like Rose, she inherited this trait from her father, who had 'always said that future generations would learn from not only the high literature of today but also the ephemera, the menus and business cards by which he made his living' (*Misfortune*, p. 257). As the librarian of Love Hall she is 'utterly democratic in her care for the world' and its texts because her social background and literary education has taught her to grant the same level of attention to the centre and the margins (*Misfortune*, p. 257).

Reflecting this camp commitment to the marginal, Stace reverses the traditional country house hierarchy of important to focus on servants and social pariahs at points when generic expectation would usually centralise the social elite. When Lady Loveall dies in her bedroom at the beginning of the novel, the narrator uses the country house setting and the metaphor of gossip to destabilise Love Hall's social hierarchy:

> The workings of the house, its structure and hierarchy, always prevailed.
> The bedroom was the epicentre of all activity, and the relative importance of the members of the household could be seen by their distance from Lady Loveall's dead body. […] Talk on the other side of the [dead woman's] door became rumour down the hall. Rumour hushed to murmur, then whisper, in the wings and petered into gossip and irrelevant conversation in the back sculleries, as servants asked how the potatoes were doing and where the lad who cleaned the cutlery was when you needed him. (*Misfortune*, pp. 45-6).

Stace's image of the journey of gossip from Lady Loveall's chamber to the sculleries is therefore a trajectory away from the 'epicentre' of the aristocratic house to its working-class margins with which he places narrative agency. He thus reverses the traditional hierarchy of 'relative importance' which positions servants as subordinate details by depicting the event from their perspective. As chapter one established, lineage is a central theme of the English country house novel and, as a result, one might expect the novel to focus on the issue of succession at this point. Instead, Stace suggests the relative insignificance of Lady Loveall's death by recording the details of the servants' domestic labour (the boiling of potatoes and the cleaning of cutlery). The level of importance assigned to the news of Lady Loveall's demise declines in relation to the characters' 'relative importance' to Lady Loveall. Beginning as

'talk' located 'on the other side' of Love Hall's exclusive boundaries, the news spreads to mere 'rumour down the hall', and is 'hushed to murmur, then whisper' before finally 'peter[ing] into gossip and irrelevant conversation in the back sculleries'. The news therefore diffuses and defuses from centre to margins, becoming irrelevant' to the everyday existence of the servants. Just as they are irrelevant to Lady Loveall (and many country house narrators), Stace's working-class characters invert this generic trend by regarding their employer as similarly unimportant. The individual identity of that employer is as negligible to them as the individual identities of servants are to their employers in the novels of Fellowes and Sanderson, etc. Thus, while the passage's opening claim that 'the working of the house, its structure and hierarchy always prevailed' initially appears to endorse the country house's conservative hierarchy of importance, the 'working' – or, rather, the *workers* – of the house really do prevail, providing the continuity and hierarchy usually associated with the upper-classes in the country house genre. Stace's camp aesthetic therefore subverts the country house genre's conservative tradition. Nonetheless, a hierarchy of importance continues to exist in Stace's country house – though reversed, it is not entirely deconstructed.

Following the death of Lady Loveall, Geoffroy then Rose inherit and democratise the family estate so that Love Hall evolves from the top of a hierarchy of power into the centre of a community in which wealth is more evenly (though not equally) distributed. In this process of social reform, the camp country house setting plays a vital role. Uninterested in stewarding his ancestral home, Geoffroy establishes a board of directors to run Love Hall, whose names form the acronym 'HaHa'. The board represents a less exclusive approach to country house life as a panel of different ages, genders, and classes, two of whom are actually former employees. Their tongue-in-cheek acronym is self-deprecating and suggests that they do not take their authoritative role too seriously, inviting the servants to question the social hierarchy which disempowers them: 'To this day, the servants still call whichever cabal rules the household the HaHa. Some have thought it insolent, but I [Rose] like it. There's something

saucy about an acronym. It shows an affectionate lack of respect' (*Misfortune*, p. 110). Rose's description of the acronym as 'saucy' underlines the campiness of this approach: it 'is a self-mocking abdication of any pretensions to power'.[159] In fact, the Lovealls eventually remove themselves from the seat of power altogether and retire to a cottage. Rather than running Love Hall like his predecessor, Geoffroy is encouraged by the spirit of his late sister to '[b]uild a new house' with the help of Anonyma (*Misfortune*, p. 53). Geoffroy, Anonyma, and Rose transform Love Hall into a free tourist attraction so that others can enjoy it. They later charge a small entrance fee, all of which is donated to the hospital and the hospice that they go on to establish. In contrast to Cleto's suggestion that camp endorses a 'clear-cut opposition between "masters" and "servants"', then, Stace uses a camp subversion of social norms to focus on the marginal.[160] The residents of Love Hall negotiate a fairer social hierarchy which distributes the estate's wealth to its surrounding neighbours and those in need. The decision of the HaHa to redistribute the Loveall family's wealth beyond the walls of the country house and into the surrounding community where it is needed readdresses the balance that Geoffroy and Rose's camp perspective has revealed as lacking.

Stace ends his novel by poking fun at those who fail to recognise the significance of the details in the country house aesthetic and regard them as merely decorative objects for passive consumption. The guidebook to Love Hall appendixed at the end of the novel encourages readers to gaze at the country house's most valuable furnishings. In fact, the description of Love Hall as 'one of the jewels in the crown of the English countryside' recalls Kenneth Williams's description of camp as 'a great *jewel*' (*Misfortune*, p. 521).[161] The guidebook encourages a heritage gaze which, according to Laurajane Smith, typically invites

[159] Booth, p. 74.

[160] Cleto, p. 28.

[161] D. J. Taylor's *Kept* (2006) and Sally Beauman's *The Landscape of Love* (2005) both feature a country house and excerpts from similarly fabricated guidebooks, suggesting a widespread consciousness amongst country house authors that readers expect a degree of authenticity and research from the genre. For more on this expectation, see chapter three.

visitors to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of a country house while overlooking social inequality.[162] According to Laurajane Smith, Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) constructs the tourist's 'gaze [as] a passive one in which the audience will uncritically consume the message of heritage' sites like the country house, which serves as a flagship of English heritage.[163] Stace's adoption of the heritage gaze at the end of *Misfortune* is therefore a satirical jab at those who read the details of the country house aesthetic at face value: the artefacts of the guidebook are objectified in the same way that the servants in conservative country house novels typically have been, so that their individual characterisation is marginalised in favour of a country house aesthetic. Presented as an extract from an English Heritage guidebook, the appendix underlines the shallow nature of the objectifying heritage gaze which is disinterested in the political significance of country house trappings. It suggests a mode of reading that lacks the critical engagement Rose and Anonyma display in their readings of the Hemmen House as 'ridiculous' and Anonyma's curtains as 'absurd' which lead them to address the social inequalities these objects represent. Instead, the guidebook mocks the fetishistic delight in country house details and the perception of country house trappings as ideologically insignificant.

Stace therefore radically subverts the detail's traditional subordination within the country house aesthetic by using it to political ends. Rather than disposing of the excessive decorative details with which the genre has been repeatedly accused of being preoccupied at the expense of wider social considerations, he uses these tropes to examine the social inequality embodied in the country house. Although he does not collapse the hierarchy of detail, he reverses it in order to draw attention to the margins and highlight the inequality of the setting's traditional social system. *Misfortune* places emphasis on figures of difference rather than those traditionally at the centre of country house narratives. Rose brings to Love

[162] Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

[163] Smith, p. 31.

Hall a new aesthetic or way of looking at things that encourages attention to detail and a re-examination of established structures and hierarchies.[164] In his androgyny and trajectory from backstreet-abortion to rightful heir to Love Hall, Rose embodies, makes visible, and calls into question the distinction between inclusion and exclusion in the social systems upheld by the country house. Stace suggests that Rose's ability to recognise (and counter) social inequality is a result of his feminine attention to detail. In the final section of this chapter, I will be examining how McEwan uses this same feminine eye for detail as a measure of class-consciousness in *Atonement*.

An Eye for Detail as Class-Consciousness in *Atonement*

In the same way that Stace's camp aesthetic belies a commitment to the marginal in *Misfortune*, attention to detail is a way of uncovering lost voices and usurping the prevailing cultural order by attending to those traditionally overlooked in *Atonement*. Due to the detail's marginality, an eye for detail is often understood to arise from a position of marginalisation in terms of class and gender. Relegated to the social margins, servants and women have historically been cast as observers. As Mary Ann Doane highlights, women figure as merely spectators in patriarchal culture.[165] Historically raised to 'listen', Patricia Ondek Laurence argues that women's social subjugation has resulted in the 'quality of attentiveness'.[166] A similar attentiveness is required of servants who are responsible for attending to small details while remaining silently on the margins of country house life. As modern-day butler, Robert

[164] In *The Stranger's Child*, too, it is men who are chiefly concerned with the decorative. Dudley is obsessed with the fashions of interior decoration, constantly reinventing Corley with the help of interior designers. In the same novel, the Sawles' servant, Jonah, is fascinated by Cecil's ivory-coloured drawers and 'beautiful singlet', 'fine as a lady's' (Alan Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011), p. 51). Both of these characters, notably, are presented as camp.

[165] Mary Ann Doane, 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address', in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 283-298.

[166] Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 59.

Watson, highlights, servants 'know everything that is going on', despite 'the golden rule' being 'that you don't actually "see" anything'.[167] As society's traditional observers, women and servants are widely conceptualised as observant. Their marginal status, repressed voice, and exclusion from spaces of power is thought to produce in them an eye for detail.

As such, the ability to notice small details is typically attributed to female or working-class characters in the contemporary English country house novel. As a maid, Faraday's mother 'had to stand every morning with her hands held out while the housekeeper examined her fingernails', while Edith's maid in *Snobs* detects any 'fractional alteration of routine' (*Little*, p. 30; *Snobs*, p. 149). Merely minor figures themselves, the (female) servants in these novels are expected to have a keen eye for detail as their work demands attention to the details of the country house aesthetic. Female characters in the genre are often credited as having an eye for detail which differentiates them from men. For example, in *Snobs*, we are informed that Edith's mother-in-law, Lady Uckfield, has both 'a watchmaker's eye for' and a 'command of' detail that marks her as a threat to Edith's performance of doting wife to the less astute Charles (*Snobs*, pp. 54, 59). A similar eye for detail is exhibited by Briony in *Atonement* in her 'taste for the miniature', while in *Past Imperfect* it takes Serena just seconds to realise that the narrator's fancy dress outfit is historically inaccurate: 'the trousers are wrong' (*Past*, p. 482).[168] In *Misfortune*, when a doll seemed 'unquestionably male' to Geoffroy because it is emblazoned with the name 'Mark', '[i]t was Dolores who had pointed out that the doll was actually not Mark at all, but Mary' (*Misfortune*, p. 51). These female characters share an eye for detail that translates into a reading competency.

This feminine competency is often contrasted with their male counterparts who reveal their lack of attention to detail by dismissing women as plain. To Fellowes's male narrators,

[167] Robert Watson, a consultant with the Guild Of Professional English Butlers, cited in Bill Borrows, 'Your not so humble servant', *Guardian* (26 January 2002) <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/jan/26/features1> [accessed 3 September 2014].

[168] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* [2001] (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 5 (hereafter '*Atonement*').

for instance, both Alice Easton in *Snobs* and Georgina Waddilove in *Past Imperfect* are 'plain as a pikestaff' (*Snobs*, p. 64; *Past*, p. 398). Fellowes's male narrators here suggest an inability to read feminine aesthetics and attend to detail, a suggestion underlined by *Past Imperfect* narrator's claim that 'Dagmar wasn't what you would call plain, even if her sallow mini-face was hard to define or at least to categorise' (*Past*, p. 485). This is not to say that male characters in the genre are not also readers: in *Atonement* Robbie has a first-class degree in English Literature from Cambridge while Terence Grey in Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001) is a historian. However, both of these characters misread important clues: Grey mistakes his half-sister for his mother, while Robbie short-sightedly associates himself with steward Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* in anticipation of 'nothing [coming] between [him] and the full prospect of [his] hopes', when it is actually the characters' mistreatment at the hands of their social superiors that connects them (*Atonement*, p. 131). In the contemporary English country house novel, then, the ability to read detail is, as much of the scholarship mentioned in this chapter has asserted, a typically feminine trait.

Diane Johnson suggests that men can misread feminine aesthetics because a sexist literary culture has meant that they are less familiar with women's writing. Johnson argues that women are more adaptable readers because they are proficient in reading across genders while male readers 'have not learned to make a connection between the images, metaphors, and situations employed by women, trained from childhood to read books by people of both sexes'.[169] This theory, though proposing a somewhat reductive gender binary, is played out in scholarship on detail such as Dyer's suggestion that heritage films appeal to feminine or gay readers who attend to fixtures and fittings, as well as the comparison between women's writing and overly made-up women. The supposition that detail is politically insignificant in the reviews outlined at the beginning of this chapter thus suggest a male approach to the novels which misreads the feminine aesthetic of the country house novel. As his article on

[169] Diane Johnson, cited in Prose, p. 62.

Bellows indicated, McEwan recognises the importance of detail even as contemporary literary culture undervalues it. As such, in a similar vein to Stace's recuperation of feminine aesthetics and detail as political signifiers, *Atonement* centres on attention to detail in an empowering recuperation of the role of observer as central rather than marginal.

Cecilia is cast as a competent observer in McEwan's novel through her attention to detail. McEwan dramatises her competency when she opens her bedroom door and unexpectedly encounters her young cousin, Jackson:

> Inches from her was a face and a raised fist. Her immediate, reeling perception was of a radical, Picasso-like perspective in which tears, rimmed and bloated eyes, wet lips and raw, unblown nose blended in a crimson moistness of grief (*Atonement*, p. 99).

The unpredictable, 'reeling' chronology of McEwan's description of Jackson's facial features follows Cecilia's gaze as it jumps from his eyes, down to his lips, and up to his nose, so that the reader experiences his features as separate, disembodied details. Cecilia's vision is therefore not a lofty, Godlike, masculine approach but a feminine one that, informed by a modernist or cubist aesthetic of multiple perspectives, considers small details separately. Forced to physically grapple with what is in front of her, she grips Jackson's shoulders and 'turned the whole body so that she could see the left ear' which, unlike that of his twin, Pierrot, is not missing a triangle of flesh from the lobe (*Atonement*, p. 99). Jackson remains an unidentified, ungendered 'body' until Cecilia has found his one distinguishing detail (or, rather, lack thereof). Cecilia's hunt for individualising details sets her apart from her mother who 'had never found this triangle of flesh. One could only know [the twins] generally' (*Atonement*, p. 65). The plot of the novel celebrates Cecilia's attention to detail and criticises Emily's prejudiced generality. Emily's lack of attention to detail leads her to support her youngest daughter, Briony, in the mistaken belief that Robbie raped her cousin, Lola.

In *Atonement*, Cecilia's eye for detail distinguishes her from her family's disinterest in the people on the margins of their life in their country house. McEwan represents her developing eye for detail as an indicator of her growing awareness of the larger political

issues surrounding her family's privileged social position. At the beginning of the novel, Cecilia is a disinterested reader. She is struggling to connect with Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) after scraping a third-class literature degree. However, discovering her feelings for housekeeper's son, Robbie, with whom she has grown up prompt her to see the world differently. Falling in love with working-class Robbie is presented as producing in Cecilia a new perspective. She realises that 'I've been seeing strangely, as if for the first time. Everything has looked different – too sharp, too real' (*Atonement*, p. 133). These improvements in sharpness and realism notably depend upon the detail. Awake to these new details, Cecilia now notices the smell of the herbs planted in the cracks of the patio by 'a temporary gardener' of whom '[n]o one remembered the name, or even the appearance' (*Atonement*, p. 106). She reflects that '[a]t the time, no one understood what he had in mind. Perhaps that was why he was sacked', thereby highlighting the perceived disposability of this anonymous gardener briefly employed to fill the literal margins of the Tallis house (*Atonement*, p. 106). The Tallis family's failure to appreciate the labour of their staff is encapsulated in the image of these herbs being 'crushed underfoot' (*Atonement*, p. 106). This inability to share the gardener's vision and long-term perspective suggests that the family's flawed perspective would benefit from Cecilia's attention to detail, which becomes allied with the working classes in this passage and for much of the novel from this point. In contrast to her family's disregard for the servants, Cecilia also notices the 'starchily pure' bed sheets and 'carefully straightened' sofa which indicate that Robbie's mother 'Mrs Turner must have passed through' (*Atonement*, pp. 45–46).[170] Mrs Turner's actions return the house to its established order. The 'starchily pure' sheets are devoid of dirt and creases, while the straightened sofa erases the imprint of its last user. Her work reveals itself through absence rather than presence, signifying both Mrs Turner's insignificance to her employer and

[170] I am indebted to Ian Fraser for highlighting the quotations in this paragraph in conjunction with Cecilia's class consciousness (Ian Fraser, 'Class Experience in McEwan's *Atonement'*, *Critique*, 54 (2013), 465-477, (p. 473)).

Cecilia's astute observation in contrast with her mother's lack of attention. In a Beauvoirian sense, as a cleaner, Mrs Turner 'wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present'.[171] Her servile presence in the aristocratic Tallis house is therefore a microcosm of the social order in which the working-classes 'keep' or 'maintain' their social superiors, thereby perpetuating the prevailing social inequalities. Cecilia's ability to notice Mrs Turner's labour suggests a wider appreciation of the social hierarchy in which her family have a privileged position.

Cecilia demonstrates Hume's definition of delicacy of taste whereby 'the organs are so fine as to allow nothing to escape them, and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition'.[172] Like Rose in *Misfortune*, her eye for detail constitutes a more modern taste which recognises the traditional order of things as an aesthetic that can be reconfigured. Cecilia's new aesthetic approach is demonstrated through her attempts to arrange the wildflowers she picks for Paul Marshall's bedroom:

> There was really no point trying to arrange wild flowers. They had tumbled into their own symmetry, and it was certainly true that too even a distribution between the irises and the rose-bay willow-herb ruined the effect. She spent some minutes making adjustments in order to achieve a natural chaotic look. […] Paul Marshall might believe that the flowers had simply been dropped in the vase in the same carefree spirit with which they had been picked. It made no sense, she knew, arranging flowers before the water was in – but there it was; she couldn't resist moving them around, and not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order, especially when they were alone (*Atonement*, p. 23).

Cecilia demonstrates a willingness to meddle with the prevailing 'natural', 'correct' order even as she recognises that 'there really was no point' and 'no sense' in the effort. By attempting to impose her own aesthetic order on wild flowers, Cecilia comes to appreciate the artifice involved in such a construction in a specifically feminine way; Marshall, however, 'might believe that the flowers had simply been dropped in the vase'. As in the cubist depiction of her perception of Jackson, McEwan uses Cecilia as an agent of shifting aesthetics

[171] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [1949], trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: David Campbell, 1993), p. 470.

[172] Hume, p. 141.

that valorises an attention to detail and recognises existing hierarchies as problematic. Thus, in the same way as Anonyma and Rose prompt a shift of perspective in Geoffroy in *Misfortune*, Robbie reflects on the new romantic element of his relationship with Cecilia which destabilises everything he thinks he knows: 'he had always known her, he knew nothing about her; she was plain, she was beautiful' (*Atonement*, p. 130). His discovery that what he once thought 'plain' is actually 'beautiful' suggests a new ability to read feminine aesthetics. As this agent of shifting aesthetics, Cecilia provokes questioning of established truths and structures of meaning.

McEwan foreshadows Cecilia's aesthetic and political awakening in her opinion of the vase given to Uncle Clem for his service to a village in World War One. Cecilia recognises that the vase 'was respected not for Horoldt's mastery of polychrome enamels or the blue and gold interlacing strap work and foliage, but for Uncle Clem, and the lives he had saved […]. Flowers, especially wild flowers, seemed a proper tribute' (*Atonement*, p. 24). Cecilia recognises the sentimental, moral, and human significance of the artefact, rather than objectifying its aesthetic details. As such, her response to the vase is a metaphor for her attention to the servants.[173] In McEwan's article on Bellow, he recommends beginning our appreciation of the author 'with a small thing, a phrase or sentence that has become part of our mental furniture, and a part of life's pleasures. After all, good readers, Nabokov advised his students, "should notice and fondle details."' [174] Through the character of Cecilia, McEwan demonstrates good reading practice, inviting his own readers to attend to the political significance of the details of his country house novel in a mode of reading often criticised as consumptive. *Atonement* therefore employs the generic trope of detail to destabilise established structures of meaning and privilege. McEwan presents Cecilia's perspective through reference to the decorative features of the country house – its vases and

[173] In chapter three, I explore a similar development in Briony's approach to authorship.

[174] McEwan, 'Master'.

flowers – both of which are traditionally feminine objects. Like Stace, then, McEwan imbues the decorative details of the country house aesthetic with political significance, subverting the view of feminine attention to such details as passive consumption.

McEwan contrasts Cecilia's class-conscious perspective and eye for detail with her mother's disinterest in the servants and disinterest in reading beneath the surface. Emily, for example, 'did not much like' Uncle Clem's vase on account of 'its little Chinese figures' and 'implausible birds' (*Atonement*, p. 24). She values it only in terms of its surface details, failing to appreciate their wider significance. McEwan equates Emily's disinterest in the significance of small details with her disinterest in her servants. The following passage, in which she recalls a professor pointing out moths above a candelabra at a dinner party, evidences her lack of eye for detail or interest in the miniature: 'He had told her that it was the visual impression of an even deeper darkness beyond the light that drew them in. […] How could anyone presume to know the world through the eyes of an insect?' (*Atonement*, p. 149). Emily doubts the professor's knowledge because insects, and the eyes thereof, are too tiny for her to contemplate humans understanding them: 'Not everything had a cause […]. Some things were just so' (*Atonement*, p. 149). She is unable to entertain the professor's ideas or challenge her own beliefs because the insects are too small and insignificant to contemplate.[175] Her disinterest in the moths is paralleled with her disinterest in those on the margins of her upper-class lifestyle. She perceives the working class as small, childlike, peripheral details on the edge of Tallis family life; the 'sullen' union members, for example, need to be 'coaxed like children' (*Atonement*, p. 49). Emily's perspective reflects John Stuart Mill's observation that the poor, and women, have historically been 'governed or treated like

[175] Sanderson uses similar insect imagery to depict the working class, referring to them as 'worker bees' (*Netherwood*, p. 154). Netherwood's kitchen staff are also described as 'a well-run beehive of bees' (*Netherwood*, p. 185). This metaphor differs to A. S. Byatt's more radical usage in *Angels and Insects* (1992) in which worker ants contrast the useless splendour of aristocrats against the values of co-operative labour (see Paul Dave, *Visions of England* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 35).

children'.[176] As Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis state, '[s]mallness indulges children's love of feeling their superiority, their desire to boss something'.[177] In fact, historically, the white working-class body was shorter than that of its social superior.[178] Through Emily's disinterest in details and perception of the working class as diminutive, McEwan criticises the lofty view adopted in conservative texts which present the working class as subordinate aesthetic details.

Uninterested in new theories and close examination, Emily lives her life by historical prejudices, a blinkered class-snobbery which causes her to indulge Briony's false testimony and pursue Robbie's conviction 'with a strange ferocity' (*Atonement*, p. 227). Emily's disinterest in detail leaves no room for doubt or nuance. Yet, after her interview with the police, despite having insisted that she'd seen Robbie 'plain as day', it dawns on Briony that 'evil was complicated' (*Atonement*, p. 167). Just as Briony is beginning to reassess the significance of small details, however, 'her mother's hands were pressing firmly on her shoulders and turning her towards the house […] Emily wanted her daughter well away from Robbie Turner' (*Atonement*, p. 183). Emily forcibly directs Briony away from thoughts of detail and nuance and towards the house which embodies the overarching class prejudices she is happy to reinforce.

Though the subversive potential of McEwan's use of detail is limited by the necessity of servants and their work remaining marginal signifiers of the class consciousness (or lack thereof) of their social superiors, the novel stresses the importance of detail in contributing to a comprehensive and representative narrative. The novel maps Briony's growing appreciation of the significance of the tiny details she previously overlooked. As the implied author of the

[176] John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* [1848], 7th edn., ed. by William J. Ashley (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1909), IV.7.8 <http://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlP62.html> [accessed 15 July 2015].

[177] Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis, *A Study of Dolls* (New York: E.L. Kellogg & Company, 1897), p. 48.

[178] Skeggs, p. 8.

novel, the 'forensic memoir' of her crime, Briony is trying to atone for jumping to conclusions based on her immature class-prejudice and an overactive imagination (*Atonement*, p. 370). She writes *Atonement* to readdress her false testimony and understand its impact. She demonstrates and engineers her growing empathy by narrating a section of the novel from Robbie's perspective as a soldier in France, an experience for which she feels responsible having curtailed his medical ambitions and orchestrated the imprisonment from which active service was his only escape. She therefore adopts a narrative style that valorises minute details. Unwilling to rely exclusively on her own perspective, she seeks out marginal voices. She consults archived letters in the British Museum, writes to Robbie's comrade for corroboration, and asks an old colonel-turned-amateur-historian for feedback on her manuscript. Reflecting on his feedback in the final section of the novel, Briony writes, 'I love these little things, this pointillist approach to verisimilitude, the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction. […] Like policemen in a search team, we go on hands and knees and crawl our way towards the truth' (*Atonement*, p. 359). Briony's quest for detail is conveyed in an image of deference that subverts the social hierarchy that lead to her crime.

