

Affinity Study Guide

Affinity by Sarah Waters

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Plot Summary

Affinity is the second novel by English writer, Sarah Waters. In this novel, Margaret Prior begins visiting the female prisoners at Millbank prison in an attempt to help her overcome the depression that led to a suicide attempt the year before. As Miss Prior makes her visits, she becomes aware of a beautiful, young mystic. At first Miss Prior is fascinated by this woman's reported abilities, but it is the woman's apparent innocence that makes Miss Prior visit this mystic over and over again. In time Miss Prior comes to believe this woman is her soul mate, her affinity, leading her to agree to a plan that could lead to disaster for both women. Affinity is a gothic style mystery that will leave readers guessing even after the novel is done.

Miss Prior is put off by the prison at first, shocked at the way in which the prisoners are treated. The prisoners are not allowed to speak, are expected to work in silence daily, and are only allowed letters or visits from their family and friends a few times a year. However, it is believed that these women will benefit from visits by women like Miss Prior because the class with which Miss Prior and her contemporaries carry themselves is thought to help these prisoners aspire to a better life that does not include criminal acts.

Miss Prior's initial visits to the prison are difficult and she finds little solace in them. However, when Miss Prior sees Selina Dawes, Miss Prior learns that Selina Dawes is in Millbank for attacking a young woman who had come to her for guidance in spirituality. On their first meeting, Selina is cold and angry, causing Miss Prior to escape her cell quickly. However, over the next few weeks, Selina warms up to Miss Prior and they quickly become friends. In fact, Miss Prior finds herself drawn to Selina more and more.

Miss Prior's mother does not approve of her daughter's visits to Millbank. Miss Prior's younger sister is about to be married and everyone pities Miss Prior's mother because her eldest child has yet to find a spouse. This social pressure bothers Miss Prior, but it does not compare to her unhappiness with her brother's marriage to her friend, Helen. When Miss Prior's father was alive, Miss Prior and Helen were lovers who planned to take a trip to Italy. Unfortunately, Helen caved under social pressure and married Miss Prior's brother instead. It was this, coupled with the death of Miss Prior's father, that led to her suicide attempt.

As Miss Prior's mother places pressure on her to stop visiting the prison, Miss Prior finds herself visiting a spiritualists' library where she studies the case that led to Selina's imprisonment. The more Miss Prior learns, the more she becomes convinced that Selina is innocent of the charges against her. Therefore, when Selina confesses her love to Miss Prior, she believes her. This, coupled with flowers and other items that seem to miraculously appear in Miss Prior's room at home, makes Miss Prior not only believe Selina's confession of love, but to believe in her powers as a spiritual medium as well. When Selina suggests she might be able to escape Millbank, Miss Prior quickly agrees to run away with her.



Miss Prior buys Selina clothing and makes arrangements for the two of them to travel to Italy together. Then Miss Prior waits for Selina's spirits to help her escape Millbank. When Selina does not arrive in the night as promised, Miss Prior rushes to Millbank to find out what happened. Miss Prior learns that Selina has escaped. Miss Prior rushes home only to find one of the maidens from the prison waiting there. Miss Prior learns the maiden helped Selina escape the prison and that a new maid working in the Prior home is in fact Selina's maid. It is then that Miss Prior realizes she has been used in a plot to help Selina reunite with her maid, Ruth, and escape.



Prologue and Part 1: Pages 7-31

Prologue and Part 1: Pages 7-31 Summary

Prologue: 3 August 1873. Selina is locked in her room in Mrs. Brink's house. Mrs. Brink has died of a heart attack after seeing Selina in a session with a young woman that had gone too far. Peter Quick showed up and the young woman, Miss Madeleine Silvester, became frightened, causing Peter Quick to calm her hysterics. Mrs. Brink walked in and thought she saw her mother. Mrs. Brink collapsed from a heart condition Selina did not know she had. Mrs. Silvester showed up and called the police.

24 September 1874. Miss Margaret Prior arrives at the gates of Millbank Prison where she has decided to become a Lady Visitor, a lady of class who comes to visit the female prisoners to help inspire them to lives void of crime. Mr. Shillitoe, the prison warden, had once visited the Prior home and it has been suggested that becoming a Lady Visitor might help Miss Prior with some of her emotional depression since the death of her father. Mr. Shillitoe meets Miss Prior inside the prison and walks her up a tower to the offices of the head matron, Miss Haxby. Out the window of the tower, Miss Prior can see the female prisoners walking around in circles. Miss Prior is told this is their one hour exercise period. Miss Prior is struck by how dreary the women appear, how bleak their situation.

Miss Haxby goes over the rules with Miss Prior, stressing that she is not to take anything from the prisoners to give to family members and she is not to talk with them about news in the prison or out in the real world. Miss Haxby then tells her some of the routines of the prison before finally handing her over to Miss Ridley for a quick tour of the gaols. There are six wards, each holding a different type of prisoner. Ward A and B holds the newest set of prisoners, the Third Class. Wards E and F hold the star prisoners, the First and Second Class, and Star Class. These prisoners are ones who are well behaved, therefore they receive privileges the others might not, such as having the outer door of their cell open during working hours. Wards C and D hold the prisoners who are accused of terrible crimes or who have become difficult to discipline. There is one prisoner per cell. The prisoners are given a cot and bedding, a Bible, and tools with which to work their specific trade. The women are not allowed personal items other than those distributed by the prison.

One of the matrons, Miss Manning, takes Miss Prior around and introduces her to a few of the women on the various wards. Miss Prior also meets Mrs. Jelf, the matron on the top floor, the Star Class women. As Miss Prior walks around this ward, she notices through the peep hole of one cell a woman who has a flower. This catches Miss Prior by surprise because she knows that a prisoner is not allowed such items. Rather than tell one of the matrons, however, Miss Prior simply watches the young woman admire the flower. Later, as she is being escorted out of the prison, Miss Prior asks the warder escorting her if flowers grow near the prison. The man tells her nothing will grow in the soil around Millbank.



That night, Miss Prior shares her experience with her good friend, Helen. Miss Prior expresses a concern that her mother is working with Mr. Shillitoe to distract Miss Prior from her emotional depression, but Helen reassures her. That night, while writing in this journal, Miss Prior's mother brings her a dose of the chloral she has been prescribed for her depression. As the medicine begins to work, Miss Prior wonders about the girl with the flower.

2 September 1872. Selina Dawes plans to have a business card made up that announces her profession as a Trance Medium.

Prologue and Part 1: Pages 7-31 Analysis

The book is written in diary entries, beginning with a diary belonging to a so far unknown woman, a diary written a full year before the beginning of Miss Prior's own diary. This first entry describes a spiritual meeting that ended in a woman being assaulted and another suffering a heart attack. As the novel turns to Miss Prior's diary entries, the reader immediately realizes this first entry, the prologue, is from the pages of a diary written by a female prisoner. As Miss Prior begins visiting the prison at Millbank, the reader knows that the diary entry must be that of the young woman with the flower. However, the reader does not know anything about this young woman just yet, only that she is in prison for fraud and assault, until the next diary entry that gives her name as Selina Dawes and her profession as a trance medium. Unfortunately, this still does not tell the reader enough to form any opinions about this new character.

Miss Prior is the daughter of a prestigious scholar of class. Miss Prior has suffered from some sort of depression since her father's death, but the true source of this depression and the depth to which it has gone have only been hinted at. When Miss Prior learns that one of the prisoners is there because of an attempted suicide, this strikes a cord with Miss Prior, suggesting that she attempted the same thing at one point. However, the reader still does not know why. When Miss Prior meets with her friend, Helen, later in this diary entry, the reader sees a strong friendship that has become strained for an unknown reason. However, the reader is still unclear about Miss Prior's past or the situation around this friendship. The reader also knows that Miss Prior is taking a medication, but does not know why or what the medication might do to her mental state.

Miss Prior's visits to the prison cause her a great deal of grief since she finds herself empathizing with these women. It is clear to the reader that Miss Prior has a big heart and she is vulnerable to allowing one of these women to become unnaturally close to her. This suggests a conflict that will most likely propel the plot of the novel.



Part 1: Pages 32-55

Part 1: Pages 32-55 Summary

30 September 1874. Miss Prior's mother has suggested she not go back to the prison, but Miss Prior already empathizes with the prisoners and cannot stop thinking about their dreary lives that might be momentarily brightened by her visits. Therefore, instead of attending a session with an artist for her sister's bridal portrait, Miss Prior returns to Millbank. Miss Prior arrives at meal time and watches as the prisoners pick up their meal rations from the men's side of the prison and proceed to carefully eat the meat and watery soup with their meager utensils. Some of the women tell Miss Prior that they dislike eating after the men because they know the men touch their food with dirty hands.

After mealtime, Miss Prior goes to Mrs. Jelf's ward and asks to begin visiting with the prisoners. The first cell Mrs. Jelf where takes her belongs to an elderly woman known as Power. Power is in Millbank for running a brothel, even though she insists she only allowed good boys and girls to kiss in her parlour. Miss Prior then visits with Cook, a young lady given seven years in Millbank for killing her baby. Cook tells Miss Prior that she had been raped by the son of the woman for whom she worked as a maid, that the baby was a consequence of this union. Cook had been living in a house where she was not allowed a child and she accidentally smothered the baby in an attempt to keep it quiet.

After visiting Cook, Miss Prior walks with Mrs. Jelf and asks about the prisoner who had had the flower the day before. Mrs. Jelf tells her the woman's name is Selina Dawes, that she is a trance medium accused of assaulting one of her clients and causing the heart attack death of her patron. Mrs. Jelf allows Miss Prior to visit with Selina Dawes, locking her in the cell with the prisoner. Miss Prior talks to her, but Selina refuses to answer at first. This catches Miss Prior by surprise because the other woman had seemed to jump at the chance to speak to someone after such a long period of silence. When Selina does speak, it is to chastise Miss Prior for messing up the blanket on her bed. Selina then accuses Miss Prior of learning all these women's stories, but never talking about herself. To this, Miss Prior gives Selina a summary of her life, including where she lives and with whom. Selina then tells Miss Prior about spirits, suggesting that she is often visited by her spirit friends and they occasionally bring gifts, like the flower Miss Prior had seen. It is then that Miss Prior begins to truly understand how bleak a prisoner's life, Selina's life, can be.

Miss Prior runs into Mr. Shillitoe on her way out of the prison. Miss Prior suggests that there are certain women in the prison that Miss Prior might have to make her special friends and Mr. Shillitoe agrees. Miss Prior returns home on foot, causing her mother to worry further about her. Miss Prior is anxious to be alone, however, and locks herself in her room after dinner with a picture she has torn from a book of Crivelli's Veritas. It reminds Miss Prior of Selina Dawes.



30 September 1872. Selina keeps track of the people who have come to see her in her diary. One of these is a woman who believes she is haunted by an old love. Selina tells her the man is upset that he could never win her love and that they must help him deal with the reality of that heart break. When the session is done, the woman wants to pay Selina, but she refuses direct payment. However, Mr. Vincy, the owner of the hotel where Selina lives, brings her the money the woman left for her.

4 October 1872. Selina is upset over working with a woman who has lost five babies and will lose two more. Selina also becomes aware that Mr. Vincy is peeking through her key-hole at night.

Part 1: Pages 32-55 Analysis

Miss Prior returns to Millbank despite her mother's fear that being around these women will be too much for her. Miss Prior empathizes with these women; she wants to make their situation easier. Every time she goes to the prison, Miss Prior learns more about life as a prisoner, such as the fact that the men touch the women's food purposely with dirty hands. Miss Prior also is aware that these women cannot speak unless they are talking with a Lady Visitor. This makes Miss Prior feel as though her visits are extremely important to these poor women.