Conclusion: Blurred Boundaries?

In this chapter I have established that the generic trope of detail in the contemporary English country house novel is not merely decorative but an important ideological signifier. The problematic presentation of servants as decorative details in the country house aesthetic in the work of Fellowes and Sanderson suggests a conservative outlook that cements the importance of socially-superior protagonists. While Waters, Litt, and McEwan criticise this disinterested perspective through dislikeable narrators and characters (Faraday, Victoria, and Emily), their critique is limited by their own relegation of servant characters to the margins of their text (a notable example being Betty in *The Little Stranger*). Nonetheless, McEwan manages to recuperate the feminine eye for detail as politically charged in an empowering

reversal of the role of the marginal observer. Stace similarly subverts the supposed frivolity of the feminine decorative and camp excess by portraying both as agents of social reform.

The contemporary English country house novel genre thus encapsulates both masculine and feminine literary approaches as far as Prose defines them. Yet what Prose fails to consider is that individual texts might contain the same mixture of approaches, resulting in the camp aesthetics of *Misfortune*, or the ambivalence of *Netherwood* or *Atonement*. These ambivalent texts approach what have been regarded as masculine, political issues through the feminine decorative, undermining this gendered approach to writing. Hermione Lee claims that,

> *Atonement* asks what the English novel of the twenty-first century has inherited, and what it can do now. One of the things it can do, very subtly in McEwan's case, is to be androgynous. This is a novel written by a man acting the part of a woman writing a 'male' subject, and there's nothing to distinguish between them.[179]

The implied authors of *Misfortune* and *Finding Myself* create similar performances that blur the distinction between masculine and feminine literary approaches. The use of detail in the contemporary English country house novel, then, signals an ongoing negotiation between the classifications of masculine and feminine, servant and master, and margins and centre traditionally upheld by the English country house and its fiction. The hierarchy of detail, then, destabilises the social hierarchy of the country house setting.

[179] Hermione Lee, 'If your memories serve you well…', *Observer* (23 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001> [accessed 4 February 2014].

Chapter 3. Self-Conscious Showcases: The Value of the Work of Writing

'Polite realist tendencies aren't enough. Do something else.' – Toby Litt [1]

In the General Introduction, I outlined the country house setting's loss of cultural value as a result of its relationship to entertainment forms such as the period drama and television book club. In this chapter, I examine how contemporary English country house authors self-consciously anticipate and manipulate the reception of their texts in a literary marketplace that devalues the genre as 'printed television'.[2] Expanding on my discussion of detail in chapter two, I will begin by highlighting in the reception of contemporary English country house novels the expectation that authors include authentic realist details. I suggest that, in light of the contemporary desire for authentic cultural products, the value of authorial research has increased, becoming a key indicator of cultural capital. I offer an overview of the response to this trend by authors in the genre who foreground research peri- and paratextually. I then contrast this approach with self-conscious in-text techniques which foreground the work of writing in terms of labour and imagination. Examining the metafictive elements of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005), Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001), and Toby Litt's *Finding Myself* (2003), I argue that these authors demonstrate an innovative approach to negotiating the value of the English country house novel in a marketplace saturated with popular and parodic English country house texts. As such, my work builds on Sarah Brouillette's recent study of self-conscious authorship in postcolonial novels to 'recuperate the controversial author-figure for literary

[1] Toby Litt cited in Richard Marshall, 'The New Bawdy', *3am Magazine* (October 2003) <http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/oct/interview_toby_litt.html> [accessed 29 September 2014].

[2] Jeanette Winterson, 'Ignore the Booker brouhaha. Readability is no test for literature', *Guardian* (18 October 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-readability-test-literature> [accessed 8 June 2015].

interpretation'.[3] Brouillette identifies an 'authorial crisis' in the contemporary literary field, which revises 'our romantic legacy's focus on the author's […] separability from media and market'.[4] Thus in contrast to scholars who assess cultural value in the literary marketplace in terms of institutional structures such as academia, publishing, and prize culture, I suggest that these four novelists use textual techniques to signal the value of their respective texts in a way that foregrounds the author's work of writing.[5] Building on Brouilette's theory that the author cannot be separated from the media or market, I refer to online and newspaper reviews throughout the chapter as evidence of the readerly expectations to which these authors self-consciously respond.

Reality Hunger and the Value of Research

In this section I will be highlighting the expectation amongst readers that the contemporary English country house novel is well-researched, arguing that this expectation is symptomatic of what David Shields refers to as contemporary culture's 'reality hunger'.[6] Online reviewers and broadsheet critics alike evidence a preoccupation with authentic details in the country house novel genre. Anna Quindlen, for example, writes that Julian Fellowes's *Snobs* (2004) 'seems authentic down to the wallpaper and the Wellingtons', while Peter Parker asserts that Alan Hollinghurst's '[p]eriod indicators are always spot on' in *The Stranger's Child* (2011).[7] It is supposed that these authentic details are the product of the

[3] Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.

[4] Brouillette, pp. 48-9.

[5] Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[6] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010).

[7]Anna Quilden, cited on the cover of Julian Fellowes, *Snobs* (London: Phoenix, 2012); Peter Parker, 'Alan Hollinghurst's allusive art', *TLS* (23 August 2011) <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article760303.ece> [accessed 20 February 2014].

careful research that informs realist writing. John Mullan, for instance, admires in Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009) the 'minutely imagined exercises in period reconstruction' and her 'research into the life of a country GP in the days just before the arrival of the National Health Service'.[8] Geoff Dyer praises McEwan's 'vividly realised details' in *Atonement*, while Hermione Lee notes the novel's 'closely researched, […] exact human details'.[9] Frank Kermode describes McEwan's work as 'full of 'enviable specificities' and 'intelligent and creative attention'.[10] In the contemporary English country house novel, then, details are regarded as contributing to an authentic realist construction that is highly esteemed by reviewers.

This praise of such details is symptomatic of the current quest for authenticity that has, according to scholars of multiple disciplines, become central to contemporary Western culture. Shields, for example, writes of 'reality hunger', while Alain Badiou discusses a growing 'passion for the real'.[11] Linked to these ideas are Charles Taylor's 'Age of Authenticity', Charlene Spretnak's 'Resurgence of the Real', and David Boyle's 'New Realism'.[12] The evidence collected across these accounts varies from debates about fictionalised memoirs, to complaints about miming musicians, to the insistence on locally-produced, organic food. Reality hunger is conceptualised as a reaction to the inauthenticity of

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[8] John Mullan, 'Book Club: *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters – Pace', *Guardian* (24 July 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/24/little-stranger-sarah-waters-club> [accessed 21 February 2014].

[9] Geoff Dyer, 'Who's Afraid of Influence?', *Guardian* (22 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/22/fiction.ianmcewan> [accessed 20 February 2014]; Hermione Lee, 'If your memories serve you well...', *Observer* (23 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[10] Frank Kermode, 'Point of View', *London Review of Books*, 23 (2001), pp. 8-9 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n19/frank-kermode/point-of-view> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[11] Shields; Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 52.

[12] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 473; Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1999); David Boyle, *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* [2003] (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 15. See also, Daniel Lea, 'The Anxieties of Authenticity in Post-2000 British Fiction', *MFS*, 58 (2012), 459-76, (pp. 459-60).

popular cultural forms. Cultural commentators claim that '[f]akery is now so ingrained in popular culture that we've become suspicious of anything claiming to present truth'; 'our confidence in a reality independent of representation has been strained to the limit'.[13] In Britain in particular, reality television prompts complaints about inauthenticity, while the growing distrust of tabloid newspapers reveals a suspicion of constructed representations of reality.[14] In popular culture, then, inauthenticity has become widespread, for all this is repeatedly bemoaned by the public who express their desire for authentic products. The view of popular forms as inauthentic has led to the valorisation of authenticity whereby its value has increased as a result of its perceived rarity.

The demand for authenticity is therefore often allied to a form of cultural elitism. Organic food, for example, is more expensive than its processed or genetically-modified counterparts, suggesting that its lack of artificiality makes it a more valuable product. As Poole suggests, authenticity has become 'yet another brand value to be baked into the commodity', embroiled in a hierarchy of cultural value which privileges objects produced through intense labour and artisan skill:

> The authenticity of […] an aspirational brand's product boils down to the promise that numberless faceless artisans have laboured personally on your behalf. […] The self-appointed guardians of authenticity, it seems, want desperately to believe that they are at the top of the labour pyramid. In cultural markets that are all too

[13] Anne Billson, 'Why we love questioning faux-or-not docs such as *Catfish*', *Guardian* (16 December 2010) <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/dec/16/catfish-faux-or-not-docs> [accessed 14 October 2014]; Wendy Steiner, *The Real Real Thing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 69.

[14] On reality television, see Emily Wadsworth, 'Is *Made in Chelsea* fake? Cast member Tina Stinnes claims show is completely staged', *Exeter Express and Echo* (4 July 2014) <http://www.exeterexpressandecho.co.uk/Chelsea-fake-Cast-member-Tina-Stinnes-claims/story-21329653-detail/story.html#ixzz3cBeAw9X3> [accessed 5 June 2015] and Stephanie Takyi, 'Gemma Collins spills the beans on *TOWIE* being a scripted reality show', *OK* (24 July 2014) <http://www.ok.co.uk/celebrity-news/gemma-collins-spills-the-beans-on-towie-being-a-scripted-reality-show-full-details> [accessed 5 June 2015]. The 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that 68% of Britons distrust tabloids, and trust in 'quality titles' and TV news has also declined (Josh Halliday, 'Almost 70% of British public distrust red-top tabloids', *Guardian* (24 January 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jan/24/british-public-distrust-red-top-tabloids> [accessed 12 January 2015]).

> disappointingly accessible to the masses, the authenticity fetish disguises and renders socially acceptable a raw hunger for hierarchy and power. [15]

As Gillian Pye suggests, contemporary, industrialised society threatens human beings with obsolescence as productive and creative entities; in a culture where computers and technology are rapidly replacing customer-facing roles, human productivity is increasingly rare. The contemporary English country house novel therefore presents itself as the result of hours of research and painstaking attention to detail only achievable through human endeavour.[16] In fact, John Lucas suggests that the 'renewed interest' in the country house novel is due to the setting allowing 'human beings meet and interact with one another, in a world where now […] such interactions are increasingly relegated to social networking sites'. [17] Reviews praising country house authors for their detailed verisimilitude, then, are applauding realist construction as a product of the author's research, knowledge, and skill.

The authentic details of the realist novel differentiate it from popular entertainment for the masses because they are the product of, to use Poole's term, artisan labour. In a context in which contemporary consumers, in the words of Boyle, are launching 'a determined rejection of the fake, the virtual, the spun and the mass-produced', novels are deemed authentic artistic responses in having been (seemingly) produced through the skilled labour of an artist (for all they have been edited, published en masse, and read by many). [18] As such, they signal the cultural capital of both the implied author and implied reader. As Melanie Mettler suggests, and the above reviews highlight, 'textual authenticity is very much alive as an indicator of

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[15] Steven Poole, 'Why are we so obsessed with the pursuit of authenticity?', *New Statesman* (7 March 2013) <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2013/03/why-are-we-so-obsessed-pursuit-authenticity> [accessed 17 October 2014].

[16] Gillian Pye, 'Introduction: Trash as Cultural Category' in *Trash Culture*, ed. by Pye (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 2-13, (p. 5).

[17] John Lucas, 'The deep foundations of the country-house novel', *Guardian Book Blog*, (1 February 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/feb/01/country-house-novel> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[18] Boyle, p. 4.

quality in narrative art'.[19] In fact, typing the words 'authenticity' and 'authentic' into Google's Ngram Viewer, which plots graphs of the use of words in books over a given period, reveals that there has been a strong uptake in usage since the early 1990s, suggesting that novelists are self-consciously responding to reality hunger.[20] Contemporary literature, then, and the English country house genre in particular, is conscious of the cultural currency of authenticity.

Reviewers of contemporary novels therefore celebrate the author's ability to convince the reader to buy into a world that is clearly a construction. A. N. Wilson, for example, deems Waters '[s]uch a brilliant writer [...] her readers would believe anything she told them', while Rodney Welch views Stace's narrator as 'just the kind of narrator an old-fashioned yarn needs: one who makes you suspend disbelief not just willingly but with great enthusiasm'.[21] These critics suggest that the contemporary reader admires the construction of an authentic fictional world, even as they recognise its imaginary status; as McEwan claims, 'the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted'.[22] These comments reveal that readers evaluate the authenticity of a novel's fictional world as a product of the author's work, and therefore assess the text's value in terms of how well it is researched and how far the author's realist skill has made the world believable. Thus reviews of *Atonement* simultaneously assess McEwan's research and powers of imagination. Dyer describes the novel as 'thoroughly authenticated by [the author's] archival imagination', while Kermode characterises it as

[19] Melanie Mettler, 'Monica Ali and the Suspension of Disbelief', *The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Medial Constructions of the Real*, ed. by Wolfgang Funk, Florian Groß, and Irmtraud Huber (London: Transaction, 2012), pp. 163-183, (p. 165).

[20] Poole.

[21] A. N. Wilson, *Daily Mail*, cited on the cover of Sarah Waters, *Affinity* [1999] (London: Virago, 2012); Rodney Welch, 'Skirting the Issue', *Washington Post* (24 April 2005) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7872-2005Apr21.html> [accessed 14 October 2014].

[22] Ian McEwan, 'The State of Fiction: A Symposium', *New Review*, 5 (1978), 14-76, (p. 51).

'deeply researched and imagined'.[23] These reviews regard authenticity and fictional construction as inherently linked.

In contemporary culture in which inauthenticity has become the norm, the authentic and artistic product is revered as a rarity and, as a result, the value of authentic fictional construction is enhanced. Authenticity has thus become central to configuring the cultural value of the contemporary novel. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I examine how English country house novelists, aware of the value and scrutiny of authenticity in contemporary culture, self-consciously foreground the authenticity of their texts to suggest value. In the next section, I outline the common approach among contemporary country house novelists of highlighting their research paratextually. In the following section, I examine how Beauman, Litt, Stace, and McEwan foreground their talents for authentic fictional construction within the text itself by using self-conscious literary techniques to remind the reader of the work of writing.

Showcasing Research in Paratexts

Most country house authors showcase the authenticity of their texts by foregrounding their research and knowledge peritextually, highlighting the continuity between their novels and real life. In her author's note to *The Somnambulist* (2012), Essie Fox claims the novel was inspired by Wilton's Music Hall and details the real-life inspirations behind many of her settings, characters, and themes:

> Dinwood Court is my fictional name for Hampton Court in Herefordshire […] Dinwood Court's internal structure and décor is a combination of Hampton Court and Croft Castle, another nearby castellated house […]. But the exterior appearance of Hampton Court, along with the great swathes of woodland behind, form the true inspiration for Phoebe's visits to the house.[24]

[23] Geoff Dyer; Kermode.

[24] Essie Fox, *The Somnambulist* [2011] (London: Orion, 2012), pp. 411-2 (hereafter '*Somnambulist*').

Fox here authenticates her representation of the country house by stressing its relationship to real-life counterparts, even as she highlights her process of fictional construction. Her knowledge of these historic and exclusive sites is mobilised to suggest her cultural capital and that of the novel. Aware that '[t]hese days, with so many e books produced, our reading choices are often inspired by word of mouth - the general buzz that some books create when talked about on the internet', Fox uses her two blogs and personal website to stimulate interest in the Victorian gothic genre to which she describes her work as belonging.[25] Advertised in the 'about the author' section and on the back cover of *The Somnambulist*, her blogs further detail her process of research and the real life inspirations behind her work. In doing so, they present the work of writing as labour intensive and rooted in attention to authentic detail. Fox's knowledge of the Victorian period is indeed admired by her readers; one *Amazon* reviewer claims that 'it is obvious that she knows her victoriana [sic] very well indeed'.[26] The authenticity of Fox's fictional world is presented by both author and reader as a selling point for her novel in the literary marketplace.

Jennie Walters similarly authenticates her novels by foregrounding her historical knowledge. The *Swallowcliffe* series repeatedly showcases her research; each chapter of each novel opens with an epigraph from a newspaper or publication of the period. Rather than synthesising this historical information into her fictional construction like Fox, Walters leaves it in its original form to highlight her use of secondary sources. By showcasing these references to historical sources as standalone features of every chapter, Walters repeatedly reminds the reader of her extensive research of the period. Walters also uses her opening peritexts to introduce the authenticity of *Standing in the Shadows* (2006). Rather than using her acknowledgements located at the end of the novel as one might expect, she uses her

[25] Essie Fox, 'Judging a book by its cover?, *Do You Do the Write Thing* (9 May 2014) <http://doyoudothewritething.blogspot.co.uk/> [accessed 26 February 2015].

[26] Betty, 'A great first novel!, *Amazon* (1 June 2011) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Somnambulist-Essie-Fox/dp/1409121194/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1423583946&sr=1-1&keywords=the+somnambulist> [accessed 17 February 2015].

opening author's note to highlight resources and individuals who have made 'sure [her work] was historically accurate', suggesting the importance of authenticity to her authorial persona and implied readers.[27] Like Fox, Walters has a website on which she shares her research on 'history', 'servants', and 'country houses'.[28] These headings add further evidence to my suggestion that contemporary English country house novelists are aware that their texts will be evaluated in terms of authenticity. Walters also reveals on her website that the inspiration behind the *Swallowcliffe* series came from her family, particularly her grandmother who lived through the two world wars during which the series is set, and that a photograph of her great-uncle appears on the cover of *Standing in the Shadows*.[29] She thereby underscores her novels' authentic links with real-life country house characters: just as Fox bases her setting on a real building, Walters bases her characters on real people.

Stressing the importance of authenticity to her work, Walters's latest blog is entitled 'Discovering the real Swallowcliffe', and details her discovery of Swallowcliffe village and Swallowcliffe manor after her second novel was published.[30] Walters claims that, having agreed on the name of her setting with her publisher, she looked up 'Swallowcliffe' in a road map of the British Isles 'to make sure there wasn't already a place called Swallowcliffe which might have a Hall in it (not wanting to ascribe a fictional history to a real place)'.[31] Walters here highlights an anxiety that the authenticity of her fictional world could be undercut by a real-life counterpart from which it might differ. Finding no Swallowcliffe listed, Walters was content. However, a subsequent *Google* search revealed a website devoted to the village of Swallowcliffe which, as Walters discovered in a phone call to the website's contact, is home to a country house named Swallowcliffe Manor. Though the post actually reveals a shocking

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[27] Jennie Walters, 'Author's Note' to *Standing in the Shadows* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

[28] *JennieWalters.com* <http://www.jenniewalters.com/> [accessed 3 March 2013].

[29] *JennieWalters.com*.

[30] Jennie Walters, 'Discovering the real Swallowcliffe', *Swallowcliffe* (5 September 2013) <http://swallowcliffe.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/discovering-real-swallowcliffe.html> [accessed 5 June 2015].

[31] Walters, 'Discovering'.

oversight in terms of Walters' research (the Swallowcliffe website is the first result in the Google search), she presents the events as lending further authenticity to her work. Describing her conversation with the website contact, Walter claims

> When he gave me his surname, I nearly dropped the phone. It was Stanbury: the same as that of my heroine, Grace. What are the chances of that? […] [I]t makes me feel I have some kind of connection with Swallowcliffe, that my stories were waiting to be written and that there's a certain inevitability to the framing of them.[32]

For all she was unaware of its existence when she wrote the first two novels in the series, Walters presents herself as spiritually connected to the real-life counterpart of her fictional setting, intuitively selecting names that resonate with the village. The authenticity of her setting, then, stems not from detailed research, but from a more intuitive knowledge of Swallowcliffe and its inhabitants.

As with Fox's readers, Walters's historical research is a source of enjoyment for many *Amazon* reviewers. One commentator describes her chapter epigraphs as 'absolute gems' and her website as 'a treasure', underlining the value ascribed to historical research.[33] Another describes *House of Secrets* (2005) as 'believable. Having previously read an autobiography by a former lady's maid, this rings true'.[34] This reviewer evidences the current trend of assessing texts in terms of the authenticity of their construction, a trend epitomised in another review which states, 'I would just like to point out that I don't think ambulances and police cars in this country would have sounded sirens in 1939. I believe they still had bells then'.[35] Nonetheless, the reviewer awards the novel three stars and, on the whole, admires Walters's

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[32] Walters, 'Discovering'.

[33] N. Schmidt, 'Delightful Story', *Amazon* (11 August 2005) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/House-Secrets-Swallowcliffe-Jennie-Walters/dp/0689875266/ref=sr_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1423580625&sr=1-5&keywords=swallowcliffe> [accessed 17 February 2015].

[34] The novel was later released electronically as *Polly's Story* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013). Stella E. Dixon, 'Good Read', *Amazon* <http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B005LC11KA> [accessed 17 February 2015].

[35] supernan61, *Amazon* (14 November 2013) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B005LD3NG4> [accessed 17 February 2015].

historical knowledge. Historical authenticity, then, is a measure of literary value amongst these country house readers. Fox and Walters self-consciously respond to this demand for authenticity by presenting their research as a marker of the cultural capital of their texts produced through their labour as authors.

Walters and Fox showcase their research as evidence of authenticity and therefore cultural capital in a way that is representative of the contemporary English country house novel genre as a whole. However, the remainder of this chapter will examine how Beauman, Litt, Stace, and McEwan depart from this approach. They highlight the labour of writing and negotiate the cultural value of the country house genre through self-conscious literary devices. Jerome de Groot has suggested that *Atonement* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) took 'the tools of postmodern historiographic metafiction and ma[d]e them mainstream and popular'.[36] However, I argue that this process is not due to the generic characteristics of historiographic metafiction. Indeed, few readers beyond the academy are likely to be aware of this literary genre as it rarely appears in reviews, marketing, or bookshops. Instead, the self-consciousness of *Atonement* and *Possession* is due to their country house novel genre which has made self-reflexivity mainstream in its cultural diffusion. Before exploring the self-reflexivity of these four contemporary English country house novels which reflect the genre's span from popular to literary, I will argue that self-reflexivity is not the elite, postmodern trope critics have presumed, but rather an inherent aspect of the country house text which combines realism and metafiction in a neo-realist form. This combination, I suggest, is key to exposing the labour of writing and thereby signalling the value of the country house text.

Neo-Realism and the Self-Consciousness of the Country House Text

Rebecca's Tale, *Atonement*, *Misfortune*, and *Finding Myself* combine realism and self-consciousness to differing extents. This combination has been defined by some

[36] Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 100.

commentators as post-postmodern neo-realism, a term mostly applied to American Literature (with a capital 'L'), but also to British novels, since the late 1980s.[37] There are, of course, limitations to the theory of post-postmodernism as a new literary epoch, dependent as it is (like postmodernism itself) on what came before. However, the suggestion that literature has entered a neo-realist phase echoes the aforementioned and widespread scholarly agreement that contemporary cultural products are evaluated in terms of authenticity: neo-realist literature is the literary component of Boyle's 'New Realism' or Shields's 'reality hunger'. *All Hail the New Puritans* (2000), a collection of short stories to which Litt contributed, evidences this shift away from postmodern experiment in British literary culture. Inspired by the Dogme 95 manifesto for cinematic minimalism and authenticity, the collection included its own manifesto which outlined a commitment to 'textual simplicity' and 'ethical reality', eschewing temporal disjunction and poetic license.[38] In doing so, the contributors aimed to distance themselves from the literary elite such as McEwan. This rejection of postmodern experiment from Litt is inconsistent with his experimental novel *Finding Myself*, for reasons I will explore in more detail later in this chapter. However, his involvement in New Puritanism and its emergence at the turn of the century underlines the shift towards realism in

[37] Josh Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Zhao-guo Ding, 'Postmodernism or Neo-Realism: On Parody in David Lodge's Campus Novel *Small World*', *Canadian Social Science*, 6 (2010), 133-142. It was around the late 1980s that Tom Wolfe published 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A literary manifesto for the new social novel', *Harper's Magazine* (November 1989) and Jacques Derrida shifted his attention to ethico-political issues in *The Other Heading* (1991), *Spectres of Marx* (1993), and *Politics of Friendship* (1994). Also, in 1991, the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies took place, entitled *The End of Postmodernism: New Directions*, suggesting that literary postmodernism had run its course. Clayton Crocket's conception of neo-realism as 'a convergence of economic neo-liberalism and political neo-conservatism, resulting in a hegemonic American neo-imperialism' is particularly resonant with the issues of conservatism and English nationalism discussed in the General Introduction. Neo-realism would vastly benefit from closer examination in a British context (Clayton Crocket, 'Postmodernism and the Crisis of Belief: Neo-Realism and the Real', in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 263-83, (p. 264)).