Miss Prior visits Selina Dawes, the woman with the flower, and discovers an angry young woman who clearly feels a visit from someone like Miss Prior is below her. However, this young woman warms up to Miss Prior when she reveals things about her own life, such as where and with whom she lives. This seems like a nice gesture on the surface, but the reader will later realize what a gross mistake this is on Miss Prior's part. However, at this point it becomes very clear how Miss Prior is quickly becoming engrossed by Selina Dawes, especially when she takes a picture that looks like Selina to her room.

Selina, in her diary dated a year before, talks about her clients in her business as a trance medium and her living situation. Selina appears to be honestly trying to help people with her gifts.



Part 1: Pages 56-74

Part 1: Pages 56-74 Summary

2 October 1874. Ellis, a maid in the Prior household, gives her notice. Ellis claims there are ghosts in the attic above her room, even though it is above Miss Prior's room and she has never heard anything. To escape her mother's anger at this abandonment, Miss Prior goes to the reading room at the British Museum where she used to go often with her father. Miss Prior spends the day studying prisons.

6 October 1874. Miss Prior goes to Millbank and visits the infirmary. The infirmary is not very full and most of the women there are accused of causing their own injuries, such as Wheeler who purposely cut her leg and pressed rust into it. It is at this point when Miss Prior first hears the term 'special friend' when she learns that some of the women make romantic connections with other female prisoners. When Miss Prior then arrives on the ward, she finds that the women are having their bi-weekly lessons. Miss Prior pauses outside Selina Dawes' cell and hears her reciting a Bible passage, but when she sees Selina's discomfort, she moves away. Miss Prior visits with two women, one who appears to have gone insane and another who is a prostitute outraged by Miss Prior's method of dressing. This last woman wants Miss Prior to take a message to another prisoner, whom Miss Prior later learns is her lover. Miss Prior refuses as she has been told to do, causing the woman great distress.

When Miss Prior arrives home that night, she finds her mother has hired a new maid named Vigers. Later that night, Miss Prior's mother notices her diary and wonders about what she is writing. Miss Prior finds herself unwilling to share the diary with her mother, making an effort to hide the book. Miss Prior is afraid someone might think her thoughts trifling, not unlike another diary she wrote and later burned.

12 October 1872. Selina makes notes in her diary from a book on spirituality, notes that explain how spirits relate to mediums. Selina has also made notes of ways to make an object look luminous or how to keep a flower from fading.

Part 1: Pages 56-74 Analysis

Miss Prior reveals to the reader that her father was a scholar when she goes to the British Museum. Miss Prior also turns to books for information, showing herself as something of the scholar. However, Miss Prior lives in a time when women were not career oriented, therefore her studies simply appear to be a way to pass time until she marries. The reader has become aware at this point that Miss Prior is the eldest child of the Prior family and both her younger siblings have either already married or are to be married soon. This suggests that Miss Prior has no interest in marriage, but the reader is not clear on why at this point in the novel.



Miss Prior returns to the prison and learns more about the life of a female prisoner. This experience draws Miss Prior in further, but it also causes her greater emotional distress, suggesting to the reader that her already fragile emotional state could be taxed by these visits, making her susceptible to someone who might try to take advantage of her. To this end, the reader reads a diary entry by Selina Dawes that suggests both that Selina is curious about the spirituality with which she claims to work, and that Selina knows how to trick people into thinking spirits are visiting them. The reader is unclear at this point if Selina is a true medium, or just a really good actress.



Part 1: Pages 75-95

Part 1: Pages 75-95 Summary

15 October 1874. Miss Prior arrives at the prison and finds some of the matrons awaiting a new delivery of prisoners. Miss Prior accompanies them as they take the girls through the initial interviews. The new girls are taken into a room where a clerk writes down their names, crime, and length of sentence. The girls are then taken to another room where their hair is cut. The women balk at this process, but each one is forced to submit. The women are given the choice to keep their hair or donate it. These women all elect to get rid of the hair. After this, the women are forced to strip out of their clothing and taken to be examined by the doctor. Miss Prior elects to leave at this point.

Miss Prior is taken to the wards by Miss Brewer, the chaplain's clerk. Miss Brewer reads the incoming and outgoing mail each day and delivers it to the cells. The prisoners are allowed to receive or send a letter only once every two months. Some of the prisoners, Miss Brewer says, never receive or send mail. This list includes Selina Dawes. When Miss Prior visits Selina Dawes, she asks her about this. Selina insists she has all the friends she could possibly need in her spirit friends. It is then that Selina tells Miss Prior about the crime that brought her to Millbank. Selina then tells Miss Prior that she can see her father about her. Miss Prior balks, insisting that Selina is playing with her. Selina touches Miss Prior's locket as she talks about her father. This upsets Miss Prior because the locket is a gift from her father.

16 October 1874. Miss Prior wakes the next morning and finds her locket missing. Miss Prior is deeply upset, not because of the loss of a gift her father gave her, but because the locket held a lock of Helen's hair. However, Miss Prior does not report this theft to anyone because she hopes it will be returned to her.

3 November 1872. The weather has been bad, so Selina did not expect any customers. Therefore, when Mrs. Brink came with her maid, Ruth, Selina thought she was the mother of another customer angry with Selina's advice. However, Mrs. Brink tells Selina about the many mediums she has seen in the past and how they cheated her. Mrs. Brink then shows Selina a picture that shocks her and convinces her to help Mrs. Brink. On 6 November 1872. Mrs. Brink is among Selina's many clients. On 13 November 1872. Mrs. Brink is Selina's only client. On 17 November 1872. Mrs. Brink has grown unhappy with the tiny, filthy room where Selina lives.

Part 1: Pages 75-95 Analysis

Miss Prior visits the prison and learns yet more about the habits and rituals there. Miss Prior also learns that Selina has no family or friends outside the prison, causing her to feel pity for the poor young woman. At the same time, however, Selina attempts to conjure up Miss Prior's father for her, but Miss Prior refuses to listen. Miss Prior does



not necessarily disbelieve Selina's powers to speak with spirits, she simply does not want to think that her father is stuck in this world when there should be something better for such a gentle soul elsewhere.

Miss Prior's locket is stolen. Miss Prior assumes a maid broke it and took it to have it fixed, but there is no proof of this. At the same time, Miss Prior knows her mother is not thrilled with her insistence in wearing only this piece of jewelry, therefore she decides not to tell anyone it is missing. Despite this generosity to the thief, Miss Prior is devastated because the locket held a piece of Helen's hair. This admission reveals to the reader that Miss Prior and Helen's relationship was far deeper than the reader has previously suspected. In fact, it appears at this point that the relationship was a romantic one that has left Miss Prior devastated. The reader must then wonder if maybe Miss Prior's depression had more to do with Helen than with her father's death.

Selina's diary entries talk about Mrs. Brink, the woman who died of a heart attack in the prologue. This appears to be the beginning of the relationship between the two women. Important from these entries is the fact that Mrs. Brink felt drawn to Selina for an unknown reason and the fact that she is unhappy with where Selina lives. These two things will lead to the series of events that caused Mrs. Brink's death as the plot continues to unravel.



Part 1: Pages 95-121

Part 1: Pages 95-121 Summary

17 October 1874. Miss Prior has a discussion with her family, a neighbor, and her sister's fiancé about Selina Dawes. During this discussion, Miss Prior argues for Selina's innocence, but Stephen and the others feel that if Selina was convicted in court, she must clearly be guilty. Stephen then suggests that if Selina were innocent, perhaps she was protecting a lover who had committed the crime, but Miss Prior insists this could not be possible because Selina receives no mail or visitors.

25 November 1872. Selina writes in her diary that she had a fight with her landlord's wife that ended with food flying at the dinner table.

21 October 1874. Miss Prior sees the prison laundry before she visits some of the prisoners. The first woman is Osborne, who argues with Miss Prior when she refuses to talk to her about world news. The second is Nash, a young woman who made counterfeit coins. Miss Prior then goes to visit Selina Dawes. They talk about Selina's first encounters with spirits when she was a small child. Selina was living with her aunt and it was her aunt who guided her through the growth of her gift. Miss Prior tries to ask Selina about Peter Quick, the spirit Selina claims assaulted Miss Silvester, but Selina refuses to answer. As Miss Prior is about to leave, Selina notices the notebook she uses to make notes about her visits. Selina takes a piece of paper from it and writes a note to Miss Prior. As Miss Prior leaves the prison, she reads the note. It tells her that the spirits took her locket.

26 November 1872. Selina has moved into Mrs. Brink's house at Mrs. Brink's request. Selina has been given a room of her own, a room that once belonged to Mrs. Brink's mother. It is because of Mrs. Brink's mother that Mrs. Brink has contacted Selina, therefore she felt living in the room would make contacting her easier. Mrs. Brink has also given Selina her own maid, Ruth.

Part 1: Pages 95-121 Analysis

Miss Prior believes Selina is innocent. The thought is in its embryonic stage at this point, but the seed has been planted. Miss Prior is a very trusting person and despite the warnings of the employees of the prison, Miss Prior has become attached to Selina Dawes.

At the same time Miss Prior begins visiting Selina Dawes more and more, the reader learns how Selina met Mrs. Brink and came to live in her home. Mrs. Brink had been desperate to reconnect with her mother who died when she was young. Mrs. Brink has gone to other mediums who were fake and used her to get money. Mrs. Brink is convinced that Selina would not do this. The reader, however, is not quite so convinced.



Part 2: Pages 125-175

Part 2: Pages 125-175 Summary

23 October 1874. Miss Prior stumbles on the British National Association of Spiritualists. They have a library and Miss Prior requests permission to use it. Miss Prior sees a group of wax molds. These molds are reportedly molds made from the faces and hands of spirits who have materialized to mediums during their trances. Among these is the hand of Peter Quick, Selina Dawes' spirit guide. Apparently inspired by this, Miss Prior asks the spiritualist in the library about Selina. This man suggests that Selina's arrest was improper and that her only mistake that night was to bring forth her spirit guide with a woman who was unprepared for the situation.

Miss Prior then reads through some papers produced by the Spiritualist Association. In these papers are the story of Miss Prior's trial. At first, the writer of the articles appears to support Miss Prior. However, this support begins to wane when Selina herself testifies and is unable to defend her decision to see Miss Silvester on her own, without witnesses, and to ask the young woman to remove her clothing. Selina is also made to look a fool when she refuses to attempt to conjure Peter Quick during her testimony. Another woman in the room notices what Miss Prior is reading. The woman tells her that Selina would often be tied up in her closet, a specially made curtained area, when Peter Quick would appear to keep skeptics from thinking Peter Quick was Selina in costume. Finally, Miss Prior sees a picture of Peter Quick in the paper and finds the eyes familiar for an unknown reason.

9 December 1872. Mrs. Brink insists that Selina Dawes take it easy, saving her energy for her séances with Mrs. Brink rather than weakening her powers with visits with other clients.

28 October 1874. It has grown cold, causing many of the prisoners to suffer with a chill due to the cold in their cells and a lack of protective clothing. Today Miss Prior sees the visiting rooms where many of the prisoners are allowed to see their family and friends four times a year for fifteen minutes. Miss Prior then goes to the wards and visits several of the prisoners, including Power. Power has become sick. Mrs. Jelf sneaks medicine and a flannel to Power to keep her well. Miss Prior puts off visiting Selina until the end of her time on the wards. When they visit, Miss Prior asks Selina about Mrs. Brink and her time with her. Miss Prior also asks about Peter Quick, learning that each medium has a guiding spirit and that Peter was hers. Selina then shows Miss Prior a trick in which she can make it appear that someone wrote on her arm. Miss Prior does not know what to make of this trick. Later, Selina's cell neighbor tells her that Selina is visited nightly by spirits, that they make a lot of noise that keeps the poor woman awake.

17 December 1872. Mrs. Brink gives Selina an emerald necklace that once belonged to Mrs. Brink's mother in the hopes of making Selina's powers greater. On 19 December



1872, Ruth has sewn cloth to make a cabinet for Selina to use during her trances. On 8 January 1873, Selina has worked for two weeks trying to conjure Mrs. Brink's mother. It appears to work on one occasion. All the while, Ruth watches and helps Selina when it is over and she is weak.