[38] *All Hail the New Puritans* [2001], ed. by Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), p. i.

contemporary English literature and the awareness of this amongst contemporary authors. Indeed, Wood marks 2001 as the turning point in the novel's relationship to authenticity, claiming that the understanding of the novel as a realistic representation of reality 'exploded in the face of the singularity that was 9/11', a view Boyle corroborates.[39]

I am not suggesting that postmodern experiment has been entirely replaced by a return to realism in the English country house novel or contemporary literature generally, but rather that the genre seems to contain both approaches, at times even within the same novel. In his account of postwar British fiction, subtitled *Realism and After*, Andrzej Gąsiorek highlights the symbiosis between realist codes and self-reflexive experimentalism in contemporary fiction.[40] In fact, he identifies 'a *rapprochement* between experimentalism and realism' in British fiction generally, in which the reflectionism of realism exists alongside the reflexivity of experimentation.[41] Thus Gąsiorek conceives of multiple 'realisms' in contemporary fiction that are 'flexible, wide-ranging, unstable, historically variable, and radically open-ended': 'They cross-breed narrative modes, taking what suits them from a variety of genres, and creating new forms that cannot easily be classified'.[42] As I suggested in the General Introduction, contemporary English country house novels are especially difficult to classify in that they draw on a wide range of generic conventions. The combination of realism and self-reflexivity in the contemporary English country house novel suggests that the metafictive techniques associated with postmodernism have been assimilated into a neo-realist mode.

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[39] James Wood, 'Tell Me How Does it Feel?', *Guardian* (6 October 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/06/fiction> [accessed 11 June 2015]; Boyle, p. 291.

[40] Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995).

[41] Gąsiorek, p. 2.

[42] Gąsiorek, pp. 4, 14, 19. Magical realism is another example of how realism has evolved to incorporate elements which destabilise reality. In fact, Lucie Armitt's description of magical realism as a 'disruptive' narrative style that 'fractures the flow of an otherwise seamlessly reality text' could easily be applied to the combination of realism and metafiction in these contemporary English country house novels (Lucie Armitt, 'The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 305-316, (p. 306)).

Scholars continue to use the term 'metafiction', and Patricia Waugh's definition of it in particular, to discuss self-consciousness in contemporary fiction.[43] However, in this section I wish to take issue with a central element of Waugh's argument in order to move the critical debate beyond understandings of this term that seem rooted in the postmodern period which many critics claim is now over.[44] Waugh's argument contains a fundamental paradox: she claims that metafiction is *both* an inherent characteristic of narrative fiction dating back centuries *and* a response to 1980s culture.[45] Waugh argues that the metafictive novel is a postmodern form that constitutes 'a mature recognition of its existence as *writing*' in 'a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized'.[46] Yet she also claims that 'although the *term* "metafiction" might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself', appearing in work by the likes of Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, and James Joyce.[47] Waugh's examples here notably include realist and modernist writers. In contrast to Waugh's view of metafiction as a postmodern trope, then, I view literary self-reflexivity as a literary technique that has been mobilised to different ends in different periods, and it is my aim to uncover the object of its use in contemporary English country house novels. To be clear, I am not proposing that all contemporary English country house novels are metafictions, though many draw on metafictive techniques and *Finding Myself* constitutes a metafiction proper, in

[43] See, for example, *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Heilmann and Llewellyn apply Waugh's definition of 'metafictions' to contemporary novels by authors such as Byatt and Waters (Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984)). Indeed contemporary literature is still conceptualised in postmodern terms, underlining the usefulness of this terminology in interpreting contemporary texts (Head; John J. Su, *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)).

[44] As Linda Hutcheon has argued, the postmodern moment has 'passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on' (*Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 181).

[45] Ann Jefferson, 'Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*…', *Poetics Today*, 7 (1986), 574-6.

[46] Waugh, p. 19, original emphasis.

[47] Waugh, pp. 5, 24.

Waugh's terms. What I am suggesting, rather, is that realism and metafiction often co-exist in the genre in a way that negotiates cultural value and destabilises cultural hierarchies.

There exists amongst readers and literary critics alike a supposition that self-consciousness denotes high cultural capital. Metafictive techniques are regarded as highbrow because they are presumed to appeal only to intellectual readers. As Pierre Bourdieu argues,

> Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation – literature, theatre, painting – more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representation and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe "naively" in the things represented. [48]

Highbrow readers are here portrayed as interested in style and form, while popular readers are 'naively' preoccupied with plot and character. That is to say, 'the working class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions […] tend to distance the spectator'.[49] The terms of Bourdieu's argument are problematic; for instance, what constitutes a 'working class audience' and why is it binarised with intellectualism? Yet despite the reductiveness of his clear-cut opposition of reading methods, this stereotype continues to circulate in contemporary literary criticism. Clive Bloom, for example, writes that '[a]rt fiction highlights its style, delights in it and makes of style a fetish', echoing Bourdieu's conflation of literary style and cultural capital.[50] Dominic Head, too, suggests that an 'essential ingredient' of serious literature is 'self-consciousness, the process by which all "literary" novelists implicitly evaluate (and stake their claim for) their place in the canon'.[51] Janice A. Radway corroborates this distinction, suggesting that popular literature is preoccupied with plot rather than style, creating 'the illusion that language is a transparent window opening out onto an already existent world',

[48] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 501.

[49] Bourdieu, p. 501.

[50] Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 21.

[51] Head, p. 15.

eliminating the self-consciousness associated with highbrow texts.[52] With this critical prejudice continuing, rightly or wrongly, to circulate amongst contemporary readers, some might assume that authors who use metafictive devices, such as McEwan, Stace, and Litt, do so to foreground the cultural capital of their literary style.

Yet in contrast to what these critics would have us believe, self-consciousness is equally prevalent in popular culture particularly in country house texts. For instance, Michael Hogan views *Downton Abbey* as teetering 'on the edge of soapy self-parody'.[53] Indeed, *Downton* participates in parody sketches for Comic Relief and its characters occasionally make self-reflexive comments in the real series, such as, 'We all have different parts to play, […] and we must all be allowed to play them'.[54] As Toth suggests, we are experiencing 'the end of metafiction as a privileged aesthetic style' and recognising that (neo-)realism and metafiction are 'equally contingent and equally relevant "language games"'.[55] Neo-realism therefore represents 'an attempt to *relax the rules*'.[56] Self-consciousness has evolved beyond elite cultural forms and spread into popular culture, allowing the country house text to reflect on its own conventions, its relationship to authenticity, and how these construe notions of cultural value. While Waugh suggested that metafictive novels of the 1980s were responding to a 'growing awareness' of how cultural value is constructed, contemporary English country house novels use metafictive techniques to negotiate a culture in which this awareness is now widespread.

In fact, the English country house text has been instrumental in this cultural diffusion, as the many country house parody sketches produced in recent years attest. The parodic

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[52] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature,* 2nd edn. (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 189-90.

[53] Michael Hogan, 'Top TV spoofs: "Don't I know you from *Lark Pies to Cranchesterford*?"', *Guardian TV and Radio Blog* (11 October 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/tvandradioblog/2012/oct/08/week> [accessed 11 June 2015].

[54] *Downton Abbey*, series 1, episode 2, *ITV*, 3 October 2010, 9.00pm.

[55] Toth, p. 123.

[56] Toth, p. 123, original emphasis.

references to *Rebecca* in the self-conscious Sky Atlantic series *Hunderby* suggest a knowing audience schooled in country house texts and the conventions of period drama.[57] The *Comic Relief* sketch, 'Uptown Downstairs Abbey', mocked the obsession with historical authenticity in country house texts in a self-conscious way. Anticipating the audience's preoccupation with period specificity, one character declared, 'I love you, Mary, hard as it is for an Englishman to say those words in this era'.[58] The sketch depicted the constructed nature of period drama: members of the crew were clearly visible pushing period cars, and actors drew attention to the false nature of the set by pretending to walk downstairs behind a makeshift wall (see figure 7). The sketch therefore highlighted the self-conscious attention to period detail in contemporary country house texts and the knowingness of how authenticity will factor into its reception. This parodic self-consciousness is now so widespread that popular American television programmes such as *The Simpsons*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Sesame Street* have produced their own country house sketches.[59] Jimmy Fallon, too, has a recurring feature named 'Downton Sixbey' on *Saturday Night Live*, featuring 'a milf' and 'three daughters named Hot, Way Hot and The Other One'.[60] Its opening credit sequence underlines the mechanisms of construction as the servant bells are used to signal the components of period drama, such as 'wardrobe' and 'jokes' (see figure 8). Like the country house novel genre, then, self-consciousness has become culturally diffuse.

These parodies reveal a widespread recognition that authenticity is used to negotiate the value of the country house text. The *Comic Relief* sketch, for example, parodied the attempt to authenticate the country house period drama through the use of generically established period-drama writers and performers. The sketch's characters self-consciously showcased their generic familiarity ('Don't I know you from *Lark Pies to Cranchesterford*?'),

[57] *Hunderby*, Sky Atlantic, 27 August -8 October 2012.

[58] 'Upstairs Downstairs Abbey', *Comic Relief*, BBC1, 18–19 March 2011.

[59] 'The Fortress', *How I Met Your Mother*, CBS, 18 March 2012; 'Dangers on a Train', *The Simpsons*, Fox, 19 May 2014; 'Upside Downton Abbey', *Sesame Street*, 5 February 2013.

[60] 'Downton Sixbey', *Saturday Night Live*, NBC, 12 April 2012-6 February 2013.

Figure 7: Constructing authenticity in 'Upstairs Downstairs Abbey' on *Comic Relief*[61]

[61] 'Uptown Downstairs Abbey Part One - Red Nose Day 2011 - BBC Comic Relief Night', *YouTube* (18 March 2011) <*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5dMlXentLw* >[accessed 7 July 2015]; 'Uptown Downstairs Abbey Part Two - Red Nose Day 2011 - BBC Comic Relief Night', *YouTube* (18 March 2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3YYo_5rxFE>[accessed 7 July 2015].

Figure 8: Engineering authenticity in 'Downton Sixbey' on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*[62]

revealing an understanding that the same 'quality' actors populate many texts in the genre. The literary equivalent, perhaps, are the genre-specific intertextual references in the contemporary English country house novel that position the text within a canonical tradition (see chapter one). Introduced as having been written by 'the Oscar-winning writer of something similar', the Comic Relief sketch revealed an understanding of how country house texts use authenticity to signal their cultural capital: in the same way, Fellowes's success with *Downton* is highlighted on the front covers of his novels to stress his past success in the country house genre. There is now a widespread awareness among readers that authenticity has become a measurement of the value of the contemporary country house text. As Hogan notes, 'I've been unable to watch a period drama without subconsciously looking out for historical anachronisms, budget-saving trickery – just two vintage cars and a penny farthing, then – and clunky attempts to establish context'.[63] The hunt for anachronisms amongst country house readers – the ambulance siren in *Swallowcliffe*, for example, or the details that

[62] 'Downton Sixbey Episode 1 (Late Night with Jimmy Fallon)', *YouTube* (12 April 2012) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFEabHQWntg> [accessed 7 July 2015].

[63] Hogan.

the colonel suggests Briony correct in *Atonement* – reveal an assessment of the country house text in terms of authenticity.

The response to this trend by Beauman, Litt, Stace, and McEwan has been to self-reflexively dramatise the work of writing in order to underline their cultural capital and negotiate their position in the literary marketplace. As Litt suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, 'polite realist tendencies are no longer enough'; the contemporary author must go beyond traditional realism and engage with the widespread self-conscious techniques in contemporary cultural forms. These country house texts are, like metafictive novels, in 'constant dialogue with [their] own conventions' and 'act in a sense of commentaries on their antecedents'.[64] Dramatising 'the boundary between fiction and criticism', these authors use authenticity to self-consciously negotiate the reception of their texts in a literary marketplace currently saturated by country house novels and television programmes.[65]

Staging Audience Awareness in *Rebecca's Tale*

In *Rebecca's Tale*, metaphors of display signal Beauman's anticipation of the reception of her novel as a sequel to a country house classic. Colonel Julyan, a character from Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1932) on which Beauman's novel is based, is the first narrative voice of the novel. When historian Terrence Grey appears in town to interview him about Rebecca, Julyan's prose transforms into a script to narrate the 'scene' of his visit.[66] His theatrical narrative mode foregrounds the element of fictional construction in his narrative:

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[64] Mark Currie, 'Introduction', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (Essex: Longman, 1995), pp. 1-20, (p. 1).

[65] Currie, p. 3.

[66] Sally Beauman, *Rebecca's Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 14 (hereafter '*Rebecca'*). Lucie Whitehouse's *The House at Midnight* [2008] (London: Bloomsbury, 2009, hereafter '*Midnight*') contains a similar theatrical motif. Jo feels herself to be 'on a bigger stage' in Lucas's family seat, where 'something about the scale of the place makes people act up' (*Midnight*, p. 155). The subjects in the painted ceiling form an audience for the house's inhabitants: 'I had the sense that the people up there were craning down to see what drama the house was cradling now' (*Midnight*, p. 158). Coupled with the house's feel of being a 'world-class art collection', it engenders in characters a feeling of to-be-looked-at-ness (*Midnight*, p. 23).

'no doubt I exaggerate (why shouldn't I indulge in a few fictions? Everyone else has)' (*Rebecca*, pp. 14-15). Julyan is aware of himself as a fictional character before a viewer's gaze and the script underlines his sense of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.[67] Julyan's self-conscious resentment of his fictional representation reflects Beauman's self-conscious anxiety over rewriting du Maurier's characters in her novel. Julyan regards storytelling as a distortion of reality which dooms the people represented 'to a curious twilit afterlife in which characters that vaguely resemble us eternally perform gestures that vaguely reflect things we actually did or said. It's a dumb show; it's a fairground mirror' (*Rebecca*, p. 16). His accusations of distortion underscore Beauman's anticipation of criticism for having adapted and appropriated du Maurier's much-loved novel: her novel enables this 'curious twilit afterlife' for du Maurier's characters.

Julyan's defence of his exaggerated tale – that 'everyone else' has indulged in such fictions – is a self-conscious nod to both Beauman and du Maurier, as well as other authors of fictions based on Rebecca. Having read various accounts of Rebecca's story, Julyan reflects Beauman's awareness of her novel as one of many publications in the so-called 'Rebecca industry':

> The story makes undeniably good "copy", as someone said to me recently. […] There have been at least two books devoted to the subject, both purporting to contain new and sensational information- and both of them are works of romantic fiction (in my view at least). (*Rebecca*, pp. 16, 13)

Beauman here implies an anxiety that her novel might be regarded as one of the 'copies' or 'romantic fiction[s]' based on Rebecca that Julyan denounces.[68] In fact, Beauman has paratextually insisted that her novel is not a sequel – 'I *loathe* sequels' – but a parallel story to

[67] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 6-18. This term was coined by Mulvey to describe the objectification of women in Hollywood cinema. I use it here to underline Julyan's awareness of himself as before a gaze which fetishises authenticity in the same way that the male gaze of Hollywood cinema fetishises women.

[68] Beauman overturns romance expectations, however, by inhibiting romance between her two young protagonists through Grey's homosexuality.

Rebecca, and responds to accusations of presumptuousness from readers by highlighting du Maurier's own debt to *Jane Eyre*.[69] In so doing, she shifts the classification of her text from a sequel to a novel versed in canonical predecessors to imply higher cultural capital. In the above passage, when Julyan claims to know of 'two books devoted to the subject' of Rebecca, Beauman is self-consciously referring to her novel and that of du Maurier. She thereby collapses the hierarchy of value between original classic and bestselling sequel and places herself on a level with du Maurier in terms of cultural value in suggesting that both have crafted fictional representations of the same reality. Beauman suggests her own novel is a fictional representation of a reality in which Rebecca and Manderley really existed. Her invention of Grey and his desire for an authentic account of Rebecca's tale therefore creates a fictional demand and self-conscious justification for her work: both Grey and Julyan verbalise the value of the authentic text in a marketplace saturated with romantic copies. As such, Beauman uses these characters to imply the value of her own text which contains an authenticity we have thus far been denied by du Maurier who neglected Rebecca's version of events. Casting *Rebecca* as an exercise in truth telling is a way of levelling the literary playing field between herself and du Maurier.

This self-reflexivity of *Rebecca's Tale*, then, figures Beauman's anticipation of the critical debate about the value of her text and its space in the literary market place as an appropriation of a canonical classic. Julyan's suggestion that *Rebecca* and *Rebecca's Tale* are romantic fictions, a label du Maurier herself strongly disputed, anticipates the critical presumption that Beauman's novel, as both a sequel to du Maurier's middlebrow classic and the latest work by an author regarded by literary critics as a writer of popular romance, is

[69] Sally Beauman, interview with James Naughtie on *BBC Radio 4 Book Club* (June 2003) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fcxrr> [accessed 6 June 2015]. In contrast to this disparagement of appropriation, Shields suggests that recent plagiarism laws have stigmatised this artistic technique.

inherently low in value.[70] Aligning her own critical disparagement with that of her canonical forerunner, Beauman suggests that this perception is mistaken. Beauman's novel is positioned in a hierarchy of literary value in which her reliance on a generic predecessor is judged as a less authentic fictional construction. Sequels are regarded as requiring less imagination; as readers we know that Beauman did not invent the novel's setting or some of its characters. If in the context of reality hunger readers value fictional construction in terms of the artisan labour involved, Beauman's use of ready-made characters, setting, and audience suggest a lack of work and therefore value. In the words of an *Amazon* reviewer, Beauman is perceived as 'merely piggybacking on the magnificence of du Maurier's imagination'.[71] In this context, her appropriation of *Rebecca* would (and does) remain critically undervalued, though Beauman has clearly attended to the minutiae of du Maurier's text in creatively reimagining a new story. In fact, she paratextually emphasises her 'meticulous' attention to detail: 'I didn't want to alter any of the facts as du Maurier gave them'.[72] Thus while Fox and Walters highlight their process of historical research through reference to real life, Beauman presents her engagement with *Rebecca* as an equally laborious process of research to address accusation of 'piggybacking' on the work of du Maurier.

Beauman's implicit anxiety towards critical reception is well founded. As Philip Hensher posits, 'the overt sequel is rarely something to admire. […] One picks up a sequel to *Rebecca* with a heavy heart'.[73] Indeed, in many reviews of the novel, critics admitted a

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[70] Christian House, 'Daphne du Maurier always said her novel *Rebecca* was a study in jealousy', *Telegraph* (17 August 2013) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10248724/Daphne-du-Maurier-always-said-her-novel-Rebecca-was-a-study-in-jealousy.html> [accessed 11 June 2015].

[71] Kindle Customer, 'A complex rich read by a skilled author', *Amazon* (30 August 2014) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/aw/cr/rRUWE3ZSF812A0> [accessed 11 June 2015]. For all this customer actually changed his or her mind having read the novel, this comment illustrates the preconception that Beauman's work is inferior to du Maurier's.

[72] Beauman, in interview with Naughtie.

[73] Philip Hensher, 'What Rebecca did next, if you care', *Observer* (23 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.features> [accessed 17 February 2015].

certain prejudice towards the 'faux sequel', with one commentator describing Beauman as 'kidnapp[ing]' du Maurier's characters 'in the irreproachable name of greed'.[74] The marketability of a sequel based on a bestselling classic is critically disparaged because it seems to demand less imagination, less artistry, and yet sells to a large, pre-established audience. Beauman's novel is therefore anticipated to be popular and consequently dismissed as unliterary. Linda Grant suggests that Beauman faces critical prejudice as a result of her novels' popular marketing strategies:

> It is worth wondering what might have happened to Sally Beauman's subsequent career as a writer if, when she published her first novel *Destiny* in 1987, her publisher had been daring enough to risk the airport sales and a guaranteed place on the bestseller list by not putting any gold embossing on the cover. But the gilt continued and Beauman was confined to a genre which, unlike crime or science fiction or thrillers, has never been cool – the despised category of romance. And perversely, her status as a serious writer is not helped by the fact that once you start reading a Beauman novel, you cannot put it down, as a lost bank holiday weekend with her sixth book, *Rebecca's Tale*, attests.[75]

Grant here suggests that marketing Beauman's novels as popular fiction has caused her writing to be undervalued (later in the review Grant compares her favourably with Philip Roth). This seems to be true of *Rebecca's Tale* which, though it is officially approved by the du Maurier estate, bears no visible marker of this claim to authenticity that grants it higher cultural value than the other novelistic responses to classic forerunners, such as the many responses to *Pride and Prejudice*.[76] Critics have therefore only begrudgingly conceded that they enjoyed *Rebecca's Tale*. Hensher, for example, admitted, 'though one's expectations here were very low, it is a great deal better than it might have been; solidly put together and

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[74] Laura Shaprio, 'Manderley Confidential', *New York Times* (14 October 2001) <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/14/books/manderley-confidential.html>[accessed 17 February 2015].

[75] Linda Grant, 'The Other Woman', *Guardian* (15 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/15/fiction.reviews> [accessed 20 January 2014].

[76] Examples include Emma Tennant's *Pemberley* (1993) and *An Unequal Marriage* (1994), Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2011), and Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013).

confidently at ease with the manners of the upper classes between the wars'.[77] Beauman's populism, then, has somewhat inhibited her perception as a serious author; her novels, despite evidence to the contrary in *Rebecca's Tale* in particular, are classified (and critically disparaged) as popular romance fiction. Anticipating this critical suspicion, Beauman employs self-conscious techniques to foreground her labour as an author through her knowledge of *Rebecca* and the literary marketplace.

In content and reception, then, *Rebecca's Tale* blurs the distinctions between popular and serious literature, destabilising hierarchies of cultural value. For all *Rebecca's Tale* is a popular international bestseller, it possesses the literary self-consciousness Head associates with 'serious literature', collapsing the boundary between these classifications. This conflicting combination of highbrow and popular elements is mirrored in the novel's cover which includes reviews from popular sources such as the *Daily Mail* and Joanna Trollope, as well as highbrow sources such as *The Times* and Elaine Showalter. All of these quotations, however, are from women, which suggests that the novel is appealing to female readers and consequently underlines Beauman's perception as a romantic author. Marketed as a bestseller, Beauman's text contains the self-consciousness contemporary readers have come to associate with the country house text in response to reality hunger's valorisation of authenticity. In the next section, I will explore how Litt self-consciously negotiates the relationship between popular romance and highbrow experiment in *Finding Myself*.

Exposing the Mechanisms of Cultural Value in *Finding Myself*

Litt takes Beauman's self-conscious approach to cultural value a step further in his experimental novel, *Finding Myself*, which is presented in the form of a typed manuscript by chick-lit author, Victoria, with handwritten amendments from her editor, Simona. Foregrounding his knowledge of the mechanisms of value in the literary marketplace through

[77] Hensher.

this experimental form, Litt acknowledges the process by which Beauman and other contemporary English country house authors are categorised (and dismissed) as chick-lit or what Jeanette Winterson refers to as 'printed television' (see General Introduction).[78] He distances his own country house novel from these popular genres through metafiction and the satirical depiction of his implied author and implied editor. Victoria's manuscript documents a two-week stay at a country house to which she invites her family and friends on the understanding that she will novelise the events. Agreeing to this plan, the characters in the novel are, as in *Rebecca's Tale*, aware of themselves as players, creating self-reflexivity.

The novel continually foregrounds the work of writing by dramatising the process of authorial construction through Victoria's writing and Simona's editorial comments and alterations. The manuscript includes many notes from Victoria to herself, including reminders to expand or cut certain sections, emphasising that it is a work-in-progress: 'I shall have to spend months sorting it out into an acceptable order, and then fictionalising it. It's such a relief to know that no-one will ever read these particular words'.[79] Through his implied author, Litt self-reflexively underscores the work that goes into writing a novel. As such, the novel represents what Alastair Fowler refers to as a poioumenon or work-in-progress novel in which 'at least one narrator or character is engaged in writing' and 'inset texts, or prominent accounts of books and papers […] remind us that what we are reading is itself a work of fiction, [providing] occasions for treating a principal theme of the genre: the relation of art to life'.[80] As Fowler suggests, the poioumenon's frequent references to the process of composition make another feature almost inevitable: 'self-conscious highlighting

[78] Jeanette Winterson, 'Ignore the Booker brouhaha. Readability is no test for literature', *Guardian* (18 October 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/18/booker-prize-readability-test-literature> [accessed 8 June 2015].

[79] Toby Litt, *Finding Myself* [2003] (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 167 (hereafter '*Finding*').

[80] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 123-4.

of the style'.[81] The work-in-progress form of *Finding Myself* not only showcases the work of writing but also allows Litt to write in dialogue with the conventions of the country house novel and the systems of value surrounding the genre in the literary marketplace.