Part 2: Pages 125-175 Analysis

Miss Prior begins investigating Selina Dawes' crime, reading newspaper articles that offer full transcripts of the testimony at the trial. Although the story in the paper is clearly the same as the one Selina has told Miss Prior, support for Selina began to drop during the trial as Selina took the stand. Miss Prior does not understand this, nor does the reader. Selina refuses to conjure Peter Quick during the trial and this seems to have caused some doubt in her story. However, Selina's reasons for doing so seem reasonable enough to Miss Prior. Not only this, but her growing friendship with Selina appears to have clouded Miss Prior's eyes. It is clear now that Miss Prior believes Selina to be innocent.

At the same time Selina is learning more about Selina's crime, the reader is learning more about the days that lead up to the crime that caused Selina to be placed in Millbank. Mrs. Brink is a trusting woman who has brought Selina to her home and given her expensive gifts with the hope of speaking to her deceased mother. Mrs. Brink is a desperate woman who is much too trusting of this strange woman. However, when Selina makes Mrs. Brink's mother speak to her child, it appears that Selina is the real thing and she can do what Mrs. Brink wants desperately. The reader should, however, remain skeptical.



Part 2: Pages 177-195

Part 2: Pages 177-195 Summary

2 November 1874. Miss Prior escapes to Millbank among the preparations for Priscilla's wedding. When she arrives, Miss Prior learns that one of the female prisoners has had an emotional breakdown that ended in the destruction of the prisoner's cell. Miss Prior is taken to see the woman in the dark cell, a cell that is padded where the troubled prisoner is left in the dark for hours at a time to exert discipline. Back on the ward, Miss Prior visits several of the prisoners. Each one wants to know all Miss Prior knows about the disturbed prisoner, but Miss Prior cannot share this information. Finally Miss Prior goes to visit Selina and finds her distraught. Selina claims that her spirit friends have been disturbing her so much that she cannot find any peace. Miss Prior touches her hands and finds them so cold that she slips her own gloves on Selina's hands. Miss Prior then notices wax on Selina's floor, something that should not be there, and she has visions of Peter Quick's wax hand crawling on the floor. This makes Miss Prior sick and ends the visit.

25 January 1873. Selina tells Mrs. Brink that her own spirit guide has found her. Selina tells Mrs. Brink that this spirit, Peter Quick, has requested that she sit with a group of Mrs. Brink's friends. Mrs. Brink immediately sends Ruth to gather her friends.

26 January 1873. Selina has a séance with Mrs. Brink and her friends. Peter Quick arrives as Selina sits in her cabinet. Mrs. Brink calls Peter out to the group of people where he introduces himself. Selina hears everything that happens as Peter entertains the group. When it is over, Mrs. Brink's friends leave money for Selina. Ruth tells Selina she did good.

Part 2: Pages 177-195 Analysis

Miss Prior goes to the prison and learns about what the prison officials call breaking out, the nervous breakdowns some of the women are prone to have. Miss Prior finds this disturbing and it causes her to worry for Selina. Miss Prior puts off her visit with Selina so as not to cause the matrons to realize how she feels about the prisoner, but finally she visits and they touch for the first time, holding hands. When Miss Prior sees wax on Selina's floor, she knows this is wrong because the prisoners are not allowed things like wax. Instead of raising suspicion, however, this causes Miss Prior to think of the mold of Peter Quick's hand. By thinking in this way, it is clear to the reader that Selina is above suspicion to Miss Prior already.

Selina begins having séances with Mrs. Brink's friends when Peter Quick begins appearing to her, earning her money. After the first séance, Ruth tells Selina she has done good. The reader thinks this could be just a compliment from a faithful servant, but will later think back on it and see another implication.



Part 3: Pages 199-233

Part 3: Pages 199-233 Summary

5 November 1874. Priscilla is married exactly two years after the death of her father. Miss Prior becomes aware of the pitying glances from her mother's friends, aware that they all think Miss Prior herself will never marry now that both her younger siblings are married. Now the house has grown quiet and Miss Prior sees herself growing old with her mother. On 10 November 1874, Helen brings Miss Prior her medication, causing Miss Prior to feel uncomfortable due to the memory of their passion in that very room.

14 November 1874. Miss Prior's mother thinks she is done with her visits to Millbank, but Miss Prior proves her wrong by visiting the prison that day. Miss Prior visits several of the women before going to Selina. Selina is hurt that Miss Prior has not been to the prison in so long, but Miss Prior quickly puts her fears to rest. Selina and Miss Prior discuss love for a time, with Selina suggesting no earthbound person could truly understand love.

20 November 1874. Miss Prior visits Selina again and tells her of her disappointment that she had not been able to go to Italy as she had planned, but that Priscilla has gone there on her honeymoon trip. They talk of Italy and all they would do if they could go there. After this visit, Miss Prior runs into Miss Haxby. Miss Haxby questions Miss Prior's frequent visits to Selina Dawes and suggests that she should not become too attached to one prisoner. This argument continues as Mr. Shillitoe approaches. Miss Prior is able to convince Mr. Shillitoe that her visits to Selina are beneficial because of Selina's lack of outside support.

10 March 1873. Many people come to the dark circles, the séances, now. Peter Quick often dotes on the pretty women, but treats the men badly, such as a man who comes with a new hat. Peter wears the hat throughout the session and then ruins it before leaving it for the man. Ruth claims later the hat was much cheaper than the man claimed.

21 November 1874. A bouquet of orange blossoms is on Miss Prior's desk when she returns home from a visit to Helen. Miss Prior asks everyone in the house where they came from, but no one seems to know. Since Miss Prior had spoken to Selina about that particular flower the day before, she suspects that Selina's spirits had placed them there. Miss Prior's mother accuses her of being ill again, but Miss Prior insists her health is fine.

23 November 1874. Miss Prior returns to the Association of Spiritualists where she gets into a conversation with the same librarian. Miss Prior learns that many young women who begin to come into their powers are driven insane if not guided properly. It is suggested that this is what Selina Dawes was attempting with Miss Silvester when the



assault took place. When the librarian is called away, Miss Prior studies the mold of Peter Quick's hand again, noting the rough, misshapen knuckles.

24 November 1874. Miss Prior visits Selina Dawes again, careful to save her for the end of her visit and to be formal when saying goodbye.

2 April 1873. Peter makes one of the clients tie Selina to her chair in the cabinet so that the naysayers cannot suggest that Selina is Peter in a costume. When Selina is released, her wrists are chafed, causing Ruth to exclaim at the brutality of Peter Quick. One of the clients question Selina about Peter Quick, wondering what about her causes Peter to pick her out to help and tease during the sessions. Ruth suggests that she might have some powers of her own.

Part 3: Pages 199-233 Analysis

Miss Prior's younger sister is married, leaving Miss Prior to have visions of herself growing old with her mother. Miss Prior feels a little guilty that her presence is keeping her mother from taking up a position in the household of one of her married children. Miss Prior also feels afraid of the future she sees for herself, a loveless, boring future that has her growing old alone. This thought, perhaps, draws Miss Prior even closer to the future she can almost feel with Selina Dawes. This thought is helped by the magical arrival of flowers in her bedroom. Miss Prior is beginning to believe Selina's claims of spirituality, a belief that could bring disaster.

The reader learns from Selina's own diary how she came into contact with Peter Quick and it was him who suggested the séances between Selina and Mrs. Brink's friends. Peter appears to be the driving force in all Selina does. At the same time, the reader knows that Selina is not Peter Quick in costume because of the ropes Peter Quick insists on placing on her during the séances. However, this does not preclude the idea that Peter Quick is a person pretending to be a spirit. The only question is, if this is true, who is Peter Quick.



Part 3: Pages 234-281

Part 3: Pages 234-281 Summary

28 November 1874. Miss Prior has a new escort on a visit to Millbank. This escort, Miss Craven, shows Miss Prior the bathrooms and where they store the inmates' clothing. Miss Craven shows Miss Prior inside some of the boxes that hold the prisoners' belongings and Miss Prior finds herself wondering how many of the matrons laugh over the items the prisoners bring to prison. When Miss Prior spots Selina's box, she fakes a fainting spell. When Miss Craven goes for help, Miss Prior climbs up to the box and looks through Selina's clothing. Along with a dress, stockings, and shoes, Miss Prior finds the hair cut from Selina's head upon her arrival at jail. Miss Prior wants to take it, but Miss Craven returns with Miss Ridley before she can. So upset by nearly getting caught, Miss Prior decides to return home immediately rather than visit with the prisoners.

2 December 1874. Miss Prior visits with some of the prisoners, discovering that Power has become seriously ill but the doctor will not move her to the infirmary. Miss Prior then visits with Selina. As they talk, Miss Brewer arrives and announces that Selina has been scheduled to move to Folham, a much more lenient prison. This news should excite Selina, but she tells Miss Prior she cannot leave Millbank. Out of desperation, Selina picks up a trencher and hits Miss Brewer across the eyes with it. Mrs. Jelf comes immediately and locks Selina behind her gate while she and Miss Prior move Miss Brewer to the matron's quarters. Miss Haxby arrives and has Selina taken to the dark cell. Miss Prior is to give testimony, but she is so upset that she asks to leave.

Miss Prior walks home, hoping to go straight to bed, but learns that her mother is hosting a dinner party. Miss Prior is forced to attend. During the party, Miss Prior becomes so emotionally distraught that she begins to talk about the darker side of Millbank in front of company despite her mother's attempts to quiet her. Finally Miss Prior is dismissed to her room where she finds the braid of hair that had been inside the box of Selina's personal effects. The doctor is called. Laudanum is ordered for Miss Prior.

26 May 1873. Ruth brings Selina a new client, Miss Isherwood. This woman is thought to have her own powers and has come to have Selina and Peter Quick help her develop them. During their session, Peter Quick has Miss Isherwood order Selina around, including forcing her to remove her clothing.

11 December 1874. Miss Prior's mother has demanded that she no longer go to Millbank. In fact, Miss Prior's mother has ordered her daughter to write a letter to Mr. Shillitoe and explain that she will not be returning. Instead, Miss Prior has Vigers clean her suit and prepare it for another trip to the prison. At the prison, Miss Prior is taken to speak with Miss Haxby and Mr. Shillitoe. They both express concern about Miss Prior's visits to Selina, but Miss Prior once again convinces them that her visits to Selina are



beneficial. When Miss Prior visits Selina, she finds her on one of the lower wards, thinner and working her fingers bloody on a new job. Selina tells Miss Prior that they are soul mates, that Miss Prior has received gifts from the spirits because they know that Miss Prior is Selina's affinity. Selina refuses to wait four more years to be with Miss Prior, however. Instead she wishes to escape the prison with the help of her spirits. At first Miss Prior refuses to discuss an escape plan, but as she is leaving she realizes that Selina is right, they are soul mates. Miss Prior goes back into the prison and tells Selina she will help her.

30 May 1873. Selina relates a dream she had in which she was locked in a coffin, unable to move. Then Selina became aware that there was someone in the coffin with her, but she could not figure out if the voice was Mrs. Brink, her aunt, or Ruth.

Part 3: Pages 234-281 Analysis

Miss Prior looks through Selina's private belongings and finds her braided hair that had been cut from her head when she arrived at the prison. Miss Prior wants to steal the hair, but is afraid she will be found out. Later, however, the hair suddenly appears on Miss Prior's bed. Miss Prior believes the hair had come to her like the orange blossoms, through some spirit that is friends with Selina. However, the reader is beginning to wonder if something else might not be going on here.

Miss Prior witnesses Selina assaulting one of the prison employees when she learns that she will be transferred to another prison. Miss Prior believes that Selina has done this because the move would prevent them from seeing one another again even though it would be a better place for Selina to spend the rest of her sentence. Selina even tells Miss Prior that she has done this to keep them together. In the same breath, Selina tells Miss Prior she wants to escape from Millbank. Selina says that she and Miss Prior are soul mates. Perhaps Miss Prior is a little too trusting, but she agrees to help Selina escape because she wants to be with her, she wants to be loved. Miss Prior trusts Selina and this is a trust that the reader hopes is worthwhile.