Litt's novel exposes the process of publishing as shrewdly navigating and contributing to a reductive conception of readership and cultural value. The disparity between what Victoria writes and what Simona will allow to be published reveals a self-conscious negotiation of the literary marketplace in which Victoria's readers are often cast as unintellectual. In her Editor's Note, Simona claims 'we have made one or two very slight cuts to the text – mainly from a desire to avoid unnecessary repetition. Apart from that, what you have just read […] is exactly what Victoria herself wrote' (*Finding*, p. 386). As Litt's experimental form reveals, this is misleading; Simona has made extensive revisions to the manuscript, cutting libellous material or anything that presents her and her husband unfavourably, and adding passages while 'tr[ying] to imitate [Victoria's] style' (*Finding*, p. 31; see figure 9). What is more, the pronoun 'we' falsely suggests that she was not wholly responsible for these alterations. Thus what will be published in Victoria's name is actually largely Simona's construction, a tension depicted on the novel's title page on which Simona has altered the title of Victoria's novel and has posted a note claiming that she hopes Victoria 'can live with' the changes she has made (figure 10). Simona's voice threatens to overpower that of Victoria, not only through her cuts and additions, but also through her Editor's Note and her letter of response solicited from all participants, which far exceeds the allotted word count. In fact, in her response, we learn that Simona has had a bigger influence on the manuscript than Victoria realised, as she has been hacking into Victoria's laptop every day to check on the progress of her novel, resulting in some of her work being lost. Simona has also engineered many of the events at the house by leaking Victoria's synopsis to the guests and

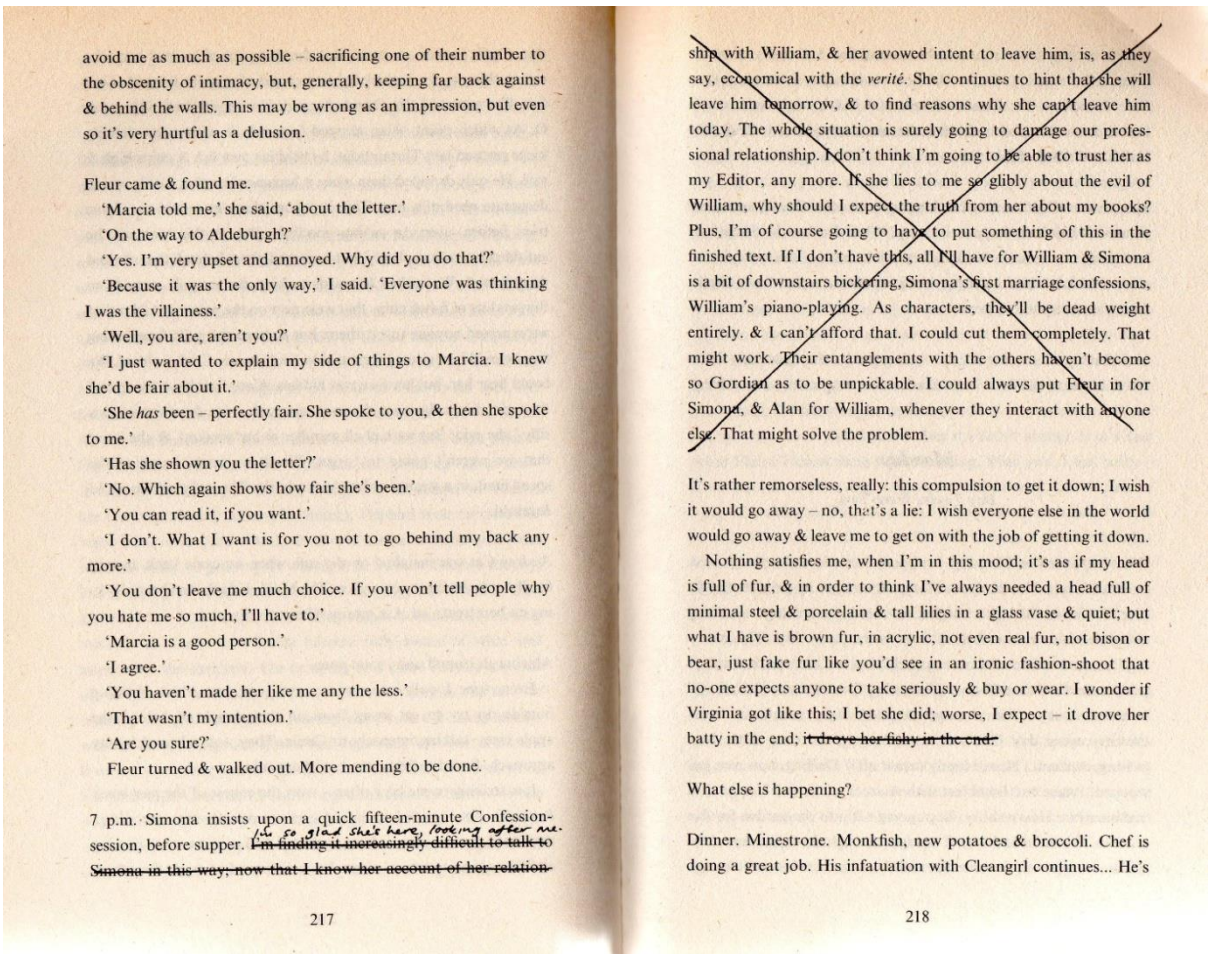
[81] Fowler, p. 124. As such, it adds further evidence to my argument that metafiction is not an exclusively postmodern trope, as Waugh has suggested. As Fowler highlights, the poioumenon includes texts dating back as far as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759).

staging 'rehearsals' and a 'play' for her benefit (*Finding*, p. 412). *Finding Myself*, then, dramatises the negotiation of the cultural value of the contemporary English country house novel through the battle between Victoria's authorial intentions and Simona's commercial ambitions.

In *Finding Myself*, Litt explores the conventions of the country house genre and its links with popular forms to expose the mechanisms through which writers, readers, and the cultural sector more generally construct ideas of value. The novel's self-reflexive cover features an image of the book with a floral cover lying on a beach towel, evoking ideas of the escapist chick-lit bought in airports for light holiday reading. This mode of reading is further implied through the novel's links with reality television, conjuring the readability of 'printed television'. Unbeknown to most of her guests, Victoria has hidden cameras installed at the house, leading to media coverage dubbing her 'Big Sister' (*Finding*, p. 320). In fact, the publication of Litt's novel coincided with the fourth series of *Big Brother*, positioning the novel within a web of references to reality television, a form that has been regarded as lacking cultural value.[82] As Boyle suggests, in a culture fascinated by reality television, contemporary readers are 'tempted more into real voyeurism than real life'.[83] The voyeurism created through Victoria's use of hidden cameras and the novel's associations with the media underline Litt's awareness of both his readers and the cultural sphere in which his own work will be received. As the novel's title suggests, the text is finding itself amongst popular forms and literary traditions in a cultural sphere in which hierarchies of value are increasingly fluid.

[82] In 2004, for example, John Humphrys claimed reality television was 'seedy, cynical and harmful' to society, referring to *Big Brother* specifically as 'damaging' (Darren Waters, 'BBC's Humphrys slates reality TV', *BBC News Online* (28 August 2004) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3602472.stm.> [accessed 12 June 2015].

[83] Boyle, p. 61.



avoid me as much as possible – sacrificing one of their number to the obscenity of intimacy, but, generally, keeping far back against & behind the walls. This may be wrong as an impression, but even so it's very hurtful as a delusion.

Fleur came & found me.

'Marcia told me,' she said, 'about the letter.'

'On the way to Aldeburgh?'

'Yes. I'm very upset and annoyed. Why did you do that?'

'Because it was the only way,' I said. 'Everyone was thinking I was the villainess.'

'Well, you are, aren't you?'

'I just wanted to explain my side of things to Marcia. I knew she'd be fair about it.'

'She *has* been – perfectly fair. She spoke to you, & then she spoke to me.'

'Has she shown you the letter?'

'No. Which again shows how fair she's been.'

'You can read it, if you want.'

'I don't. What I want is for you not to go behind my back any more.'

'You don't leave me much choice. If you won't tell people why you hate me so much, I'll have to.'

'Marcia is a good person.'

'I agree.'

'You haven't made her like me any the less.'

'That wasn't my intention.'

'Are you sure?'

Fleur turned & walked out. More mending to be done.

7 p.m. Simona insists upon a quick fifteen-minute Confession-session, before supper. I'm so glad she's here, looking after me. ~~I'm finding it increasingly difficult to talk to Simona in this way; now that I know her account of her relation-~~

217

ship with William, & her avowed intent to leave him, is, as they say, economical with the *verité*. She continues to hint that she will leave him tomorrow, & to find reasons why she can't leave him today. The whole situation is surely going to damage our professional relationship. I don't think I'm going to be able to trust her as my Editor, any more. If she lies to me so glibly about the evil of William, why should I expect the truth from her about my books? Plus, I'm of course going to have to put something of this in the finished text. If I don't have this, all I'll have for William & Simona is a bit of downstairs bickering, Simona's first marriage confessions, William's piano-playing. As characters, they'll be dead weight entirely. & I can't afford that. I could cut them completely. That might work. Their entanglements with the others haven't become so Gordian as to be unpickable. I could always put Fleur in for Simona, & Alan for William, whenever they interact with anyone else. That might solve the problem.

It's rather remorseless, really: this compulsion to get it down; I wish it would go away – no, that's a lie: I wish everyone else in the world would go away & leave me to get on with the job of getting it down.

Nothing satisfies me, when I'm in this mood; it's as if my head is full of fur, & in order to think I've always needed a head full of minimal steel & porcelain & tall lilies in a glass vase & quiet; but what I have is brown fur, in acrylic, not even real fur, not bison or bear, just fake fur like you'd see in an ironic fashion-shoot that no-one expects anyone to take seriously & buy or wear. I wonder if Virginia got like this; I bet she did; worse, I expect – it drove her batty in the end; ~~it drove her fishy in the end.~~

What else is happening?

Dinner. Minestrone. Monkfish, new potatoes & broccoli. Chef is doing a great job. His infatuation with Cleangirl continues... He's

218

Figure 9: Power dynamics in *Finding Myself*

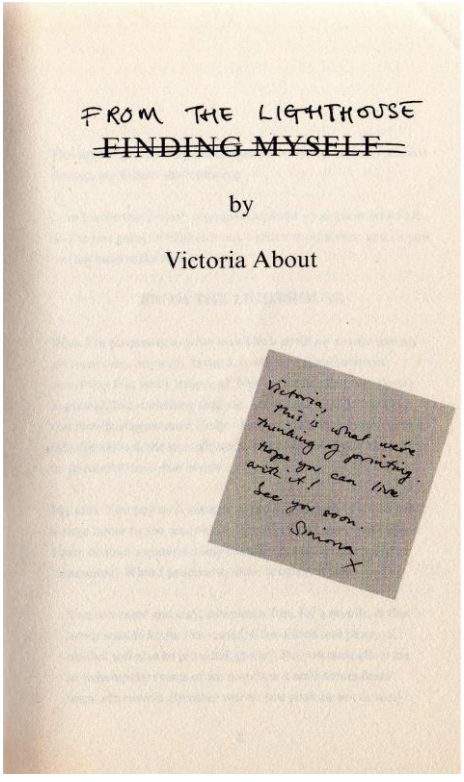


Figure 10: A novel within a novel

Finding Myself parodies the perception of the English country house novel as a popular and vacuous form. Like country house novelists Fox and Walters, Litt's implied author bases her fiction on real life events, settings, and people. This approach, mocked by Litt (and Stace), implies that Victoria lacks talent and imagination as an author. Her unimaginative romantic clichés are a key source of humour in the novel: she describes a former lover as having 'bedded me like tulip bulbs in November – deeply and at regularly spaced intervals' (*Finding*, p. 66). Litt underlines Victoria's unoriginality when she criticises popular romance novels on account of their all having 'the same last line. "And when he took her in his masterful arms, she knew that she would be safe for ever with him to hold her, in his masterful arms, and keep her safe."' Approx', and promptly uses the same line to describe her own relationship: 'After this, I went and found X [her boyfriend who has retrospectively withdrawn consent for his identity to be revealed]; with a bit of encouragement, he masterfully held me in his masterful arms' (*Finding*, p. 58). Like Beauman, Victoria attempts to distance herself from the romance genre with which she is associated in the literary marketplace in order to assert the cultural capital of her text. However, Litt suggests that Victoria's formulaic approach to novel writing inhibits her creativity so that her book becomes a replica of countless romantic novels rather than a work of her own original construction. This devaluing of the formulaic, of course, is also at play in the critical reception of *Rebecca's Tale* as a reworking of a classic novel. Litt self-consciously stresses the cultural value of the proficient writer who produces characters, settings, and plots through the powers of imagination and creativity – like him. He thereby distances his own novel from the romance category into which so many country house novels are placed by creating a satirical and metafictive narrative frame that critiques popular tropes.

Thus Litt satirises Victoria's novel through the key characteristics Radway identifies as popular – repetition, 'cliché, simple vocabulary, standard syntax, and the most common

techniques associated with the nineteenth-century realist novel'.[84] Rather than relying on her imagination, or indeed real events, Victoria attempts to force her work into a generic mould that limits creativity:

> The house was looking most splendidly something something, that fine summer day – […] (I think an opening passage like this will probably be necessary – though I don't really feel like doing it right this moment.) I think there was birdsong audible; not 100% certain but I'd better put some in anyway – maybe some bumblebees and butterflies, too (or would that be overdoing it?) (*Finding*, p. 56).

This passage underlines the inauthenticity and lack of imagination in Victoria's fictional construction as an unfinished, heavy-handed attempt to write what she thinks is expected of her as a country house novelist, rather than engaging with what she is confronted with. Her predicted synopsis at the beginning of the novel further underlines the disparity between her romance formula and real life. For all Victoria pitches to her editor the idea of novelising '[n]ot something that has already happened but something that will - because I make it', the romantic storylines she tries to orchestrate fail to occur (*Finding*, p. 3). Litt aligns Victoria's failure to puppeteer her friends with her failure to invent her own storylines. Relying on real life as source material, Victoria's approach to novel writing is implicitly lazy, an implication confirmed in her repeated promises to come back to certain sections for embellishment later: 'I don't really feel like doing it right this moment' (*Finding*, p. 56). Litt's novel, then, criticises authors like Fox and Walters who rely on real life rather than imagination for their fiction. Victoria's reality-television approach to the novel is presented as the equivalent of Beauman's reworking of *Rebecca* in that it is perceived to involve little imagination and 'piggy-backs' on the success of popular forerunners.

Both Victoria and Simona are highly conscious of literary reception and the country house genre of the novel they are producing. Victoria self-consciously reflects on her position within the literary marketplace thus:

[84] Radway, p. 189.

> I write at the very upper end of what has sometimes recently been called "chick fic". My favourite English writers are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James. My favourite writers, though, are all French: Laclos, Flaubert, Sagan. My private life was, up until the success of *Well-Hung*, exactly that: mine, private and really a life. I did, for a while, date an actor. We all make mistakes. Since, then, I have been interviewed over 200 times but I have never written a confessional newspaper column. I have been on Woman's Hour but I have never won a literary prize. (I'm not bitter.) (Am.) (Am not.) (Am.) (Am not.) (*Am*.) (*Finding*, p. 18).

Victoria's description of her authorial persona combines popular and highbrow elements. She writes 'chick fic' which, she claims, is the 'upper end' of the cultural scale, although her previous title, *Well-Hung*, suggests otherwise. Her favourite authors are all highbrow, canonical figures, but her writing style and assessment of her cultural value in terms of interviews, boyfriends, and Woman's Hour suggests that her own work is closer to popular romance, underlined by her lack of literary awards. Victoria's favourite English authors, notably, have all written country house novels, suggesting that Victoria views the country house genre as a potential vehicle for the critical acclaim she craves.

Indeed, Victoria is particularly conscious of the critical reception of her text as a country house novel, recognising the need to bring a new slant to a form that has exhausted critical acclaim: 'I don't want romance above and below stairs. It's been done to death, and I don't want to be caught interfering with the corpse' (*Finding*, pp. 24-5). Yet she struggles to navigate the hierarchy of country house novel subgenres: 'There was always a threat looming that this would turn into either a country-house farce or a country-house murder mystery – and now it seems to have done the unlikely, becoming *both*' (*Finding*, p. 123, original emphasis). Reflecting on the disparity between her predicted synopsis and reality, Victoria is conscious of her inability to construct the kind of novel she had planned, complaining, 'Oh no, it's doing something I really didn't want – turning into country-house gothic' (*Finding*, p. 166). Litt thus reflects the fluidity of the country house genre and its cultural value, presenting the country house novel as one which includes a wide range of components that cannot be easily classified. As such, *Finding Myself* seems far removed from the manifesto of

New Puritanism which eschewed experiment, poetic licence, and distanced itself from high literature. Victoria's preoccupation with the reception of her text as a country house novel reflects the central debate of the novel regarding the genre's cultural value while presenting the idea of writing for acclaim as inherently bad writing.

Litt's novel raises questions about classifying texts into distinct categories of value as a marketing ploy. His depiction of Victoria's editor, Simona, as a shrewd publicist and cut-throat profiteer invites the reader to question the implications of her modifications to Victoria's text in the pursuit of maintaining generic boundaries and removing any ambiguity about the novel's cultural value. Simona is preoccupied with conforming to readerly expectations: 'your readers are going to want', 'Don't you think your readers would like […]?' (*Finding*, pp. 7, 31). Her attempts to pander to a mass market through a popular form are insulting to not only Victoria but her readers. When she removes Victoria's description of the house as an 'Austenesque, Jamesian, a Woolflike space' on account of its being '[p]retentious beyond belief', a phrase she uses beside many subsequent cuts, she implies that high cultural references are beyond both Victoria and the implied reader (*Finding*, p. 108). Indeed, she cuts most of Victoria's social reflections, particularly regarding gender, mocking her attempts to transcend the popular romance formula with political considerations: 'Hello Germaine – and goodbye' (*Finding*, pp. 61, 88-9). When Victoria considers selling a section of her novel to the *Guardian* women's page, Simona notes that 'we got a far better offer from the *News of the World'* (*Finding*, p. 167). Marketing the novel through a tabloid rather than a broadsheet suggests that Simona is consciously aiming the novel at popular readers looking for sensational entertainment rather than intellectual stimulation. In fact, in her written response to the novel, Simona writes of Victoria's appearances on 'chatshows and the like' and celebrates that the author is 'now famous': 'She has joined that very rare group of authors who have actually managed to enter the public consciousness' (*Finding*, p. 413). Simona thus

exposes the mechanisms of the country house setting's recent drop in cultural value through its mounting populism and links with entertainment.

Through Simona, Litt critiques the power of the publishing industry in policing generic boundaries that literary texts intrinsically evade. The violence of the description of her having 'cut [paragraphs] out, with scissors' suggests her cut-throat attitude to the literary marketplace (*Finding*, p. 36). Making Simona condescending and self-interested, Litt invites the reader to distrust her reductive approach to the country house novel. Simona is presented as unapologetically commercial in her dealings with Victoria's novel. Expressing her lack of sympathy for the author's tarnished relationships and her resistance to the publication of the novel following the discovery of the hidden cameras, Simona claims that she was 'completely naïve to think that one can make this leap [into fame] without being distorted in the process. […] She's enjoying her new role [as a cartoon villainess]' (*Finding*, p. 414). The media's distortion of Victoria is here paralleled with Simona's distortion of her manuscript, making both commercial forces untrustworthy. In fact, describing the price Victoria paid for her fame as a 'Faustian pact', Simona claims to 'fancy myself as her Mephistopheles' (*Finding*, p. 414). The Faustian reference is a distinctly highbrow one, suggesting that Simona's authority in deciding the cultural value of Victoria's text arises from her own cultural capital and ability to decipher between popular and highbrow texts. Mephistopheles is trapped in hell serving the Devil which, in this case, Litt equates with the publishing industry. Deriving from the Hebrew *mephitz*, meaning 'destroyer', and *tophel*, meaning 'liar', her allusion underscores her role in corrupting Victoria's authorship: for all the novel will be marketed as Victoria's, it might be more accurately described as Simona's.[85] Litt therefore contrasts the authenticity of Victoria's unguarded recordings and the editions Simona makes in the name of generic

[85] Douglas Harper, 'Mephistopheles', *Etymonline* <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Mephistopheles> [accessed 19 August 2015].

specificity, suggesting that the literary marketplace sacrifices authentic fictional construction in the name of simplistic classification.

Litt's novel therefore critiques traditional hierarchies of cultural value, exposing an increasingly commercial book trade in which publishing houses (symbolised by Simona) are growing more powerful and reductively classifying readers as either popular or highbrow. As such, Litt destabilises the distinctions between popular, middlebrow, and highbrow literature, particularly in the country house novel. Indeed, the experimental form of *Finding Myself* undermines the 'straightforward manner' of reading that Radway defines as popular; Simona's notes and cuts, and Victoria's gaps, create the 'disorienting […] organization' associated with highbrow literature.[86] Litt combines conventions from country house novels across the cultural spectrum, placing popular romance discourse alongside highbrow experimentalism, asking readers to re-evaluate their ideas about the cultural value of the country house text and its respective authors and readers.

Foregrounding the Skill of Realism in *Misfortune*

In the remainder of this chapter, I will be analysing how Stace and McEwan reveal the work of writing by metafictively dramatising the labour of their respective implied authors. David Lodge suggests that foregrounding the act of authorship in contemporary fiction is 'a defensive response […] to the questioning of the idea of the author and of the mimetic function of fiction by modern critical theory'.[87] While agreeing with Lodge to an extent, I interpret the foregrounding of authorship in these texts not as a reaction to questions about 'the idea of the author' but rather to the country house genre's growing populism and resultant loss of critical esteem outlined in the General Introduction. Thus just as the foregrounding of authorship in heritage films has been read as borrowing 'prestige' from a 'higher' cultural

[86] Radway, p. 191.

[87] David Lodge, 'The novel now', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Currie, pp. 145-160, (p. 155).

form, I suggest that these novels underline the process of authorial construction in order to present writing as a laborious process of research and editing.[88] Like Fox and Walters, McEwan and Stace exhibit a consciousness of a literary marketplace that evaluates texts in terms of the authenticity of fictional construction and respond by paratextually and intratextually making visible the work of writing. They promote the value of their texts by deconstructing their realist verisimilitude with metafictive devices in order to highlight their proficiency in fictional construction. As the following close readings reveal, Stace and McEwan foreground the labour and skill of authorship and suggest the cultural capital of their respective novels.

Stace uses theatrical metaphors in *Misfortune* to demonstrate the self-consciousness of his implied author. In presenting the country house as a theatre, he dramatises his awareness of the reader and their expectations of authenticity. Love Hall becomes known as Playfield House, a name which underlines his presentation of the country house setting as a theatre and its characters as actors before an audience. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, the reader is invited to look into Love Hall as one would a dollhouse, an image which underlines the puppeteering involved in narration.[89] Stace's narrator, Rose Loveall, is struggling with his gender identity as a man raised as female. He describes the process of adopting a male persona for the sake of his family's reputation as 'dress[ing] the part' and 'handl[ing] the props' (*Misfortune*, pp. 237, 240). This theatrical imagery recurs throughout the novel. Rose 'rehearse[s]' the role of a man until it convinces his extended family: 'I felt triumphant, just as the man who plays the pantomime dame feels when his debut entrance brings down the house. I had finally found a part in the drama that I was born to play' (*Misfortune*, pp. 242, 255). Stace's theatrical metaphors pun on the 'house' as a space of fiction and spectatorship.

[88] John Caughie, 'Small Pleasures: Adaptation and the Past in British Film and Television', *Ilha Do Desterro*, 2 (2000), 27-50, (p. 29).

[89] Wesley Stace, *Misfortune* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 45 (hereafter '*Misfortune*').

Rose's conflicting gender roles are mapped on to Love Hall, a space one letter short of his own name:

> I tried to create a consistent character for every floor of Love Hall. […] I led a two-tiered existence now. Upstairs, excepting the luxury of my own chamber, where I did as I pleased, I was [the male] Lord Rose Loveall. […] Beneath, I was plain old [female] Rose but I descended the stairs less and less often (*Misfortune*, pp. 257, 242).

Stace presents Love Hall as a self-conscious space of contrivance in which the novel's characters are aware of themselves as playing fictional parts for the benefit of an audience (Rose only adopts his male persona to please social expectations). Stace's theatrical metaphors simultaneously underline Rose's awareness of society's expectations regarding gender roles, and his own awareness of the reader's expectations regarding the genre's authentic mode of fictional construction. His implied author, acting the role expected of him as a country house heir, embodies Stace's own peformativity in answering the demands for authenticity from country house readers.

Through this self-conscious mode of narration, Stace draws attention to his powers of fictional construction. The first section of the novel, 'Anonymous', in which Lord Geoffroy discovers Rose as an abandoned baby and returns home with him to Love Hall, is narrated by a third-person, 'old-fashioned narrator, the All-Seeing One – or let's call him God' (*Misfortune*, p. 77). The rest of the novel is related in the first person by Rose, who recounts his battle with gender identity and the quest to save Love Hall from the evil Lovealls in order to preserve it for the community. When this shift of narrative voice occurs between the two sections, Rose reveals himself as both narrators: 'It was I who made up the first line of this confession, but when I read it to myself in His voice (deep, echoing) even I believed it. Print, too, is very persuasive' (*Misfortune*, p. 77). Here Stace self-reflexively highlights the process of authoring an authentic, believable narrative:

> If I had written the foregoing part in my own voice, I would have been covering, waiting for what I knew and making up the rest […] This would have been rendered less persuasive by a preponderance of the seasickening word *probably*, not to mention the cowardly limitations of *slightly* […]. I would have induced in

> you the queasy feeling that I was backpedalling from definitive statement […]. My intention was to convey you to this point with the minimum of fuss, to have you trust in what you were reading (*Misfortune*, pp. 77-8).

Rose deconstructs his verisimilitude to reveal that the implied reader's trust in his narrative authority is the result of his vocabulary and tone – in other words, Stace's writing. The awareness of the implied reader and ability to manipulate his or her response is brought to the fore in this focus on literary technique. Thus Stace's writing and, more specifically, the authenticity of his fictional construction, is brought to the reader's attention. Continuously reminding the reader that the novel is a product of authorial labour suggests Stace's awareness of the cultural value of authentic fictional construction.

In the guidebook appendixed to the end of the novel, Stace mocks the thirst for authenticity in the contemporary English country house novel. 'Excerpts from: A GUIDEBOOK TO LOVE HALL, PLAYFIELD', apparently published in 2000 by The Love Hall Trust and The English Heritage Committee, highlights key artefacts in Stace's fictional setting (*Misfortune*, p. 521). However, the guidebook is entirely fictional – there is no Love Hall Trust nor a Love Hall maintained by The English Heritage Committee (a fictional variant of English Heritage). Stace's guidebook mocks the attempt by contemporary authors like Fox and Walters to authenticate realist fictional constructions with references to real-life counterparts. Poking fun at the susceptibility of the reader in associating realism with reality, the guidebook showcases Stace's ability to construct a believable narrative and realistic setting to the extent that the reader is invited to think of them as real. Of course, as chapter one has illustrated, the guidebook is not Stace's only peritextual nod to reality hunger: the Loveall family tree at the beginning of the novel represents another metafictive parody of the attempt to imply cultural capital by substantiating fictional construction with paratextual historical resources. The tree is parodic in its presentation as a historical document: it bears the Loveall crest, complete with Latin motto, and is written in an archaic-looking font that resembles old calligraphy, the handwritten element lending yet more parodic authenticity to

the design (see figure 11). Stace's metafictive devices, then, playfully mock both the readers of contemporary English country house novels who valorise authenticity even in fictional forms and the country house authors who bow to this demand through their paratextual parallels with real-life equivalents.

Figure 11: The Loveall family crest in *Misfortune*

The Cultural Value of Realism in *Atonement*

Like *Misfortune*, *Atonement* is a novel that foregrounds the process of authorship. It is a novel about storytelling, focalised through Briony, who is both a character and the implied author. Entitled 'London, 1999,' the metafictive denouement which reveals Briony as the implied author is narrated in the first person and details her process of research in the Imperial War Museum library.[90] Like Stace's theatrical house, McEwan maps fictional construction on to his novel's setting with its 'sham' banisters and 'artificial island in an artificial lake' (*Atonement*, pp. 102, 163). It is in the country house, where the first part of the novel is set, that Briony graduates from the childish scripts she writes at the beginning of the novel and discovers the ambivalent power of storytelling. Her overactive imagination causes her to invent false testimony that sees her sister's lover, Robbie, wrongly convicted of raping their cousin, Lola. Returning to the country house as a pensioner, Briony's denouement contains the shocking revelation that, contrary to the novel's plot, the lovers – Cecilia and Robbie – did

[90] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* [2001] (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 351-373 (hereafter '*Atonement*').

not make peace with Briony after all, nor even survive the war to fulfil the romantic hopes her storytelling inhibited in real life. McEwan's 'sham' country house, therefore, as a false reconstruction, reflects Briony's attempts to rewrite history and atone for her crime by inventing a fictional alternative in which the lovers 'survive and flourish' (*Atonement*, p. 371).

As Briony reflects on the process of writing *Atonement*, McEwan foregrounds the laborious process of research involved in writing a novel, particularly one with a historical setting. Briony's account of correcting tiny details in the pursuit of historical authenticity signals the cultural value of McEwan's novel as a work produced through hours of delicate artisan labour. Following the advice of a retired colonel and amateur historian, for example, Briony alters the phrase 'on the double' to 'at the double', changes her RAF soldier's beret to a forage cap, and corrects 'a single thousand-ton bomb' to 'a single thousand-pound bomb' (*Atonement*, p. 359). The metafictive denouement thus destabilises the distinction between Briony's work and that of McEwan. Briony, for example, promises to thank the museum in her acknowledgements, a promise McEwan fulfils in his, so that we are left wondering how far the novel's implied author can be distinguished from its real one. This final uncertainty is ironic given Briony's penchant for a tidy finish. Having reached the end of the writing process, 'the drafts are in order and dated, the photocopied sources labelled, the borrowed books ready for return, and everything is in the right box file. I've always liked to make a tidy finish' (*Atonement*, p. 353). McEwan equates Briony's approach to research with her approach to writing in which she invents a tidy happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia. Tidying – and Briony's version of it is particularly labour intensive – therefore becomes a metaphor for authorship and the process of representing real life in the realist novel. For instance, Briony has concentrated her experience of working in three different hospitals into one fictional setting for the sake of concision, '[a] convenient distortion, and the least of my offences against veracity' (*Atonement*, p. 356). Reflecting on her ironic pleasure in correcting tiny inaccuracies to realist ends, Briony admits, '[i]f I really cared so much about facts, I

should have written a different kind of book' (*Atonement*, p. 360). The distinction between reality and realism is particularly pertinent in Briony's novel because she faces litigation for refusing to disguise 'the exact circumstances' of her crime in her 'forensic memoir' which implicates Lola and her rapist, Paul Marshall, in Robbie's wrongful conviction (*Atonement*, p. 369).

McEwan's metafictive denouement has prompted mixed reactions from readers. One *Good Reads* reviewer, for example, laments of the novel, 'It's beautiful, every word of it is gorgeous, but it's as if the author spends all this time painstakingly crafting a really detailed, intricate vessel for you […] and then just before your journey's over he snatches it out from under you & you sink'.[91] The 'detailed, intricate vessel' is a metaphor for the verisimilitude McEwan crafts in the first three sections of the novel before Briony reveals the happy ending and, indeed, the entirety of the narrative, as her own fictional construction. McEwan's metafictive twist therefore disappoints some readers who have emotionally invested in the novel thus far. An *Amazon* reviewer describes the text as 'a purposeful attempt to trick the reader for the sake of being "literary"'.[92] The same reviewer complains that McEwan's style is too self-conscious to enjoy:

> the writer's presence is continuously brought to the reader's attention due to the over-the-top descriptions. […] I always find the 'literary' style ineffective, because it is so concerned with being 'literature' that it fails as writing. The world created is always superficial and the reader skates on the surface of it, because it's more about the writer trying to demonstrate his cleverness than about the truth of the story. […] All very clever and intellectual, but the whole novel has a kind of deceit to it.[93]

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[91] Angi Machos, 'Atonement', *Good Reads* (February 11 2008) <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/14151530?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1> [accessed 11 June 2015].

[92] Kublai, 'Trying to be literary', *Amazon* (15 February 2014) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Atonement-Ian-McEwan/dp/B007YTF4SS/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1423579983&sr=8-6&keywords=atonement+ian+mcewan> [accessed 17 February 2015].

[93] Kublai.

This reviewer highlights a tension between McEwan's authentic realist narrative and metafictive devices which reveals it as a fictional construction. He or she therefore takes issue with the self-consciousness of McEwan's 'literary' style as inauthentic – a 'deceit' – because it foregrounds writing skill at the expense, in this reader's opinion, of reader satisfaction and a happy ending. Thus whether his self-reflexive approach is admired or criticised, McEwan's novel is regarded as 'literary' because it reminds the reader of his skill as a writer.

As the above reviews highlight, McEwan's novel, and indeed Briony's, also represent a second dimension to the cultural value of authenticity aside from the skill of accurately reproducing period details through research. The ability to construct a realist novel in which the reader is emotionally invested requires the author to create authentic characters through empathy. The cultural value of authentic fictional construction, then, also arises from the author's ethical responsibility to see the world from another's point of view. McEwan depicts the value of authentic characterisation through Briony's literary and moral development from Modernist disengagement to realist responsibility. Having submitted an early draft of the novel entitled *Two Figures by a Fountain* to *Horizon* in Bloomsbury, Briony receives a letter from 'CC' (presumably Cyril Connolly) criticising it for owing 'a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf' (*Atonement*, p. 312). Although the Modernist approach 'allows a writer to show his gifts', CC writes, it also suggests a degree of distance from socio-political issues (*Atonement*, p. 312). Thus in her covering letter Briony feels the need to apologise 'for not writing about the war' (*Atonement*, p. 314). For all CC purports that artists are 'wise and right to ignore it' and 'use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels', Briony's emotional development is actually signalled by her disagreement with his view of the artist as 'politically impotent' (*Atonement*, pp. 314-5).

McEwan establishes a tension between literary value (Modernism being notoriously highbrow) and social value (realism commonly examining social dynamics). Writing the

novel in a realist mode constitutes Briony's atonement as, in redrafting the novel, she assesses the causes and effects of her crime in minute detail. The first half of the novel conveys the complex class prejudice and childish ambition that contributed to her false testimony, while the second – partly narrated by Robbie during his time as a soldier in France – reveals her mature recognition of the implications of her actions. Thus CC's letter, the agent of Briony's shift from Modernism to realism, notably arrives after the emotional climax of the third section of the novel in which, after much resistance, Briony indulges the dying soldier she is nursing in his delusion that she is his fiancée. Briony's literary skills, then, are not those of modernist distance, but of constructing an authentic realist world to fulfil an ethical responsibility. The extent of her literary and moral evolution is underlined by the cyclical structure of the novel. Returning to the country house in which the first section was set (now a hotel), Briony's grandchildren perform the play she wrote as a child at the beginning of the novel. As the play begins, Briony is ashamed of the 'busy, priggish, conceited little girl' with 'ridiculous vanity' that wrote it (*Atonement*, p. 367). Underlining the extent of her growth as a writer, Briony reflects, 'I knew the words were mine, but I barely remembered them', and later explains to the audience that her own attempt to stage the play had failed because 'halfway through I had decided to become a novelist' (*Atonement*, pp. 367, 369). In fact, her attempt to stage the play failed because of her inability to empathise with her cousins who, in the midst of their parents' divorce, are unable to summon the enthusiasm to perform it. Moving from her childish play about a princess, Briony develops beyond modernist distance to a complex engagement with realism that taught her the skill of empathy she lacked as a girl.

McEwan's preoccupation with the ethical responsibility of the author is reflective of the neo-realist turn to ethics following (post)modern apathy and elitism.[94] Neil Brooks and Josh Toth suggest that this ethical shift was consolidated in the aftermath of 9/11, when a 'shared

[94] Brooks and Toth; Ding; Wood; Lowry.

sense of "moral outrage"' became 'irreconcilable with a sustained rejection of metanarratives': 'if postmodernism became terminally ill sometime in the late-eighties and early-nineties, it was buried once and for all in the rubble of the World Trade Centre', after which postmodern experimentation seemed no longer relevant, creating demand for a new literary approach.[95] Though published in 2001 and therefore written before 9/11, *Atonement* nonetheless anticipates this shift towards traditional realism and ethical responsibility. In fact, writing in response to 9/11, McEwan described terrorism as 'a failure of the imagination': 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality'.[96] In her life-long dedication to fine-tuning her representation of her crime, Briony turns to her imagination and to realism to atone for the happy ending she prevented in real life, suggesting a post-postmodern turn to the ethical responsibility of the author:

> Who would want to believe that [Robbie and Cecilia], except in the service of the bleakest realism? […] I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love (*Atonement*, p. 371).

In contrast to Fox and Walters, then, McEwan positions fictional construction as more valuable than simply reflecting reality through laborious research. His metafictive denouement reminds the reader that *Atonement* is a work of fiction in which our emotional investment was engineered through the author's ability to create an authentic representation of a fictional reality through empathetic imagination.

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[95] Brooks and Toth, p. 3.

[96] Ian McEwan, 'Only love and then oblivion. Love was all they had to set against their murderers', *Guardian* (15 September 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2> [accessed 28 February 2015].

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how contemporary English country house novelists have responded self-consciously to debates about the value of the genre in the literary marketplace. Aware that readers will be assessing the authenticity of their text, most authors respond by foregrounding their research in paratexts, as I have exemplified with reference to Fox and Walters. These authors suggest the authenticity of their texts by suggesting that their realist novels reflect real-life events, settings, or people. They thereby paratextually showcase the labour of research. However, the majority of this chapter has focused on how some country house authors mobilise self-reflexive techniques to explore the work of writing and construction of value. In contrast to Waugh's view of metafiction as a postmodern trope, I have suggested that literary self-reflexivity predates postmodernism and has recently evolved to combine with realism in neo-realist texts which showcase the work of writing. By dramatising the process of authorship, Beauman, Litt, Stace, and McEwan suggest that their respective novels possess cultural capital because they contain authentic fictional worlds created through imagination, research, and writing skill. Indeed, Litt takes this to extremes by creating an experimental frame to distance his work from his implied author's romance novel. In doing so, his novel, like the English country house genre generally, raises questions about categories of value in the literary marketplace. While Litt and Stace mock the implied reader's expectation of authenticity from a fictional text, however, McEwan presents this quality as an ethical responsibility of the (neo-)realist author. Both intra- and paratextual methods of highlighting the work of writing in terms of research or artistic construction present the contemporary English country house novel as the product of labour and imagination, qualities increasingly valuable in a culture of reality hunger. These novelists anticipate the reception of their novels as the latest English country house text in a market increasingly saturated with the genre. Thus the foregrounding of authorship Lodge identified

in contemporary novels is less about ‘the idea of the author’ but rather how value is constructed in the contemporary literary marketplace.

Chapter 4. Ruin and Renovation: Rewriting the Wrongs of the English Country House Novel

> *'An obsolete building is in place but out of time. Obsolescence arises when an artefact or technology loses value, sometimes through physical deterioration but often as a consequence of newer or better alternatives becoming available' – Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs* [1]

In previous chapters I have established the contemporary English country house novel as a self-conscious form aware of its position within a literary tradition with problematic class and gender politics and debatable cultural value. As such, the genre raises questions about its relevance in modern Britain. As the General Introduction has highlighted, the country house, as a historical icon of English national identity, is deemed by many critics to be outdated and politically problematic, creating a tension between the simultaneous fascination and frustration with the setting in contemporary British culture. Its mounting obsolescence, as the above epigraph from Cairns and Jacobs suggests, invites examination of how the systems of value that surround the setting, and the country house novel, have changed. The issue of relevance has become central to contemporary engagement with the English country house. The Director General of the National Trust, Helen Ghosh, has claimed that its greatest challenge in 2015 is to 'make sure that people can enjoy and understand' the country houses conserved by the Trust and 'feel that they are relevant to the world they live in now'.[2] This is also a key focus for contemporary country house novelists. In this final chapter, I will be exploring how Diane Setterfield and Sarah Waters use the theme of ruin in *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006) and *The Little Stranger* (2009) to signal the genre's problematic history and explore the contemporary significance of the English country house in contemporary British

[1]Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs, *Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), p. 103.

[2] Helen Ghosh, 'Why National Trust is focusing on restoring UK's green lungs', *Guardian* (23 March 2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/23/why-national-trust-is-focusing-on-restoring-uks-green-lungs> [accessed 25 March 2015].

culture. In doing so, I situate the contemporary English country house novel within current debates about waste more commonly occupied by scholars of geography and architecture.[3]

My approach to ruin as an evaluation of generic tradition differs from most scholars who have read the trope as indicative of England's depleting international power.[4] While Vera Kreilkamp argues that the decaying properties in the Anglo-Irish Big House novel convey 'the loss of power and prestige of Anglo-Ireland', I will be focusing on how the process of ruin in the contemporary English country house novel represents an evaluation of past uses of the setting in the genre and a reformulation of its contemporary meaning.[5] As Kevin Hetherington suggests, it is 'only when the social relations that made [buildings] and for which they had significance have gone into decline and become a shell-like ruin […] do we see a trace of what held them together materially in the ruined remains'.[6] Setterfield and Waters deconstruct the country house, presenting it as no longer functional or representative of contemporary social relations, so that the reader is invited to reflect on the setting's problematic semantic history. In deconstructing the country house, these authors uncover marginalised, ghostly characters that symbolise the oppressive social systems embodied in the setting. Both Setterfield and Waters use ruin to reflect and rewrite the conservatism of generic forerunners. Thus in the same way as Jed Etsy argues that representations of Englishness in novels from the 1950s 'aim not so much to fetishize national tradition as to recognize and come to terms with its limitations', I suggest that the contemporary English

[3] Cairns and Jacobs; *Trash Culture*, ed. by Gillian Pye (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010); Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London: Verso, 2014); Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

[4] Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mark D. Larabee, 'Modernism and the Country House in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 53 (2010) 75-94.

[5] Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracruse: Syracruse University Press, 1998), p. 236.

[6] Kevin Hetherington, 'The Ruin Revisited', in *Trash Culture*, ed. by Pye, pp. 15-37, (p. 22).

country house novel is not so much regressing to a problematic tradition as evaluating it.[7] In this final chapter, then, this thesis comes full circle by returning to the ideas of relevance raised in the General Introduction and the theme of literary tradition explored in chapter one.

I will begin by outlining the current fascination with ruin across various cultural forms and academic scholarship, suggesting that the trope has a particular contemporary resonance and therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine the significance of the country house setting to today's readers. I will then examine the depiction of decaying country houses in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger*. These novels are set in different historical periods, suggest different futures for the country house, and reflect two different types of ruin. According to Gavin Lucas, ruins are either 'fast', occurring as a result of an abrupt transition, or 'slow', decaying or abandoned gradually as a result of social or economic shifts.[8] Angelfield in *The Thirteenth Tale* represents a fast ruin. Destroyed by fire decades ago, it becomes a building site for a new hotel by the end of the novel. Setterfield's decaying country house functions as a talisman of repressed trauma, aligning the setting with historical guilt that must be confronted and resolved in a metaphor for her engagement with a problematic literary tradition. In contrast, the decaying Hundreds Hall in *The Little Stranger* is a slow ruin. Still housing its ancestral family, the house's eroding structure mirrors the decline of pre-war class structures in a postwar climate of death duties and Labour government.[9] The ruined country houses in both novels signal an awareness of the setting's conservative history and the need to renegotiate its contemporary meaning. Indeed, ruin is an inherently intertextual symbol; as Catherine DeSilvey and Tim Edensor highlight, the ruin 'is

[7] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 21.

[8] Gavin Lucas, 'Fast Ruins. Nature and Modernity in Iceland', *Ruin Memories* (2015) <http://ruinmemories.org/modern-ruins-of-iceland/fast-ruins-nature-and-modernity-in-iceland/> [accessed 26 April 2015].

[9] Kreilkamp similarly reads the decaying house in Aidan Higgins's *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966) as an image of a declining social class (p. 21).

one of the most enduring and complex representational devices in western tradition, and contemporary perspectives are inevitably inflected with traces of earlier engagements'.[10] As such, the contemporary English country house novel itself represents a kind of ruin: containing the fragments of an old form transformed by successive generations of writers, it is both preserved and renovated by contemporary authors.

Ruin Lust

There is a broad critical consensus that contemporary culture is marked by 'ruin lust', a preoccupation mirrored in the growing academic interest in the topic.[11] In their recent monograph, *Buildings Must Die* (2014), Cairns and Jacobs note that 'the aesthetics of precarity' has 'acquired a popular charm of late': 'The thirst for what some have dubbed "ruin porn" is undeniable'.[12] However, contemporary ruin lust is largely manifested in visual depictions of urban ruins.[13] Literary representations of ruined historical buildings are less

[10] Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor, 'Reckoning with ruins', *Progress in Human Geography*, 37 (2012), 465–485, (p. 465). The decaying mansions in these novels evoke the gothic trope of the haunted castle, possessed as they are by repressed memories and dead relatives (Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1927). Indeed the novels share many tropes that link them to the Gothic tradition, including siblings, ghosts, and death. However, few of the novels in the English country house novel resurgence can be described as neo-Gothic. Examining these novels through the lens of neo-Gothicism, then, would produce a reading that is not generalisable to most of the genre, and it is my object in this thesis to highlight common tropes. I will therefore be focussing on how these two novels use the imagery of decay in a way that invites comparison to other contemporary English country house novels.

[11] Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by Julia Hell et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Edensor; Garrett. DeSilvey and Edensor claim that academic interest in ruin has intensified over the last decade (p. 465).

[12] Cairns and Jacobs, pp. 5-6.

[13] Tate Britain recently housed an exhibition entitled 'Ruin Lust' (2014), displaying artwork of ruins from the seventeenth century to the present day, while Flowers Gallery exhibited Nadav Kander's 'Dust' (2014), a collection of photographs capturing 'the aesthetics of destruction' in radioactive ruins. Added to this are the many websites dedicated to archiving photographs of ruins across the world (Paul Talling, *Derelict London* <http://www.derelictlondon.com>; Harald Finster, *Stahl Art* (9 September 2007) <http://www.finster-stahlart.de>; *28 Days Later* <http://www.28dayslater.co.uk>; Manas Bhattacharya and Madhuban Mitra, 'Darkly Through a Lens', *WordPress* (13 October 2011) <http://darklythroughalens.wordpress.com>;

common, particularly beyond the genre of science fiction. Dominic Head offers one of the only examinations of the ruined country house in contemporary literature. His comments on the ruined country house in V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) argue that it represents the post-imperial moment as a decayed, dissolved version of an earlier Englishness, but his examination is brief and somewhat tangential to my own focus in that Naipaul's text is semi-auto-biographical.[14] The nearest to scholarship on the ruin in contemporary fiction is Colin Hutchinson's article on the abandoned church in the contemporary British novel. He argues that the ruined church symbolises a reassessment of 'community' in contemporary Britain and signifies 'both the value and the loss of collective ties alleged to have been cast aside'.[15] Hutchinson's argument resonates with my reading of the ruined country house as a space in which authors readdress the relative value of past uses of the setting. He suggests that the image of the church in decline encourages readers to empathise with the 'powerless against the powerful, with the marginalized against the mainstream', a technique also visible in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger*, as my close readings will later highlight.[16]

The lack of interest in the ruined country house is a surprising critical lacuna since the idea of decline has become increasingly pertinent to the setting. Following World War Two, country house owners struggled to pay Labour's inheritance tax and increasingly gifted their homes to the National Trust, so that country house ownership dropped sharply. I suspect that the critical neglect of the country house ruin is partially related to the disregard for the contemporary English country house novel as a result of its reputation as a nostalgic and conservative form (see General Introduction). Indeed, the eighteenth-century Romantic

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Abandoned Porn', *Reddit* <http://my.reddit.com/r/AbandonedPorn> [all accessed 20 April 2015]. Edensor also makes reference to the 'Radioactive' exhibition at www.re-location.org.uk, a domain that (ironically) no longer exists [accessed 17 April 2015] (Edensor, pp. 34-5).

[14] Head, p.176.

[15] Colin Hutchinson, 'The Abandoned Church and the Contemporary British Novel', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 37 (2007), 227-244, (p. 227).

[16] Hutchinson, p. 227.

tradition idealised rural ruin as a nostalgic and beautiful subject in a highly conservative mode.[17] Thus Kristen Kelly Ames claims that the presence of decaying country houses in twentieth-century novels 'always evokes' a nostalgic depiction of 'fading splendour'.[18] This is certainly true of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) which portrays Evelyn Waugh's (mistaken) prediction that English country houses were 'doomed to decay and spoliation' in a postwar climate.[19] Another reason that the image of the ruined country house has not been examined closely, however, is because the genre has historically rarely allowed the setting to reach dilapidation. The literary English country house has, until recently, continued to function, however poorly, as a home.

In contrast, the contemporary English country house setting either becomes a ruined shell or is repurposed. In Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001), of course, and in *The Thirteenth Tale*, the country house is destroyed by fire. In Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005) and again in *The Thirteenth Tale*, family homes become heritage attractions. And in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Katherine Webb's *The Legacy* (2010), and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* (2011), country houses are renovated into flats or hotels. The English country house of contemporary literature has almost always expended its usefulness by the time the novel closes. In these contemporary novels, then, the country house either redefines itself or is lost. Unlike earlier novels or current television programmes which largely uphold the country house's traditional gender and class inequalities in historical depictions of

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[17] Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990).