Selina, in her diary entries, continues to tell of her exploits with Peter Quick. These exploits seem to include a great deal of sexuality, especially when women are involved. This could be because Peter Quick was a cad in his earthly life, or there could be other reasons of which the reader is not yet aware. These sessions, however, will prove to be important as the novel reaches its surprising end.



Part 4: Pages 285-318

Part 4: Pages 285-318 Summary

21 December 1874. Miss Prior receives small tokens from Selina every day now. Miss Prior even believes she can feel Selina in the room with her at night and hears a sound, like the bells at Millbank, that wake her each morning. When Miss Prior visits Selina, they make plans with Selina instructing Miss Prior on what she must do to prepare for their escape.

23 December 1874. Miss Prior learns that she, her mother, brother, and Helen are to visit Priscilla and her new husband on their estate in three weeks. This shortens the amount of time Miss Prior has to prepare for Selina's escape. Miss Prior takes the opportunity to sit her brother down and ask about her personal finances. Stephen promises to show her everything the following day when he comes to their house where their father kept the papers in his study.

24 December 1874. Stephen shows Miss Prior that her father has left her a substantial amount of money that is hers to do with as she pleases, as long as she has his signatures on all drafts presented to the bank. Stephen then gives her a blank, but signed, bank draft.

6 January 1875. Miss Prior convinces her mother to allow her to remain behind when the family travels to Priscilla's new home in a few days. A few days later, Miss Prior goes to see Selina and tells her all she has done to prepare for their escape to Italy. As they talk, Selina sees the velvet collar that Miss Prior now wears around her throat, one that Selina once wore during her séances in which Peter Quick showed himself. Finally they set a date for Selina's escape, January 20, St. Agnes Eve.

14 June 1873. Another woman asks for a session like Miss Isherwood's. Through the end of June and the first of July, Selina visits with several women like Miss Isherwood, taking in a great amount of money with Peter's help.

15 January 1875. Miss Prior takes out thirteen hundred pounds from her bank and arranges for passports for herself and Selina, under an alias. On 16 January 1875, Miss Prior begins taking larger doses of her laudanum because she believes it strengthens the connection between herself and Selina. That same day, Miss Prior purchases clothing for herself and Selina for their journey.

19 January 1875. Miss Prior visits her father's grave to say goodbye. Then Miss Prior visits Selina late in the evening and watches her as she prepares for bed. Mrs. Jelf comes and admires Selina as she lies in her bed. Miss Prior waits for a few minutes outside the prison for a cab. Mrs. Jelf comes and begins to walk home, leaving Miss Prior wondering what kind of a life Mrs. Jelf has outside of Millbank.



20 January 1875. Everything is packed and ready for Selina's arrival. Miss Prior writes a letter to Helen to say goodbye and let her know she has a new love. Miss Prior then waits late into the night, convinced Selina will come before dawn. However, Selina never arrives.

Part 4: Pages 285-318 Analysis

Miss Prior makes arrangements for her escape to Italy with Selina Dawes, plans that include learning about and withdrawing some of the money her father set aside for her. As Miss Prior learns about this money, it becomes obvious to the reader that Miss Prior's father assumed she would never marry, suggesting he was aware of her affection for her own sex. This is a secret that Miss Prior assumes no one knows, but now that the reader looks back, the reader can see that almost everyone in the novel must have known about Miss Prior's relationship with Helen and how the ending of that relationship must have led to Miss Prior's previous suicide attempt.

Miss Prior believes that Selina is sending her things through her spirits and through her spirits they are together in her room all night. This feeling is enhanced by the laudanum, leaving the reader curious if the feeling is not just the laudanum and nothing more. Through Selina's diary entries, the reader is beginning to get more and more of a sense that Selina is not a true medium, that she is in it for the money. This sense is underscored by the listing of how much each customer paid after a session and the lavish lifestyle Mrs. Brink has given to Selina. This brings into question Selina's true motives, especially when she fails to arrive at Miss Prior's home the night of the planned escape.



Part 5: Pages 321-351

Part 5: Pages 321-351 Summary

21 January 1875. Miss Prior rushes to Millbank shortly after dawn, convinced something terrible has happened to Selina. However, when she arrives, Miss Prior learns that Selina has escaped. Miss Haxby believes that one of the matrons helped Selina by giving her a matron's boots and cloak. However, the night matron is there and claims that Selina had been in her bed at midnight. Miss Prior quickly leaves the prison, anxious to return home and see if Selina is there. When she arrives, a woman in a matron's cloak is waiting for her, but it is Mrs. Jelf, not Selina. Miss Prior welcomes Mrs. Jelf into her home and they begin to talk.

Mrs. Jelf admits that she had sneaked Selina out of the prison at nine o'clock and paid the night matron to say she was in her bed at midnight. Mrs. Jelf did this because Selina had helped her contact her dead child. In fact, Selina had given her a locket from her dead son with a lock of his blond hair inside. Miss Prior sees this locket and knows it to be her own, to be Helen's hair inside. Then Mrs. Jelf tells Miss Prior the most startling news. Mrs. Jelf had come to the Prior home not to see Miss Prior, but to see Selina's maid. To see Ruth Vigers. Mrs. Jelf knew about the maid because she often had sneaked letters to and from Selina to Vigers.

Miss Prior becomes upset and begins tearing at the velvet collar around her throat, finally removing it with a knife that leaves a nick on her throat. Miss Prior then rushes up the stairs and discovers that her luggage, her money, and her tickets for the trip to Italy are all gone. It is then that Miss Prior realizes it had been Vigers who was leaving the small gifts in her room, Vigers who had made her feel as though the spirits were keeping she and Selina connected. Miss Prior rushes outside and reports the theft to a police officer, but then realizes how crazy she sounds and stops.