[18] Kristen Kelly Ames, 'Conventions Were Outraged: Country, House, Fiction' (doctoral thesis, York University, Toronto, 2014), p. 1 <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKEwjX1bHSr5fHAhWFvRQKHbKQBws&url=http%3A%2F%2Fyorkspace.library.yorku.ca%2Fxmlui%2Fbitstream%2Fhandle%2F10315%2F28184%2FAmes_Kristen_K_2014_PhD.pdf%3Fsequence%3D2&ei=MNrEVdf9FYX7UrKhnlg&usg=AFQjCNHl2wNa-OyIzl9U6okZofqeWMTCUw&bvm=bv.99804247,d.ZGU> [accessed 7 July 2015].

[19] Evelyn Waugh, Preface to *Brideshead Revisited* [1959] (London: Penguin, 2000), p. x.

domesticity, the more common instances of remodelling, repurposing, or rejection in the contemporary English country house novel signal the need to readdress the historical structures upheld by this cultural icon that continues to resonate in contemporary Britain. Often no longer functional, the decaying country house is commonly depicted as a burdensome relic and a memorial to a traumatic past that must be faced before characters can move forward. Thus, just as Edensor claims that the objects found in ruins 'pose an alternative way of relating to [them]', I argue that the ruined country house invites a new perspective on the setting that has for so long operated as a nostalgic emblem of conservative ideals and social inequality.[20] The country house's heyday is firmly located in the past in the majority of contemporary English country house novels. Setterfield's and Waters's presentation of the decaying country house as sinister and inhospitable suggests it is no longer viable as a domestic space in contemporary Britain.

As Etsy highlights, 'literature's social relevance' is 'debated in the context of decline'.[21] The current fascination with ruin in Britain, then, particularly with regards to debates about social relevance, is perhaps unsurprising due to the cultural preoccupation with national decline, an idea that has recently regained traction in light of Britain's growing inequality and struggling economy.[22] According to Jeremy Warner, there are 'more reasons for such declinist thinking in Britain today than at any stage in the last century' because almost all of the measures by which we track progress (cost of living, standards of health, and education) are either 'going sharply into reverse' or enduring 'the longest peacetime hiatus […] of the modern age'.[23] Contemporary ruin lust has thus emerged at a time when economic crisis has

[20] Edensor, p. 123.

[21] Etsy, pp. 215-6.

[22] Daniel Dorling et al., 'Poverty and Wealth across Britain from 1968 to 2005' (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007).

[23] Jeremy Warner, 'All the indicators of progress are heading in the wrong direction, and time is running out', *Telegraph* (31 Oct 2013) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/10417838/Harsh-truths-about-the-decline-of-Britain.html> [accessed 12 June 2015].

slowed regeneration and development, creating, as Hetherington notes, 'new areas of decline, new discarded spaces'.[24] In fact, Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski argue that the 2008 credit crunch has created a 'bust culture', comprised of texts that exploit the Great Recession as a backdrop or plot catalyst.[25] They claim that contemporary culture is filled with 'post-crash mass cultural artefacts' in which incidents of repossession are 'scripted and dramatically re-enacted'.[26] Emerging in the same period and demonstrating similar preoccupations, the contemporary English country house novel, in its depiction of ruin and repossession, resonates with the preoccupations of bust culture.[27]

However, the idea of decline appears in contemporary English country house novels published before the credit crunch, such as *The Thirteenth Tale*, suggesting that this theme is not so much the product of the global economic climate but rather a response to a long-standing idea of national decline in Britain, and England particularly, that has often been aligned with the country house. Martin Wiener traces England's self-image as a declining nation back to nineteenth-century industrialisation during which the landed gentry claimed that 'an Arcadian vision of rustic England' was being lost through modernisation.[28] The concept of English decline is therefore rooted in the aristocracy's attempts at cultural self-preservation, of which the country house is an emblem. This narrative of national decline was exacerbated by two world wars which, firstly, reduced Britain's international standing and, secondly, undermined the nation's pre-existing social hierarchy as the armed services and war effort blurred class boundaries. (As my close reading will highlight, this is a key context for *The Little Stranger*.) The country house became an icon of the nation's decline in the postwar

[24] Hetherington, p. 15.

[25] Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski, 'Introduction', in *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and TV*, ed. by Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski (Lanham: Lexington Books), pp. ix-xxvi, (p. x).

[26] Boyle and Mzrozowski, pp. xi, ix.

[27] The recession is a pertinent context to *The Legacy*, in particular.

[28] Martin Wiener interviewed by Michael Kenny in *Rethinking British Decline*, ed. by Richard English and Michael Kenny (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp. 25-36, (p. 26). Also see Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

period as the landed gentry struggled to maintain their estates.[29] These events led to what Patrick Wright describes as 'the cult of Brideshead' which echoed Waugh's nostalgia for the country house's pre-war heyday and the social system it once embodied.[30] The continuing association between British decline and the country house in the post-war period was underscored by the 1979 V&A exhibition, 'The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975', which re-entered contemporary culture in 2014 when the original curators reunited to reflect on the legacy of the exhibition.[31] According to Wright, Thatcherism's heritage industry, which flourished soon after the exhibition, using the country house as its 'flagship', is part of the self-fulfilling culture of national decline.[32] Indeed, as Raphael Samuel highlights, heritage is deemed 'the mark of a sick society […] "obsessed" with an idealized version of its past', 'a symbol of national decadence' arising from economic recession, mass unemployment, and the collapse of British power.[33] The English country house, then, has historically been mobilised to evoke the image of national decline in a particularly conservative mode. In fact, Humble argues that the country house novel came into being in response to the perceived destruction of the aristocracy.[34]

Indeed, the idea that Britain is failing to measure up to earlier ideas of success is at the heart of contemporary Conservative rhetoric. As Andrew Gamble highlights, the political class in general have developed 'a discourse in which Britain [is] portrayed as constantly

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[29] Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* [1991] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 60.

[30] Wright, *Journey*, p. 60.

[31] 'The Destruction of the English Country House', *V&A Museum* (15 November 2014) <http://www.vam.ac.uk/whatson/event/3587/the-destruction-of-the-english-country-house-5102/> [accessed 25 March 2015].

[32] Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006); Patrick Wight, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1995).

[33] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, vol. I (London: Verso, 1994), p. 261.

[34] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 62.

underperforming and slipping further and further behind its rivals'.[35] Both right and left have attacked one another's policies as the main contributory cause of decline. However, according to Gamble, the most potent populist characterisations of decline have been peddled by right-wing political movements, such as Social Imperialism and Thatcherism.[36] For all Gamble's reflections refer to the twentieth century, his observations ring true for contemporary Toryism which repeatedly blames Labour for Britain's struggling economy and large deficit, portraying the nation as decadent.[37] As evidence of the nation's decline, contemporary Toryism mourns changing attitudes to historical ideals of Englishness. A letter written to *The Spectator* in 2005 by six newly-elected Tory MPs that despaired of Britain's 'sickening decadence' was reprinted in 2013, suggesting that its ideas continue to resonate.[38] It cited family breakdown and 'the metropolitan mix of gay rights and lager louts' as evidence of 'moral decline'.[39] These examples present the erosion of traditional (heterosexual) family values as evidence of Britain's decadence. As Gamble's work anticipates, the authors suggest that this decline is the result of the 'excesses' of a liberal Left:

> People's sense of identity has been eroded as our traditions and the institutions that safeguard them have been derided for years. People's sense of history has been weakened by an education system that too often emphasises the themes in history rather than its chronology, and which indoctrinates a guilt-ridden interpretation of Britain's contribution to the world.[40]

Contemporary Conservatism thus presents Britain's changing traditions and recognition of the problematic aspects of its history as evidence of the nation's decadence.

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[35] Andrew Gamble, 'Theories and Explanations of British Decline', in *Rethinking British Decline*, ed. by English, pp. 1-22, (p. 4).

[36] Gamble, p. 4.

[37] 'Speech by the Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH', *CCHQ Press* <http://press.conservatives.com/> [accessed 7 August 2015].

[38] David Blackburn, 'John Hayes: Muslims are right about Britain', *Spectator Blog* (28 March 2013) <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/03/john-hayes-muslims-are-right-about-britain/> [accessed 18 March 2015].

[39] Blackburn.

[40] Blackburn.

The image of ruin speaks to this conservative mourning for what has passed. As a physical reminder of what once was, the ruin signals loss and erasure and can, according to Ian Baucom, evoke nostalgia through the promise of 'restoration and redemption'.[41] Baucom therefore reads the literary country house ruin as evidence of England's 'lost hour of precedence'.[42] Though Baucom's argument refers to England's lost imperial power, I read the ruined country house as a metaphor for the nation's internal social structures of class and gender because, as a process of eroding the barriers between internal and external, ruin reveals the internal workings of the nation. The image of the ruin as a monument to lost precedence, then, suggests a longing for the traditional social hierarchy embodied in the country house. Evoking mourning for what has passed and presenting the future as fragile and inferior, ruin offers a pessimistic depiction of progress. Dylan Trigg therefore views the ruin as embodying 'the structure of our age' as a 'pathway from incipience to extinction' and 'the drive toward collapse': 'Ours is an age whose virtue is our nearness to the end'.[43] Ruin might therefore function as a conservative image of present decadence and future demise.

However, comprised of enduring fragments of history, the ruin represents both the erosion and the endurance of the past. While the endurance of the past can be conservative, it can also provide a tradition and context against which contemporary forms can be re-evaluated, as in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger*. According to Edensor, ruins provide 'limitless possibilities' for 'imaginative interpretation, unencumbered by the assumptions which weigh heavily on highly encoded, regulated space […]. [R]uined space is ripe with transgressive and transcendent possibilities'.[44] Formulating new structures of meaning, the ruin invites speculation about the future as well as reflection on the past. As Brian Dillon suggests, the ruin is 'an intermediate moment, a fragile equilibrium between

[41] Ian Baucom, *Out of Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 181.

[42] Baucom, p. 166.

[43] Dylan Trigg, 'The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason', *New Studies in Aesthetics*, 37, general ed. Robert Ginsberg (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 221.

[44] Edensor, p. 4.

persistence and decay'; it therefore represents a transition rather than an ending.[45] Ruin restructures old forms to bring new perspectives, suggesting renovation if not innovation. The process of decay encapsulates both decline and renewal, working to contain dangerous elements and harness useful components. Thus, for all the theme of ruin is associated with loss in these novels, it also presents the opportunity for adaptation, evolution and rebirth. The ruin, then, is not a reactive lament but a redemptive possibility. If, as Garrett suggests, ruin fosters 'cautious curiosity about what the future may hold', then the use of the trope in contemporary novels suggests a tentative consideration of how the country house genre might move forward beyond its traditionally conservative uses and evolve into a more liberal contemporary form.[46]

If decadence prompts a consideration of what society is leaving behind and where it is heading, then the decaying literary country house asks how the conservative values it once represented might be reformulated to reflect the more liberal attitudes of contemporary England. As my close readings of *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger* will illustrate, the rhetoric of decline prompts debate about the relevance of the nation's historical social structures to contemporary England. Both Setterfield and Waters thus deploy ruin to critique and, to some extent, rewrite the conservatism of specific country house intertexts. Indeed, the image of contemporary Britain shrugging off traditional ideals in growing awareness of its problematic national identity described in the Tory MPs' letter, much as they would refute it, is an image of progress that evokes England's willingness to modernise.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the extent to which the decaying country houses in *The Thirteenth Tale* and *The Little Stranger* represent a new approach to the genre's conservative tradition. Drawing on DeSilvey and Edensor's view of ruin as an inherently intertextual symbol, I examine how contemporary authors use ruin to address the problematic

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[45] Brian Dillon, 'Fragments from a History of Ruin' *Cabinet*, 20 (2005/6) <www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/dillon.php> [accessed 16 April 2015].

[46] Garrett, p. 65.

aspects of generic forerunners. Both Setterfield and Waters reclaim the imagery of decline and the decaying country house from Conservative rhetoric and present it as a progressive move away from the archaic traditions that historically maintained social inequality. I will begin by exploring how images of decay are aligned with a guilty history in *The Thirteenth Tale*. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue, 'the reconstruction of fragmented, fabricated, or repressed memories' in Setterfield's text reflects 'the narratological traditions [the novel] seeks to reshape'.[47] However, while they explore how metaphors of legacy and reading relate to this process, I concentrate on how the trope of ruin is used to create a dialogue with generic conventions. I will then move on to discuss how Waters represents the postwar redistribution of wealth through the ruin of Hundreds Hall in *The Little Stranger*, reflecting on the limitations of her deconstruction of the genre's conservative traditions.

Redemptive Ruin: Confronting the a Problematic Past in *The Thirteenth Tale*

The fragmented structure of *The Thirteenth Tale* replicates the topography of ruin. Split into four parts, it is narrated by numerous characters and contains various forms such as letters, diary entries, and prose. Its cyclical narrative structure, opening and closing with sections entitled 'Beginnings', suggests a literary rebirth that takes place through the imagery of ruin. Setterfield uses the two narrative strands of the novel – one historical, the other contemporary – to establish tension between the past and present uses of the country house setting. The frame narrative details the stay of biographer Margaret Lea with author, Vida Winter, in the country house she shares with her senile sister and their housekeeper. The second narrative strand is the story of Vida's childhood and adolescence, set largely in the novel's second country house setting, Angelfield. Vida recounts this historical narrative to Margaret for her biography and tells 'the story of Angelfield. […] And the Angelfield family

[47] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 34.

itself. […] Their house, their fortunes, their fears. And their ghost'.[48] Centred on twins Adeline and Emmeline, we originally believe Vida to be the former and her sister the latter. However, we later discover that Emmeline died in the fire at Angelfield, and that Vida is the twins' half-sister, Shadow, the so-called family 'ghost'. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that both Margaret and Vida have repressed a traumatic event from their past to do with their siblings. Vida feels responsible for Emmeline's death after accidentally locking her in the burning library at Angelfield trying to save her from Adeline. Margaret's trauma stems from her discovery that she was a conjoined twin and that her sister died in the operation to separate them. *The Thirteenth Tale* charts the women's confrontation of their repressed trauma through the story and ruin of Angelfield.

Decline pervades Setterfield's novel through not only the ruin of Angelfield but also the declining health of the elderly sisters, Vida and Adeline, both of whom die by the end of the novel. As Vida's story unfolds, even Margaret begins to grow unwell. Her doctor's diagnosis is that she is 'suffering from an ailment that afflicts ladies of romantic imagination' caused by 'emotional trauma' and fuelled by reading *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre*, and *Sense and Sensibility* – all novels in which a country house is the central setting (*Thirteenth*, p. 339). Setterfield here implies that the country house tradition contains a dangerous romanticism for contemporary readers. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), in particular, is clearly a huge influence for both Setterfield and her characters, who make frequent references to the novel. However, Setterfield attempts to challenge some of Brontë's conservative ideas through the ruin of the country house setting.

This is not to say that *Jane Eyre* is a wholly conservative text. In fact, by presenting the country house as the locus of oppression, Brontë's novel challenged many contemporary conventions of class and gender as well as what Parama Roy refers to as 'country house

[48] Diane Setterfield, *The Thirteenth Tale* (London: Orion, 2006), p. 66 (hereafter '*Thirteenth*').

concerns like power, primogeniture, inheritance, and "suitable" alliances'.[49] Her novel is attuned to the problematic social systems embodied in the country house. According to Roy, both the destruction of Thornfield and Rochester and Jane's eventual residence at Ferndeen represent a rejection of the oppressive social structures upheld by the country house.[50] Yet Brontë's radical ideas are often tempered by conservative undertones that reinforce the country house's social mores. Her depiction of Rochester's wife, Bertha, as a West Indian Creole is particularly problematic. Denied a voice and painted by Rochester as the agent of his torture, Brontë's novel dehumanises and demonises Bertha, focalising the narrative through Jane, who is, Roy argues, 'manifestly enthusiastic' about both 'the exploitation of colonized peoples' and Rochester's callous treatment of his wife.[51] The conflation of marriage with happy endings for Jane and her female cousins – particularly when contrasted with the bachelorhood of her male cousin, St John – is also problematic, suggesting that women's happiness resides in their adherence to patriarchal institutions. The union of Jane and Rochester at the end of the novel is muted in its radicalism as a result of their minimalised class differences due to Jane's social ascension through her inheritance and Rochester's reduced status as a cripple. Brontë's novel problematically implies that Jane has only become Rochester's equal due to her increased fortune and his depleted physical health following the fire that burned and blinded him. Thus while Jane and Rochester seem to distance themselves from the oppressive social systems of the country house by residing in Ferndeen at the end of the novel, much of Brontë's narrative reinforces patriarchal and imperial ideals. Moving from Thornfield to Ferndeen, then, which is itself a manor house, is not as progressive as Roy suggests. *Jane Eyre* is therefore a problematic text for contemporary readers versed in

[49] Parama Roy, 'Unaccommodated Woman and the Poetics of Property in *Jane Eyre*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 29 (1989), 713-727, (p. 714).

[50] Roy, p. 714.

[51] Roy, p. 715.

feminism and postcolonialism, and a problematic intertext for contemporary writers like Setterfield as they return to the same site of oppression.

Setterfield uses the iconography of the ruin to reflect the destructive history of the country house genre, particularly in Brontë's text. In deconstructing the country house, she acknowledges the problematic history of the tradition and reconfigures its oppressive structures. As Edensor states, '[r]uination produces a defamiliarised landscape in which the formerly hidden emerges', and in Setterfield's text, a version of womanhood invisible in *Jane Eyre* takes centre stage through the ghostly character of Shadow, Vida's younger self.[52] Kristen Kelly Ames has argued that ghosts 'foreground figures marginalized by history'.[53] Both *The Thirteenth Tal*e and *The Little Stranger* use the figure of the ghost to represent marginality. The eponymous little stranger in Waters's text, as my close reading will demonstrate, represents the oppressed country house servants taken for granted by their employers. In *The Thirteenth Tale*, Vida is the marginalised figure. Excluded from the family as a 'child of rape', she begins her life on the outskirts of Angelfield, often spotted in the garden with John the Dig (*Thirteenth*, p. 394). As the twins' half-sister, she is often excluded by their bond and is merely a Shadow that even their governess, Hester, fails to recognise as distinct from Adeline. The 'little ghost' is described as 'the movement in their peripheral vision' and 'the secret of the house', underlining her marginalised position (*Thirteenth*, p. 392). By marginalising Vida within the country house, Setterfield comments not only on the marginalisation of women within the English canon (see chapter one), but also on the lack of complexity in *Jane Eyre*'s female characters.

Adeline and Emmeline are understood by Hester and Dr. Maudsley to be two halves of one person, so that each possesses only half the emotional range of an 'ordinary person': '[o]ne twin is wild and given to physical rages; the other is indolent and passive' (*Thirteenth*,

[52] Edensor, p. 109.

[53] Ames, p. 94.

p. 200). The child-like insanity of Brontë's Bertha is present in Adeline and, like Rochester, Vida secrets her away from Margaret in the country house. Setterfield draws another parallel between the characters when Adeline, like Bertha, ignites 'the fire of a madwoman' that ruins the country house (*Thirteenth*, p. 421). The character of Shadow also mirrors Bertha to an extent: hiding in the margins of Angelfield until the fire presents the opportunity for her to exist legally as Adeline, she reflects Bertha's occupation of the margins of Thornfield until the fire that allows Jane to become Rochester's legal wife. However, while Brontë's novel positions the ruin of the country house as the removal of all obstacles to Jane's happy ending, Setterfield depicts it as a traumatic rebirth for Vida who leaves her former self, Shadow, behind. As such, *The Thirteenth Tale* represents a literary rebirth informed by the country house novel's problematic past.

As the third sister, and a half-sister, Vida represents a middle ground between the angelic Emmeline and the evil Adeline. Less naïve than the innocent Emmeline yet partly implicated in her death, she is the complex depiction of womanhood lacking in Brontë's heroine. I am not suggesting that Setterfield's twins are two dimensional and lack complexity; all three of the Angelfield sisters are both socially delinquent and capable of kindness. However, the author's use of twins and presentation of them as oppositional suggests a reworking of the angel/madwoman binary Brontë poses in *Jane Eyre*.[54] However, unlike Thornfield, Angelfield is inhabited not by two binaristic women, as the villagers (and indeed, Margaret, for some time) believe, but by three complex female characters that span the spectrum between the Angel in the house and the madwoman in the attic. Through her many references to *Jane Eyre* and the combination of 'angel' and 'Thornfield' in the name of the novel's central setting, Setterfield appears to be returning to the country house to explore

[54] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [1979] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

the problematic representation of women in the country house novel tradition, and using ruin to deconstruct that representation.

Setterfield uses the imagery of ruin to reflect her deconstruction of Brontë's text. The fire that ruins Thornfield is the agent of Brontë's problematic happy ending; it conveniently disposes of Rochester's wife and causes the injuries which subdue him into a worthy match for the novel's governess-turned-heiress heroine. While the fire that ruins Thornfield kills off the monstrous woman to save the angel in the house, the fire that ruins Angelfield preserves the troubled Adeline and sacrifices the idolised Emmeline, suggesting Setterfield's dissatisfaction with the angelic heroine of Brontë's novel. The ruin of Angelfield does not provide a happy ending in *The Thirteenth Tale*. It is a physical manifestation of guilt and destruction. Setterfield therefore subverts Brontë's conservative and binaristic approach to femininity in *Jane Eyre* through complex characters and the destruction of the angelic woman. She uses the ruin of Angelfield, a 'dangerous house', to signal the destructive literary consequences of Brontë's novel to the country house tradition. Adeline even uses pages from *Jane Eyre* as kindling for her fire at Angelfield, an image that mirrors Vida's hypothetical game of '*Jane Eyre* and the furnace' in which she asks Margaret how she would feel if the novel were burned (see chapter one). In using *Jane Eyre* as the fuel to ruin Angelfield, Setterfield aligns its ruin with her deconstruction of the conservatism of Brontë's text. The ruin of Angelfield therefore suggests that the country house genre, like the setting, contains a guilty past that must be confronted.

The ruin of Angelfield thus takes on the topography of trauma and destruction. Angelfield has collapsed in on itself: 'Beams had fallen, some at one end only so that they cut the space diagonally, coming to rest on the heaps of masonry, woodwork and other indistinguishable material that filled the room to the level of the window' (*Thirteenth*, p. 146). In the library, though '[f]our tall walls were still intact', there is no ceiling, 'only four thick beams, irregularly spaced, and beyond them more empty space' (*Thirteenth*, p. 146). The

ruin's 'fire stains' mirror Vida's scarred hand, which bears the imprint of the iron key to the library door and serves as a constant reminder of the loss of her beloved half-sister, Emmeline (*Thirteenth*, p. 145). The ruin of Angelfield is therefore presented as a physical manifestation of Vida's trauma in losing her sister. It is filled with empty signifiers such as 'glassless window frames' and 'the timber planks that used to hold books', evoking her loss (*Thirteenth*, p. 147). Vida's sense of loss is amplified by her own lost identity in the aftermath of the fire when the emergency services mistake her for Adeline. Forced into the role of older sister to a troubled Adeline (now known as Emmeline), she becomes the legal guardian of both the ruined Angelfield estate and the half-sister who brought about its destruction. The ruin of Angelfield thus symbolises not only the loss of her family and home but also the erosion of her selfhood. Vida's assumption of the legal identity of Adeline relegates her own identity to the ghostly 'Shadow' she lost in the fire.

Margaret's inspection of the ruin is paralleled with her own self-examination as the setting (literally) reflects her trauma. She is repeatedly described as looking in windows and mirrors at the ruin, suggesting her inquisitive self-reflection: 'Perched on a chunk of fallen masonry, I was tall enough to peer inside. What I saw caused a deep disquiet to bloom in my chest' (*Thirteenth*, p. 146). Using the fragments of the past, she looks 'inside' and responds through her chest, which bears the scar of her traumatic separation from her sister. It is through the country house ruin that Margaret acknowledges her painful and guilty origins and begins to construct a new identity informed but unhindered by the past. Setterfield underlines Margaret's confrontation of her repressed trauma over losing her sister when she catches sight of her own reflection in a mirror and momentarily believes that she has seen her late twin. 'Shadowy with dirt and tarnished with dark spots', the mirror transposes Margaret's psychological scars into physical disfigurement, so that the 'hazy, uncertain figure trembling inside the old frame' reflects not only her idea of her late sister but also her uncertain identity as a lone twin (*Thirteenth*, pp. 148, 149). The uncertainty within an old frame reflects

Setterfield's negotiation of the country house's contemporary significance as she takes on a traditional form and deconstructs the meaning of its central setting. Margaret's dangerous fixation on this past is emphasised when she moves to step towards her reflection and realises at the last moment that there 'were no [floor]boards, only a drop of twenty feet onto hard stone flags' (*Thirteenth*, p. 149). Here Margaret's inability to distance herself from her late twin threatens her future in a metaphor for Setterfield's reliance on problematic generic forerunners.

Setterfield suggests that the country house novel is similarly at risk of failing to differentiate itself from its previous identity as a conservative text. The ruin of Angelfield operates as a space in which both Vida and Margaret confront their past and reclaim marginalised identities. It is only by returning to the ruin vicariously through Margaret that Vida can eventually define herself in her long-awaited biography. In finally narrating her story and revealing herself as the twins' ghostly half-sister, Vida relinquishes her guilty identity of Adeline, and reveals her true self. The house's process of opening up through decay therefore mirrors the process by which Vida and Margaret face up to their repressed traumas. Thus, searching the new layout of Angelfield as a result of its ruin, Margaret notices that she is able to see beyond historical trauma to a new, boundless future: 'At the end of the tunnel was light. The sky' (*Thirteenth*, p. 144). Coming to terms with what they have lost, the women are able to cast off harmful memories and reclaim their individual identities. In the same way, Setterfield returns to the country house ruined by the 'fire of a madwoman' to reclaim the marginalised narratives in the genre's history. Setterfield aligns the confrontation of a traumatic history (embodied in the country house ruin) with literary rebirth. The ruin allows both Vida and Margaret to address their guilt and move forward, fashioning an individual identity rather than defining themselves through their relationship to their respective sisters. Their individual identities, notably, are bound up with the literary so that their emotional breakthroughs coincide with Margaret's finished biography and Vida's

elusive thirteenth tale. Setterfield's ruin therefore reflects Edensor's view of the ruin as providing 'limitless possibilities' for 'imaginative interpretation, unencumbered by the assumptions which weigh heavily on highly encoded, regulated space'. Thus whilst Conservative rhetoric has linked imagery of decline and the decaying country house with national regression due to the departure from traditional social norms, Setterfield uses the same imagery to insist on this departure as a means of progressing in both literary and social terms.

Setterfield parallels the ruin of Angelfield with Vida's traumatic rebirth as Adeline in order to dramatise the process of redefining the problematic country house setting for modern readers. Shadow's ghostly identity is bound up with the literary. Described as 'no more than a sub-plot' in the lives of the Angelfield family, her fragile identity as the foundling child largely excluded by the twins is made tangible through books (*Thirteenth*, p. 59). The 'unexpected movement of books from one room to another' and 'the mysterious movement of bookmark from page to page' are tiny clues to her existence within Angelfield as the third Shadow sister (*Thirteenth*, p. 391). When she locks the door of the burning library, she loses not only the only sister who acknowledged her but also the only objects which defined her existence. In losing Angelfield, Vida lost her story, causing her to invent as many life stories as she has had interviews with journalists. Thus the ruined country house figures Vida's need to redefine herself, a need Setterfield links to the literary through her early life as a 'ghost reader' (*Thirteenth*, p. 386). As such, Setterfield's ruined country house suggests a need to update the setting's perception in contemporary culture in a way that recognises its past guilt and moves forward having learned from it.

Ruin is inseparable from the act of storytelling in *The Thirteenth Tale*. Indeed, while narrating her story, Vida undergoes a process of ruin and regeneration similar to that of Angelfield (*Thirteenth*, p. 349). She begins the novel dressed extravagantly like 'an ancient queen, sorceress or goddess', but gradually forgoes her elaborate make-up and even asks

Margaret to cut off her hair, which has turned from red to white in the course of the novel (*Thirteenth*, p. 43). Vida's façade of Adeline decays as the story progresses, leaving a new identity in its place. Margaret's realisation that Vida is distinct from Adeline is similarly described in terms of breakdown and reformulation: 'the story Miss Winter had told me unmade and remade itself […]. Like those images that reveal a young bride if you hold the picture one way, and an old crone if you hold it the other' (*Thirteenth*, p. 349). Again here Setterfield deconstructs the binaristic representation of womanhood in its generic forerunner *Jane Eyre* by revealing Vida to be a combination of both at once. This new perspective 'mend[s]' Vida's story as Margaret formulates a new narrative through restructuring narrative fragments (*Thirteenth*, p. 349). As such, Setterfield presents Margaret's recognition of Vida's guilty history as an acknowledgement of the history of misrepresentation in country house novels such as Brontë's. This acknowledgement allows Setterfield to move the genre forward by looking back. Thus the novel closes not with the section entitled 'Endings' as one might anticipate, but rather a second 'Beginnings'.

Setterfield stresses the need to redefine the country house through what Margaret refers to as a 'ghost notice' attached to the Angelfield ruin (*Thirteenth*, p. 391). The ghost notice resonates with Setterfield's description of Vida as a 'ghost reader' and reflects her lost identity: it 'had the shape of writing but the meaning had been bleached out by months of sunshine' (*Thirteenth*, pp. 386, 143). Presumably once a safety warning, its loss of meaning suggests that the perils of the site – a metaphor for the problematic traditions of the country house – are no longer communicated in a way that recognises their current threat. Setterfield suggests that our over-exposure to the country house has robbed it of its political significance, the 'months of sunshine' serving as a metaphor for the countless idealised representations of the space in the tradition. As a faded signifier, the ghost notice is a metaphor for the way the country house setting has lost its original significance and requires redefinition. As such, it reflects Hell et al.'s view of the ruin as having 'lost its function of meaning in the present,

while retaining a suggestive, unstable semantic potential'.[55] Like the ruin, the decaying English country house in *The Thirteenth Tale*, with its ghost notice and ghostly Shadow, represents a desire to disrupt 'the relationship between form and meaning' in the country house novel genre and redefine the setting's significance in contemporary Britain.[56]

Setterfield uses Margaret to dramatise the process of closely analysing the country house setting and re-evaluating its position in contemporary Britain. Her first impression of Angelfield is that it 'sat at an awkward angle. […] The visitor was not met by a welcoming smile but by a cold shoulder. […] The house was of asymmetrical construction' (*Thirteenth*, p. 144). From the beginning, then, Margaret registers the incongruity of the country house in its contemporary surroundings as a result of its exclusivity (the unwelcoming 'cold shoulder') and uneasiness (it is 'asymmetrical', faces the 'wrong' way, and sits at an 'awkward' angle). The country house is here presented as troublesome and inscrutable. Approaching Angelfield, Margaret is initially convinced that it is still viable: 'A ruin? […] [I]t was hardly a ruin' (*Thirteenth*, p. 145). From a distance, the country house seems unproblematic. 'Then I put my glasses on and realized. […] It was not a house, but only a shell' (*Thirteenth*, p. 145). What Margaret initially mistakes for a 'clean', 'fresh', and 'intact Elizabethan house' is actually 'rotted', 'burned', and 'stain[ed]' (*Thirteenth*, p. 145). Setterfield here dramatises the process of closely examining what at first seems idyllic but on closer inspection contains internal rot. Taking a closer look, Margaret reassesses her perception of the country house and recognises its limitations and unsavoury aspects, realising that, like the ghost notice, it is no longer fit for purpose. By focalising the novel through Margaret, Setterfield invites the reader to do the same.

Margaret readjusts her perception of the country house a second time when the building work begins in the final section of the novel. Returning to the flattened ground

[55] Hell et al., p. 6.

[56] Hell et al., p. 7.

where Angelfield once stood, she immediately feels sad. However, she recalls that the house had 'always seemed to face the wrong way' (*Thirteenth*, p. 446). Margaret therefore welcomes its demolition:

> The new building was going to be better. It would face straight towards you. […] [T]he house had gone, and it had gone completely. The men in the yellow hats had reduced the past to a blank page. We had reached a tipping point. It was no longer possible to call it a demolition site. Tomorrow, today perhaps, the workers would return and it would become a construction site. The past demolished, it was time for them to start building the future (*Thirteenth*, p. 446).

Again Setterfield parallels the renovation of the country house setting with the evolution of the country house novel by comparing the site to a 'blank page' and employing the imagery of construction. Both Margaret and Setterfield recognise the importance of the country house casting off its troubling history and responding to the present by redefining itself. Thus, following Vida's death, Angelfield becomes a building site on which a new hotel will soon stand and her home is converted to a literary museum and garden. Transforming from spaces of secrets and trauma, the country houses become sites open to the public and, in the case of the museum, where new stories can be told. Through the transformation of Angelfield from home to ruin to building site, Setterfield signals the reformulation of the country house novel genre in which the foundations of an earlier form are renovated into something befitting contemporary culture.

Setterfield's novel therefore illustrates Garrett's conception of ruin as conveying 'cautious curiosity about what the future may hold'. While Angelfield signifies loss it also looks to the future and evokes ideas of regeneration. The building site is presented as an optimistic attempt to use what was lost to develop something new and more suited to the present. This optimism, however, is curtailed by the end of the novel which leaves Angelfield at 'tipping point', neither a 'demolition site' nor a 'construction site'. As such, it represents a work-in-progress, offering no alternative configuration of the country house setting for contemporary readers. Angelfield therefore reflects Dillon's view of ruin as 'an intermediate moment', encapsulating both decline and renewal. The decaying Hundreds Hall in *The Little*

Stranger similarly offers no alternative function for the country house in contemporary Britain as Waters simply leaves it, and the pre-war social structures it represents, to rot. While Setterfield presents the ruined country house as a talisman of a guilty past, Waters uses the image to reflect the redistribution of wealth in postwar England.

The Threat of Social Flux in *The Little Stranger*

> '*The Ayreses' problem—don't you think?—is that they can't, or won't, adapt. Don't get me wrong; I've a lot of sympathy for them. But what's left for an old family like that in England nowadays? Class-wise, they've had their chips. Nerve-wise, perhaps they've run their course*'.[57]

Like Setterfield, Waters is highly aware of the problematic traditions of the English country house novel. When writing *The Little Stranger*, she claims to have been 'very conscious of novels like *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Franchise Affair*' and worried 'that it would end up being conservative'.[58] She has spoken and written at length about how her novel began as a response to the problematic class-politics of Josephine Tey's *The Franchise Affair* (1948).[59] Tey's novel is narrated by a lawyer, Robert, who is called to the local country house, The Franchise, to assist Mrs Sharpe and her spinster daughter, Marion. The Sharpes have been accused by a teenage girl, Betty, of kidnapping her and holding her hostage after her refusal to act as their servant. The affair becomes a national sensation and the villagers express their resentment towards the Sharpes by vandalising the house with graffiti, smashing its windows, and eventually setting it on fire. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that Betty, a war-orphan, concocted the story as cover for her affair with a married man and her subsequent injuries on being discovered by his wife. Waters claims to have been fascinated and troubled

[57] Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009), p. 378 (hereafter '*Little*').

[58] Sarah Waters in interview with Kaye Mitchell, '"I'd love to write an anti-Downton!": An Interview with Sarah Waters', *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 129-141, (pp. 133-4).

[59] Sarah Waters, 'The Lost Girl', *Guardian* (30 May 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/30/sarah-waters-books> [accessed 8 June 2015]; Mitchell.

by Tey's prejudices which depict Betty as the 'feckless working class' and the Sharpes as 'shabby genteel'.[60] She was 'appalled' by the savagery of Tey's sympathetic characters that demonstrate an 'almost visceral loathing' for the war-orphan in a narrative that is 'nothing short of sadistic'.[61] What particularly interested Waters, however, was Betty's 'dangerous' liminality: 'She's such a powerful meeting point for anxiety about gender, sexuality and class – all categories that the war had done a great deal to disturb'.[62] In this final section, I explore how Waters projects the liminality of Tey's protagonist on to Hundreds Hall in *The Little Stranger*. Like Betty, the decaying country house is the meeting point for postwar anxieties about gender, sexuality, and class. I argue that Waters uses the imagery of decay to deconstruct the conservative class relations Tey's novel upholds.

The Little Stranger is regarded by Emma Parker as an 'adaptation' of *Brideshead* which 'opposes the class and gender politics' of Waugh's text, whilst contesting 'the attitudes to class and gender that characterize *The Franchise Affair*'.[63] In this section, then, I will be examining how far Waters subverts the conservative narratives of Waugh and Tey for contemporary readers. Whilst agreeing with Parker's reading of Waters's novel as a response to the country house tradition, I disagree with her suggestion that Waters effectively opposes the class politics of her generic forerunners.[64] Waters's attempt to rewrite the conservatism of the English country house novel is limited by the repeated presentation of her upwardly-mobile narrator, Dr. Faraday, as a violent threat to the ruling class. I will begin by examining how Waters portrays the ruin of the country house as a result of postwar social flux, before arguing that her presentation of Faraday as the eponymous little stranger and agent of this ruin limits the subversive potential of her reformulation of the English country house novel.

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[60] Waters, 'Lost'.

[61] Waters, 'Lost'.

[62] Waters, 'Lost'.

[63] Emma Parker, 'The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*', in *Sarah Waters*, ed. by Mitchell, pp. 99-113, (pp. 112, 99, 100).

[64] Parker, p. 101.

Set in 1947 when, according to Samuel, country houses were 'on their last legs', Waters's country house setting embodies the theme of decline in *The Little Stranger*.[65] The novel is narrated by Faraday, a village GP worried about the impact of the forthcoming National Health Service on his meagre income. He is called to the decaying country house of Mrs Ayres and her two grown-up children, Caroline and Roderick, to assist their maid, Betty (a nod to Tey), whom he diagnoses as homesick. Noticing that Rod is struggling with the leg injuries he sustained as an RAF pilot in the war, Faraday offers to treat him and thus becomes a regular visitor to Hundreds Hall, which he is disappointed to see in such decline as a result of the Ayreses' depleting fortune. Hundreds begins the novel in a fairly dilapidated state: 'Ivy had spread, then patchily died, and hung like tangled rat's-tail hair. The steps leading up to the broad front door were cracked, with weeds growing lushly up through the seams' (*Little*, p. 5). The garden is 'a chaos of nettle and bindweed' with 'a faint but definite whiff of blocked drains' (*Little*, p. 7). The flying stone steps lie 'scattered on the gravel four feet below, dark and weathered as if they had lain there some time' (*Little*, p. 67). Inside, all the valuable paintings and furniture have been sold and many of the furnishings are 'chipped or cracked, or had been lost completely. The floorboards, humped and cracking' are covered with 'threadbare rugs' (*Little*, p. 19). The sofa is 'sagging' and the chairs are 'worn' (*Little*, p. 19). The old morning-room is 'quite empty, and far too shabby', while the library is 'hung with dust-sheets' (*Little*, p. 63). The decorative ceiling has become 'so bloated with water it actually sagged', while elsewhere 'rain had simply worked its way through seams in the plaster to fall unchecked on the carpet and furniture below' (*Little*, p. 293). Hundreds is a house past its best.

Monica Germana has traced Waters's depiction of the Ayreses' decline through the lens of fashion, arguing that the opulent clothes that Mrs Ayres secreted away from the war effort signal the family's 'past glory and current physical decay':

[65] Samuel, p. 139.

> Their ephemeral condition – itself a function of fashions trend-led *raison d'être* – discloses the awareness that the war has definitively eroded the social model Mrs Ayres has lived by, thus signalling the beginning of the end for the whole family. Pre-war social roles are caught in the process of renovation to accommodate the increasing permeability of class boundaries in post-war Britain. This becomes obvious in the scene when Mrs Ayres encourages Betty to try on her old pair of gold slippers, which the maid models in a parody of a cat walk.[66]

However, focusing on the trope of fashion leads Germana to the, I think, mistaken conclusion that 'Betty is in fact the "little stranger"'.[67] Germana overlooks the ruined country as portraying the same 'process of renovation' and 'increasing permeability' associated with the erosion of traditional models of class. Reading the ruin of Hundreds, I argue that the little stranger is, in fact, Faraday, who is (somewhat problematically) aligned with working-class social mobility.

While the house has previously decayed in a slow and quiet way, things go quickly downhill with seeming malevolence as Faraday's intimacy with the family grows. The rooms at Hundreds are plucked off one by one by mysterious fires or water damage, so that the family gradually retreat into the parlour as the house crumbles around them. Scorch marks appear on the furniture, inanimate objects launch themselves across rooms, papers burst into flaming infernos, and childish scribbles rise up through the woodwork. The house transitions from a slow to a fast ruin, according to Lucas's definition, and the agent of this shift seems to be Faraday. Discussing these events with his medical colleagues, Faraday comes to the conclusion that the house is haunted by the titular 'little stranger', a psychological 'germ' or 'shadow-self' motivated by repressed 'envy, and malice, and frustration' (*Little*, p. 380). The little stranger, then, is a malicious agent of destruction, motivated by jealous resentment. Faraday suspects that Rod's accounts of the supernatural events at Hundreds are symptomatic of this psychological germ and therefore diagnoses Rod as mentally ill and has him committed to a mental hospital. The fees for Roderick's care force the Ayreses into 'drastic

[66] Monica Germana, 'The Death of the Lady: haunted Garments and (Re-) Possession in *The Little Stranger*', in *Sarah Waters*, ed. by Mitchell, (pp. 114-128), p. 121.

[67] Germana, p. 127.

extra economies' so that the generator must be turned off for days a time, plunging the freezing house into darkness (*Little*, p. 234). As the novel progresses, the little stranger sees off each of the Ayreses in turn; Rod continues to deteriorate in the asylum, then Mrs Ayres, convinced that her late child, Susan, has returned, hangs herself in the nursery. Dreaming of saving Hundreds from dilapidation, Faraday proposes to Caroline but, soon after she calls off the engagement, she too is found dead having fallen over the banister on the top landing. By the end of the novel, Hundreds is an empty shell, and the occasional rumours of its purchase and planned renovation begin to tail off as its decay escalates:

> Probably the look of the place has begun to put people off – for of course, the gardens are hopelessly overgrown now, and the terrace has been lost to the weeds; children have chalked on the walls and thrown stones at the windows, and the house seems to sit in the chaos like some wounded, blighted beast (*Little*, p. 497).

With the Ayreses gone, Faraday continues to haunt the ruin of the house he has coveted since childhood.

The erosion of Hundreds reflects the social flux of postwar England which saw the demise of the country house and its class, as well as increased social mobility for the working and middle classes. Waters foreshadows this demise in the novel's opening description of the hall when Faraday recalls Hundreds's pre-war instability: 'I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings. They made it look blurred and slightly uncertain – like an ice, I thought, just beginning to melt in the sun' (*Little*, p. 1). Even before the war, the house was 'ageing', 'worn', and 'weathered', but when Faraday returns to the house as an adult he finds that sections of 'the lovely weathered edgings […] have fallen completely away, so that the house's uncertain Georgian outline was even more tentative than before. […] The place, for so large and solid a structure, felt precarious' (*Little*, p. 5). Hundreds reflects Cairns and Jacob's aforementioned 'aesthetics of precarity' that signal the ruin's destabilisation of established forms. The precarity in this instance refers to the uncertain future of the country house and the pre-war class system. The decaying house upsets Faraday because '[o]ne could see so painfully, I thought, both the

glorious thing it had recently been, and the ruin it was on the way to becoming' (*Little*, p. 52). As such, Hundreds reflects the liminality Waters identifies in Tey's protagonist as it embodies both past and future, and represents a physical manifestation of the eroding class structures it once embodied. As the epigraph to this section suggests, the doctors in Lidcote view Hundreds as 'defeated by history, destroyed by its own failure to keep pace with a rapidly changing world': 'the Ayreses, unable to advance with the times, simply opted for retreat—for suicide, and madness. Right across England […] other old gentry families are probably disappearing in exactly the same way' (*Little*, p. 498). Like their family seat, the Ayreses are becoming socially obsolete. Caroline therefore feels the need to 'get out' of the country: 'Get right away. England's no good any more for someone like me. It doesn't want me' (*Little*, p. 448). Like the drooping wallpaper, the house seems 'less interested in hanging on to' the Ayreses as it enters into a climate of increased social mobility (*Little*, p. 66).

To offset their depleting fortune, the Ayreses have sold some of their land to a property developer and, when the novel opens, new, affordable housing is being built on this plot. Waters describes the erection of these houses in terms which reflect the changing social dynamics of postwar England: the land is 'levelled' and 'parcelled off into sections by […] rising walls' in an image of wealth redistribution from the wealthy to the less privileged (*Little*, p. 245). The rubble being used for the foundations of the new houses 'consisted mainly of pieces of broken brown stone from the demolished park wall' (*Little*, p. 245). Thus the new affordable housing, which symbolises the rising fortunes of the working class, is built on the declining monopoly of the landed gentry. These foundations are therefore described as 'trenches', stressing their connection to the war which contributed to social reform by eroding social distinctions in the forces and home front (*Little*, p. 245). By transposing class disturbance from the marginal figure of working-class girl, Betty, to the country house as an image of power and wealth, Waters presents a more progressive approach to post-war England than Tey in which the wealth of the nation is shared more fairly. The Ayreses'

resentment of this process reveals their conservative self-interest as they attempt to preserve what remains of their social status by maintaining the house.

Waters uses the house's battle against rising damp and subsidence as a metaphor for the Ayreses' resistance to change and their distaste for their upwardly-mobile social inferiors. Hundreds is repeatedly described in terms of opening up, breaking down, and threatened by things that rise up. The family's attempts to secure the hall are presented as a process of guarding themselves from the influx of postwar upstarts like Faraday. Its windows are closed, 'and most were shuttered', and the gates are wired shut 'because since the war we've begun to have problems with ramblers wandering in' (*Little*, pp. 7, 74). Waters contrasts the Ayreses' defensive approach to postwar social reform with that of the new owners of the neighbouring country house, Standish. The new owners deliberately open up the country house: they '[get] rid of practically all the panelling' and 'rip open the entire south wing of the house' to 'make a sort of cinema of it for their friends' (*Little*, p. 111). While the new owners are engaged in breaking down barriers and sharing their wealth, the Ayreses insist that the new housing estate built on their old land is fenced off from their remaining plot 'to keep out the mob', which Rod imagines will 'soon be scaling the walls of the house at night, with cutlasses between their teeth' (*Little*, p. 189). Waters here presents the Ayreses' hostility towards the working class through the dynamic of us vs. them, or inside vs. outside. Indeed, Faraday's car has to 'fight its way' through the 'overgrown and untended' park to reach the house (*Little*, p. 5). In contrast to the Sharpes' victory over working-class Betty in *The Franchise Affair* as a return to a conservative social order, the trope of ruin in *The Little Stranger* presents the Ayreses' social status as an obsolete relic of pre-war England that selfishly excludes and demonises hardworking people. Thus, despite the family's attempts to preserve their way of life, the boundaries of their existence are circumvented by the socially aspirant, like Faraday and the new tenants of the housing estate. In this respect, Waters's decaying country house represents a progressive depiction of post-war wealth redistribution that is missing from the novels of

Tey and Waugh. Like Setterfield, then, she uses ruin to deconstruct and rewrite the conservatism of the country house novel tradition.

However, Waters's radical reimagining of the postwar period is limited by the implication that the country house and its owners are the victims of a malicious 'little stranger', which becomes increasingly aligned with working-class upward mobility. The house is repeatedly presented as an injured soldier in imagery that goes beyond the connection between the war and the decline of the landed gentry. As Caroline explains to Faraday early in the novel, an army unit was billeted at the house during World War Two, and they 'left odd things about the park, barbed wire, sheets of iron: they're already rusting away, like something from another age' (*Little*, p. 22). Waters here references Brideshead's use as an army base, aligning Hundreds with Waugh's conservative nostalgia. The war has eroded the age in which the Ayreses' social superiority remained unchallenged by the observation of strict social hierarchies. The hall is twice described as a 'wound', as well as 'bleeding', and in 'shrouds': 'the place had a sickness in it, a sort of lingering infection in its floors and walls' (*Little*, pp. 244, 497, 80, 139, 476). As such, Hundreds is aligned with its injured heir. The similarities between Rod's injuries and the house's decay is emphasised when Faraday compares the scorch marks that appear in Rod's room to the burns on Rod's face and hands: 'It was as if the house were developing scars of its own, in response to his unhappiness and frustration' (*Little*, p. 148). Thus the unused rooms in the house are described as 'paralysed limbs' and Rod likens the decadent state of Hundreds to 'Sarah Bernhardt playing Juliet with one leg' (*Little*, pp. 233, 78). Like Rod, the house is a casualty of war. Faraday therefore views the house as invalided by the war and in need of his care.[68] Waters's use of war imagery here problematically presents the Ayreses as victims in the battle against a socialist government and upwardly-mobile working class.

[68] Later in the novel Faraday also describes 'the obvious derangement of the house and landscape' as 'brutally recalling that of Mrs Ayres herself', aligning her mental decline with the physical decay of Hundreds (and postwar England generally) (*Little*, p. 430).

Germana claims that by projecting the notion of malaise on to the country house, *The Little Stranger* pays homage to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1846), and *Jane Eyre*. However, Waters's war imagery is closer to that of John Lodwick in *Pearl of Ordnance* (1947), in which Stevenham Hall is used as a home for disabled ex-servicemen. Lodwick offers his reader a tour of the country house in which aesthetics have been replaced by what Wright refers to as a 'taxonomy of mutilation'.[69] *Pearl of Ordance* is a crucial intertext for Waters as, written in the year her novel is set, it offers 'an altogether more reactionary evaluation' of the country house that, according to Wright, 'was gathered up into the emerging cult of Brideshead'.[70] Thus rather than offering a feminist presentation of the country house as wounded by patriarchal social systems as in the intertexts Germana lists, Waters aligns her depiction of ruin with conservative nostalgia for the oppressive pre-war class system in the works of Lodwick and Waugh. While Setterfield's novel subverts the Conservative rhetoric of decline, Waters problematically uses the same right-wing rhetoric in a way that seems to mourn England's departure from traditions of social inequality.

Besides the problematic alignment of Hundreds with its injured war-hero heir, Waters's depiction of ruin is troubling in that it seems to be caused by Faraday's jealousy and resentment. The crumbling hall underscores the uncertainty of Faraday's social status, born to working-class parents who literally worked themselves to death to pay for his medical education. Indeed, postwar Britain was an uncertain time not only for the aristocracy but also General Practitioners with the forthcoming NHS, to which Faraday repeatedly refers with trepidation. Waters's narrator projects his own fears of social demise on to the country house and mourns the erosion of a fixed social hierarchy in England, reflecting the ideology of the cult of Brideshead. Faraday is intent on possessing Hundreds because he has for so long

[69] Wright, *Journey*, p. 59.

[70] Wright, *Journey*, p. 60.

equated the country house with social superiority. He therefore systematically removes the Ayreses and sets his sights on marrying Caroline, to whom he has never even felt attracted. The little stranger, like Faraday, 'want[s] the house all for its own', a desire Waters signals by naming her narrator after the new owner of Darlington Hall in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) (*Little*, p. 485). Faraday's over-attachment to Hundreds and over-involvement in the health of the Ayreses – particularly when compared to his dismissive attitude to servant, Betty – reveal his longing for a social structure in which his ascension is more certain. He shares the house's lack of substance in a way that manifests both his precarious social standing and his presentation as the ghostly little stranger.

An uncertain character and unreliable narrator, Faraday is as elusive as the lost grandeur of Hundreds. He claims that the Ayreses 'have never been able to place me', because he circumvents social boundaries like a ghost penetrates walls: 'I don't hunt or play bridge; but I don't play darts or football, either. I'm not grand enough for the gentry – not grand enough for working people' (*Little*, p. 36). He shares Hundreds's liminality and is therefore implicated in its decay. The disturbance of ideas about class that Waters transposed from Tey's working-class protagonist onto her country house setting, then, bleed into her narrator as the agent of the house's decay. Later in the novel, when Caroline rescues a button that falls from his shirt as 'the threads unravelled', she describes him as 'coming apart at the seams' (*Little*, p. 287). Like the country house, Faraday is unravelling as his medical persona of professional composure erode, giving rise to the little stranger. Waters's ruin and the little stranger that haunts it therefore reflect Edensor's view of ruin as 'ripe with transgressive and transcendent possibilities'. To Faraday, then, the little stranger is 'in some way *familiar*: as if its bashful advance towards us was more properly a *return*' (*Little*, p. 393). He recognises himself in the little stranger because it emerges from his repressed class resentment.

Faraday's potent combination of admiration and resentment of the ruling class becomes a potent force of destruction at Hundreds. He admits to Caroline that even as a

young boy he liked Hundreds '[e]nough to want to vandalise it', and therefore stole an acorn from one of the plaster borders (*Little*, p. 64). The acorn, of course, hails from the oak tree, which has strong historical connections to the English landscape, suggesting that Faraday's nostalgic view of Englishness belongs to Wright's cult of Brideshead. The plaster acorn, as a part of the decaying country house, is a material memento of a disappearing form, but also symbolises the self-serving process of hoarding treasure to ensure survival after a period of struggle. It therefore represents Faraday's desire to save Hundreds from dilapidation in order to ensure his own social ascension. His use of a knife to prise the acorn from the border betrays a violent undertone to his attitude to the ruling class. Faraday paradoxically both resents and fetishises the country house as a status symbol and therefore attempts to take ownership of it even as he destroys Hundreds. He seeks to simultaneously preserve and destroy the country house and the vision of England it represents. Waters thus toys with the idea of Faraday both possessing and being possessed by the country house.

Acutely aware of his roots in the 'labouring stock', Faraday is offended by the Ayreses' disregard for their staff:

> Hundreds Hall had been made and maintained, I thought, by the very people they were laughing at now. After two hundred years, those people had begun to withdraw their labour, their belief in the house; and the house was collapsing, like a pyramid of cards. Meanwhile, here the family sat, still playing gaily at gentry life, with the chipped stucco on their walls, and their Turkey carpets worn to the weave, and their riveted china . . . (*Little*, pp. 246, 27).

Faraday here takes issue with the Ayreses' failure to take their servants seriously and links the decay of the country house with the decreasing number of servants in postwar England. (Ironically, however, he was similarly scornful of Betty; in fact, he spends the rest of the novel trying to overthrow his own working-class roots and become part of the Ayres family.) Waters therefore suggests that working-class resentment is causing the decline of the country house. Roderick's description of the little stranger as something that 'hated me, really hated me' resonates with his earlier observation that 'ordinary people hate our sort now', as well as Faraday's 'dark dislike' of the Ayreses and Caroline's later remark to Faraday that 'you must

hate us slightly […] on your parents' behalf' (*Little*, pp. 27, 189, 164, 250).[71] Rod perceives in the little stranger a similar resentment to that fostered by Faraday and other 'ordinary people' towards his family. Rod's horror at the potential malevolence contained in everyday or 'ordinary' objects following his altercation with a seemingly possessed mirror suggests an anxiety regarding the malevolently-motivated social uprising of a people who had previously been part of the furniture of aristocratic life: 'It was all the more sickening, somehow, for the glass being such an *ordinary* sort of object. […] It made one feel as though everything around one, the *ordinary* stuff of one's *ordinary* life, might all at any moment *start up* like this and—overwhelm one' (*Little*, pp. 161-2, my emphases). Rod positions himself and his family at odds with ordinary people and thus vulnerable to attack.

Indeed, the scorch marks plaguing Rod's room are not only similar to those on the injured heir himself, but also 'just like a mark [Faraday] could remember seeing on the floorboards of the little terraced house I grew up in, where my mother had once set down an iron' (*Little*, p. 142). The scorch marks are warnings of the downfall of the country house and its inhabitants at the hands of a newly-mobile working class. As Katharine Boehm observes, 'the violent objects in *The Little Stranger* are directly linked to domestic labour'.[72] The wave of supernatural events that plague the house from the beginning of Faraday's visits therefore targets objects with class connotations, such as the servant bells or the nursery speaking tube and the scorch marks seemingly caused by an iron – items which figured prominently in the life of his mother. The little stranger that haunts Hundreds and catalyses its destruction is therefore aligned with a threatening working-class agency. Notably, the ghost's scorch marks and childish scribbles rise up from beneath the surface, suggesting that the Ayreses' mistreatment of their servants is coming back to haunt them now that the same class is upwardly mobile. Embodying this working-class uprising, Faraday's resentment of the

[71] For these quotations I am indebted to Parker (p. 108).

[72] Katharina Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters', *Studies in the Novel*, 43 (2011), 237-257, (p. 254).

Ayreses leads to his 'peasant blood […] rising' (*Little*, p. 27). As Edensor states, '[r]uination produces a defamiliarised landscape in which the formerly hidden emerges'.[73] Returning to Hundreds and noting its ruin unlocks in Faraday the resentment he has harboured towards the ruling class that oppressed his parents and led to his own romantic disappointments in being 'thrown over' by a girl from a 'good Birmingham family' because he was not 'a suitable match' (*Little*, p. 39). Parker suggests that Faraday's repressed resentment is released when he returns home after his first return to Hundreds and opens the tin that stores old 'odd little fragments' from his past.[74] These 'fragments' reflect not only Faraday's repressed memories but also his desire to destroy Hundreds and the class it represents.

Rod suspects the doctor's self-serving obsession with the hall early in the novel and resents his attempts to help him and his family: 'are my legs estate property, like everything else around here? Got to patch them up, get a bit more wear out of them; never mind that you're grinding them down to stumps' (*Little*, p. 136). The image of Faraday 'grinding' Rod down underlines the fact that Faraday's social ascension is based on the erosion of the class-system that has thus far propped up Rod and his family. Indeed, Caroline notices that '[w]henever [Faraday] go[es] away, something happens here', and on the night she dies, Faraday falls asleep alone and dreams of 'slip[ping] like a poacher through the Hundreds gate and along the overgrown drive; to nudge open the swollen front door, to inch across the chequered marble; and then to go creeping, creeping towards her, up the still and silent stairs' (*Little*, pp. 320, 325). Waters suggests that Faraday is responsible for Caroline's death, the noun 'poacher' suggesting that he profits from her demise. Their relationship is therefore a microcosm of the decline of the aristocracy and their cultural usurpation by the upwardly-mobile working and middle classes. Caroline's fall from the highest landing in the house is thus aligned with her family's social downfall at the hands of Faraday in a disturbing image of

[73] Edensor, p. 109.

[74] Parker, p. 104.

postwar social mobility as a violent toppling of an innocent ruling class. At the end of the novel, Faraday claims to occasionally return to the house, which to him, 'is handsomer than ever' now that 'the house has thrown the family off' (*Little*, p. 498). It is no surprise, then, that in his continuing search for the little stranger that haunted the Ayreses, he looks at one of Hundreds's 'cracked window-pane[s]' and finds that 'the face gazing distortedly from it, baffled and longing, is my own' (*Little*, p. 499). As the little stranger on the margins of life at Hundreds, he seeks to possess the house in which his mother served in order to drive out the employers who take their social position for granted.[75]

Thus while Waters uses the decaying country house as a politically-progressive image of the postwar redistribution of wealth, she does so in such a violent way that the process is not wholly condoned by the readers who distrust the unsympathetic Faraday and feel he has mistreated the Ayres (in both senses of the word). The erosion of strict social hierarchies and the rise of social mobility is therefore presented, problematically, as Faraday's malevolent witch-hunt against a group of people for whom he harbours a 'dark dislike'. While Waters addresses Tey's depiction of the working-class as reprehensible in their refusal to serve the ruling class, her depiction of the violent Faraday as a working-class ally is equally problematic. The sadistic violence that appalled Waters in Tey's sympathetic middle class is merely transposed on to the Ayreses at the hands of Faraday's little stranger. Thus while Waters's depiction of the country house's decadence as part of postwar wealth redistribution is more progressive than Tey's account of working-class vandalism against The Franchise, Faraday's love for Hundreds and the violent means by which he wrests it from the ruling classes presents working-class social ascension as a dangerous, malicious, and frightening force. In making Faraday and the little stranger unsympathetic figures, Waters limits the extent of support for the postwar social flux that led to the decline of the country house and its

[75] Heilmann and Llewellyn have briefly outlined a similar reading of Hundreds as haunted by Faraday's memory of his deceased mother and his desire to take control of the house in which she worked, 'destroying the rightful owners in order to repossess her (Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 65).

class. In the character of Betty, however, Waters offers a glimmer of hope. When Faraday sees her at the end of the novel and finds that she is happily working in a factory, Waters suggests that working-class happiness lies beyond the country house and the outdated social systems it embodies. Waters thus rewrites Tey's conservative depiction of the working-class by moving Betty beyond the confines of the country house and giving her an alternative to service. Betty is, according to Waters, 'the image of the working class future, she's on her way up, she's on her way out', while Faraday is doomed to haunt the Hall as a relic of an eroded age.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced the connection between contemporary ruin lust and a conservative rhetoric of national decline. While imagery of decay can represent an idealisation of past traditions, however, I have suggested that, in the contemporary English country house novel, it represents an evaluation and reformulation of a problematic tradition. As Anne Janowitz highlights, the depiction of ruin in English literature has historically been connected with the issue of literary immortality, suggesting that Setterfield and Waters are concerned with the future of the genre.[76] While Janowitz views the picturesque deployment of ruin by literary Romantics as presenting authors as 'cut off from a continuous tradition', Setterfield and Waters use ruin in a more complex negotiation between past forms and their contemporary significance.[77] They simultaneously engage with literary predecessors in the English country house tradition and distinguish their texts from these generic forerunners by either leaving the setting to dilapidation or renovating it to something new. Both authors reflect Edensor's view of ruin as producing 'a defamiliarised landscape in which the formerly hidden emerges'. Setterfield uses ruin to challenge the conservative depiction of femininity in

[76] Janowitz, p. 6.

[77] Janowtiz, p. 77.

Jane Eyre, bringing marginalised and complex characters to the centre of the country house novel. Her protagonists, Vida and Margaret, use the ruin to confront their traumatic pasts and move forward. Setterfield's literary metaphors to describe the ruin of Angelfield suggest that the country house tradition requires deconstruction and reformulation. The author's reluctance to construct an alternative, however, is reflected in the site's liminal state at the end of the novel. Waters similarly uses the ruin to deconstruct the conservative politics of generic forerunners by imbuing the decaying Hundreds Hall with ideas of progress in imagery of wealth redistribution. Like Setterfield, she uses ruin to bring the marginalised to the centre, this time the eponymous little stranger that represents the oppressed working-class. However, her Gothic representation suggests that this working-class agency is sinister and violent, undermining her attempt to reconfigure Tey's conservatism. Both authors are therefore aware of the country house novel's problematic history and use images of ruin to signal their deconstruction of this tradition, though neither offers an effective alternative.

Fittingly for a final chapter, the ruin speaks to the core themes of this thesis. I have been arguing throughout that the contemporary English country house novel is a self-conscious form, a characteristic reflected in ruin which, as Hell et al. note, 'functions as a uniquely flexible and productive trope for modernity's self-awareness' and the 'reflexivity of a culture that interrogates its own becoming'.[78] Edensor's description of the ruin as a state in which 'the tricks that make a building a coherent ensemble are revealed, exposing the magic of construction' might also be said of the contemporary English country house novelists in chapter three that deconstruct their realist verisimilitude to expose their creative powers to suggest cultural capital.[79] In the novels of McEwan, Stace, and Litt, and in the ruin, 'form suddenly becomes foregrounded […] [as] the barriers between the valued and valueless dissolve'.[80] In the ruin's combination of past and present, and the opportunity it presents to

[78] Hell et al., pp. 6-7.

[79] Edensor, p. 109.

[80] Edensor, p. 117.

reflect on what has passed and what might come, the theme of lineage explored in my analysis of the hierarchy of detail in chapter one is also visible; as Albert Speer suggests, ruins are a 'bridge of tradition' to future generations.[81] What is more, Edensor's view of ruin as producing 'a defamiliarised landscape in which the formerly hidden emerges' also resonates with the current trend of bringing the margins to the centre in country house narratives, as I explored in chapter two. Combining the English country house novel's chief tropes of tradition, self-consciousness, and an examination of established (social) structures, the decaying country house suggests that the genre can only move forward by examining its past. To conclude this thesis then, I will explore the extent to which the contemporary English country house novel represents a decadent literary form as the setting continues to circulate in a context of national decline.

[81] Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 56.

Conclusion. A Decadent Genre?

Re-emerging at the turn of the millennium, the contemporary English country house novel shares numerous characteristics with the decadent literature that arose at the fin de siècle.[1] Both literary forms, in content and context, raise issues of 'decline and renewal' and shifting social relations.[2] As such, I will conclude this thesis by considering the extent to which the contemporary English country house novel can be regarded as a decadent genre. I use the frame of decadence to examine the genre's relationship to contemporary British literary culture and how far both can be said to be in a state of decline.

Like the contemporary English country house novel, decadent literature was met with critical suspicion; indeed, the term 'decadence' was adopted by eighteenth-century critics to disparage the movement.[3] As a result of circulating ideas of social degeneracy, decadent literature was widely regarded as a literary symptom of cultural decline.[4] The same association between national and literary decline is also present in the reaction to postwar English literature. Jed Etsy, for example, highlights the widespread 'intuitive belief that English literature has suffered a steady decline in the twentieth century and, moreover, that the decline can be correlated to and even explained by the contraction of British power'.[5] Indeed, as Dominic Head notes, the English novel in particular, prior to the 1980s, has often been characterized as

[1] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. xvii.

[2] Weir, p. xvi.

[3] Désiré Nisard, for example, used it against Victor Hugo and Romanticism in general in *Etudes de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834) (Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, 'Introduction', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 1-34, (p. 8)).

[4] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1892] (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

[5] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 1.

> provincial, insular, and dominated by conventional forms of realism, and it is this perception of an essentially uninventive literary scene that, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to repeated assertions that the English novel was an exhausted form, in a state of terminal decline.[6]

Thus it is assumed that contemporary English literature, 'in becoming provincial and ex-centric, also became stale and wan'.[7] The recent propagation of decline rhetoric in contemporary British culture (see chapter four), along with the accompanying anxieties about the readability of Man Booker nominees and literature as 'printed television' (see General Introduction), suggest that the idea of decadence is also resurging alongside the English country house novel.[8] For example, Head has suggested that 'a good deal of contemporary fiction in Britain is written under the sign of "reaction" rather than of "reinvention", more a form of commentary than a process of making new'.[9] Contemporary English literature, then, is commonly portrayed as the decadent product of a declining nation culturally eclipsed by globalisation and the contemporary English country house novel, as what John J. Su terms 'a dying genre', has taken a central role in this narrative.[10] Its characteristic intertextual references to ground-breaking and classic forerunners in some ways illustrate the contemporary novel's presumptive reliance on and consequent inferiority to the texts that came before it.

Contextually, too, contemporary Western culture bears certain similarities to the period that gave rise to decadent literature. For instance, David Weir suggests that the '[a]larmist scientists' at the turn of the twentieth century who 'warned that the universe would die of heat

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[6] Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 10. Indeed, while decadence was a European tradition, the country house genre is mostly English or Irish and consequently a more insular form. Malcolm Bradbury, however, highlights that 'the novel has in fact been dead for every single decade of [the twentieth] century' (Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin, 2001)).

[7] Etsy, p. 1.

[8] Bradbury, p. xi.

[9] Head, p. 9.

[10] John J. Su, 'Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel', *MFS*, 48 (2002),552-580, (p. 554).

loss' find parallels in today's concerns about global warming.[11] As usual, this worldwide issue has been pedalled by right-wing politicians as evidence of Britain's moral decline. UKIP MP, David Silvester, for example, has suggested that the extreme weather caused by global warming is, in fact, divine retribution for the UK's decision to legalise gay marriage.[12] This suggestion, absurd as it is, highlights another important parallel between the periods – the issue of gay rights. In nineteenth-century Britain, homosexuality was a criminal offence and a topical issue following the imprisonment of celebrity author, Oscar Wilde, in 1895. Though progress has been made through the legalisation of gay marriage in England, Wales and Scotland (2014), it remains illegal in Northern Ireland and the LGBT community face persecution worldwide. Similarly, women's rights campaigns that gave rise to the suffragette campaign at the turn of the previous century find parallels in Laura Bates's Everyday Sexism project and the continued resistance by many people to the concept of feminism.[13] While there are similarities between the social issues facing fin de siècle and contemporary Britain, these parallels do signify progress to a certain extent, even as they signal the need for further improvement. Above all else, these parallels highlight a shared movement at the turn of a new century to evaluate changing social values as evidence of the health of the nation.

Emerging in a period of social flux and economic recession, the contemporary English country house novel, like decadent fiction, is a novel of 'transition, a drama of unsettled aesthetics, and […] a mixture of literary tendencies'.[14] As I outlined in the General Introduction, the contemporary English country house novel is a fluid generic category including elements of Neo-Victorian, romance, and detective fiction, reflecting the mixture of literary tendencies ascribed to decadent literature. The different uses of decorative detail in

[11] Weir, p. 193.

[12] 'UKIP councillor blames storms and floods on gay marriage', *BBC* (18 January 2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-25793358> [accessed 20 February 2014].

[13] Laura Bates, *The Everyday Sexism Project* <http://www.everydaysexism.com/> [accessed 15 August 2015]; *The Antifeminist* <http://theantifeminist.com/> [accessed 15 August 2015].

[14] Weir, pp. xv, 14.

the genre evokes decadence's 'unsettled aesthetics', as authors such as Julian Fellowes use the trope to conservative ends whilst Ian McEwan and Wesley Stace use it to draw attention to servant characters traditionally overlooked by the genre (see chapter two). What is more, the genre's attention to both decorative details and wider political issues suggests a combination of what critics have defined as masculine and feminine writing in a mix of literary styles reminiscent of decadence. There is a critical consensus that, in decadent texts, 'the whole is subordinated to the parts', and decadent reading privileges the part over the whole.[15] The novels in chapter two therefore encourage decadent readings in drawing attention to marginal details. Towheed's description of decadent fiction as 'embedded in the discourse of multiple anxieties centred upon the act of reading' also resonates with the anxieties of reception present in the novels discussed in chapter three.[16] Indeed, the metafictive representations of authorship by which Toby Litt, McEwan, and Stace deconstruct their realist verisimilitude to highlight their skill as writers reflect the 'artificiality' that A. E. Carter posits is the chief characteristic of decadent literature.[17] Employing techniques which span from popular to highbrow, the contemporary English country house novel represents a cultural diffusion that echoes decadence's displacement from the realm of the aristocrat to that of the common man.[18] Both decadent literature and the contemporary English country house novel, then, employ literary techniques that reflect the context of social flux in which they were produced.

The contemporary English country house novel and decadent literature share a preoccupation with literary tradition. Chapters one and four have demonstrated that the genre is highly conscious and even critical of its conservative canonical tradition which has

[15] Havelock Ellis, *Affirmations* [1898] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), p. 175; Shafquat Towheed, 'Containing the Poisonous Text: Decadent Readers, Reading Decadence', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2006), pp. 1-31, (p. 3).

[16] Towheed, p. 13.

[17] A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 25.

[18] Weir, p. 153.

underrepresented women, gay men, and the working class. Using intertextual references to generic forerunners to highlight and evaluate the tradition, the contemporary English country house novel reflects Shafquat Towheed's characterisation of decadent fiction as 'explicitly intertextual' and 'inherently bibliographic', 'defined through the hinterland of texts it draws upon'.[19] Contemporary English country house novelists are often engaged in a process of readdressing the problematic aspects of a tradition repeatedly regarded by the media as an outdated and nostalgic form. However, while there are relatively few female writers in the canon of decadent literature, the contemporary English country house novel is produced by both male and female authors. The increasing focus on literary matrilineage in the genre since 2001 suggests a new movement in which the traditionally male icon is reclaimed and reappropriated from a more inclusive perspective. Thus while Murray G. H. Pittock's view of decadent novels as presenting an 'idolized prestigious or luxuriant past era' might also be true of contemporary English country house novels by Fellowes and Jane Sanderson, the genre as a whole is generally more critical of the history its prestigious setting represents.[20] That said, as highlighted in the General Introduction, the contemporary English country house novel remains racially narrow and focussed on the social dynamic between white, English people, ignoring the racial dimension of service that is increasingly present today. Though authors like Litt satirise the whiteness of the genre, none have effectively countered this issue with racially-diverse characters.

Like decadent fiction, the contemporary English country house novel has been aligned with national decline. The genre has re-emerged at a time the divide between rich and poor is increasing in an echo of the socio-economic extremities embodied in the country house's upstairs/downstairs division (see General Introduction). The simultaneous return of a form of patrimonial capitalism which produces a master/servant social dynamic and the resurgence of

[19] Towheed, pp. 20, 4.

[20] Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 83.

the country house setting in contemporary culture have therefore prompted accusations of national regression.[21] Although the contemporary English country house novel is often presented and understood as a symptom of decline and a conservative manifestation of nostalgia, however, this thesis has demonstrated that the form both celebrates and critiques one of the nation's most iconic and yet problematic genres. Aware of its position in a national literary tradition that is critically disparaged, the contemporary English country house novel manifests a more complex and self-conscious negotiation of existing generic expectations and contemporary concerns than many commentators suggest. It recuperates (some) marginalised voices traditionally suppressed by the country house genre and, to some extent, destabilises the distinctions between centre and margins, popular and highbrow. In doing so, the genre is not so much regressing to a historical tradition as evaluating it. Though read around the world by readers who hail from countries with different (and arguably less-prominent class and gender politics), the contemporary English country house novel represents an evaluation of England's literary and cultural traditions.

If, as John Brannigan suggests, the role of contemporary literature is to engage 'critically and dialogically with the culture it inhabits, with the society from which it is inseparable', then the English country house novel is a distinctly contemporary form in dialogue with its own conventions and the culture into which it has re-emerged.[22] By altering existing tropes and creating new themes such as ruin and authorship, the genre exhibits the 'reinvention' that Head claims is lacking in contemporary literature, even if it is haunted by the misgiving that its generic forerunners will always enjoy more literary prestige. As Neville Morley highlights, decadence 'does not necessarily mark the last stage before a cycle repeats itself', but might instead represent 'the penultimate stage before a range of possible endings,

[21] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

[22] John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 11-12.

or even […] a beginning'.[23] At the turn of the next century, then, readers might look back on the resurgence of the English country house novel since 2000 as a new literary epoch in the genre, or even in English fiction more broadly.

[23] Neville Morley, 'Decadence as a Theory of History', *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), 573-585, (p. 574).

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