18 July 1873. Peter Quick became angry with two men in the circle at a séance and began to bait them, making them sound ignorant. When they mock Selina, Peter drops a crab in one man's lap. That same night a new girl approaches Selina. Her name is Marguerite Silvester.

21 January 1875. Miss Prior is darkly depressed, unsure what time it might be. Miss Prior has set everything to rights in the house and is finishing her story before she burns the diary in which she has written. Miss Prior has managed to erase every trace of Selina Dawes and Ruth Vigers. Now Miss Prior is free to end her life.

Part 5: Pages 321-351 Analysis

Miss Prior learns that Selina has escaped the prison, not with the help of her spirits, but with the very earthly help of Mrs. Jelf and Ruth Vigers. In fact, Miss Prior sees the locket that Selina has given Mrs. Jelf and realizes that Selina has carefully played both



women. The entire plan had always been to escape from Millbank in order to be reunited with Ruth Vigers, not to be with Miss Prior or to help Mrs. Jelf speak with her dead child. Now it all makes sense to both Miss Prior and the reader.

Miss Prior takes the realization of what Selina has done hard. Miss Prior had been truly in love despite everything. This is the second time that Miss Prior's heart has been broken. The first time Miss Prior had attempted suicide. This time the reader knows that her attempt will be successful. It is a sad ending to the life of a woman who should have had everything, but discovers she has nothing. The contrast between Miss Prior's life and Selina's is a startling one, one that shows the good gal does not always win.



Characters

Miss Margaret Prior

Miss Margaret Prior is the daughter of a wealthy scholar and his wife. Miss Prior's father passed away nearly two years ago. Not long after his death, Miss Prior had attempted suicide. The family believes the cause of this suicide attempt is grief over the death of her father. However, as the plot develops, the reader learns that the true reason Miss Prior had attempted suicide is because she had been involved in an affair with a woman named Helen, but Helen ended the relationship and married Miss Prior's brother, Stephen. This has left Miss Prior heartbroken and forced to watch her ex-lover live a different life right under her nose.

Miss Prior begins visiting Millbank Prison in order to focus on people with problems bigger than her own. While visiting the women at Millbank, Miss Prior meets Selina Dawes. Selina had been convicted the year before of assault and fraud due to the heart attack of her patron during a spiritual session between Selina Dawes and a wealthy young woman. Miss Prior investigates Selina's trial and comes to the conclusion that she had been unfairly convicted. Not only this, but Miss Prior quickly finds herself falling in love with Selina Dawes.

Selina Dawes convinces Miss Prior that they are soul mates, meant to be together no matter what. Selina plans an escape from Millbank and urges Miss Prior to help plan their escape from London. Miss Prior willingly does this in the belief that she and Selina would be together after the escape. However, Selina has tricked Miss Prior and left her alone and miserable, worse off than she had been before she had begun visiting Millbank.

Selina Dawes

Selina Dawes is a young trance medium who has come to London under the tutelage of her aunt to better learn her profession. Selina's aunt has passed away, leaving Selina on her own. Selina comes to live at a hotel where a man runs a kind of hotel for mediums. Selina begins seeing customers, making a small amount of money here and there helping people with her gifts. One day a woman comes to Selina and requests help speaking with her deceased mother. The woman believes Selina is not a fraud like the other mediums she has hired because she looks just like a young version of her mother. Mrs. Brink soon convinces Selina to move into her home with her and work exclusively attempting to contact Mrs. Brink's mother.

Selina finds her spirit guide while living with Mrs. Brink and convinces Mrs. Brink that she needs to share her gifts with other people. Mrs. Brink begins bringing in her friends for dark circles, or séances, in which Selina will make Peter Quick, her spirit guide, show up. This leads to private sessions with some of the female guests. During one of



these private sessions with a young woman named Marguerite Silvester, Peter Quick frightens the girl causing such a ruckus that Mrs. Brink comes into the room and promptly collapses from shock. Selina is later arrested and convicted of assault and fraud in Mrs. Brink's death.

Selina is incarcerated in Millbank Prison where she does not receive any visits or mail from people on the outside. Miss Prior becomes fascinated with Selina and soon begins visiting her frequently. In time, Selina is able to convince Miss Prior to help her escape. When she does, Selina and her maid, Ruth, steal the tickets and money Miss Prior has gotten for their escape and use them for her own means.

Ruth Vigers

Ruth Vigers is Mrs. Brink's maid. When Selina Dawes comes to live with Mrs. Brink to help her contact her dead mother, Ruth becomes Selina's maid. Ruth caters to Selina's every need and eventually they begin a romantic relationship. Ruth then takes on the persona of Peter Quick, Selina's spirit guide, and helps Selina get lots of money from those who believe Peter is really a spirit. In the end, it is because of Peter Quick that Selina is arrested and convicted of fraud and assault. It is Peter Quick who slaps Miss Silvester and causes the heart attack in Mrs. Brink.

After Selina begins visiting with Miss Prior, Ruth Vigers takes a job in the Prior household. Miss Prior is unaware of Vigers' first name and therefore never makes the connection between Vigers and Selina's maid, Ruth. While working in the Prior household, Vigers leaves little gifts in Miss Prior's room that Miss Prior believes are from Selina's spirits. Vigers also relays messages to Selina that help her scam Miss Prior. In the end, Selina and Vigers run away together.

Mrs. Helen Prior

Helen Prior is Miss Prior's sister-in-law. Before marrying Miss Prior's brother, Stephen, however, Helen had been Miss Prior's lover. They work together to help Miss Prior's father with his scholarly pursuits. In fact, the three of them are supposed to go to Italy together, but Mr. Prior dies before the planned trip takes place. Helen then ends her relationship with Miss Prior, marrying her brother Stephen instead. They quickly have a son together. In fact, it is implied that the child is conceived before the wedding, allowing Stephen and Helen to marry despite a period of mourning that would normally have prevented such a wedding. Now Miss Prior must see her ex-lover nearly every day, increasing her heartbreak over the ended affair.

Miss Marguerite Silvester

Miss Marguerite Silvester is an American living in London with her mother. Miss Silvester attends a dark circle at Mrs. Brink's home and becomes fascinated with Selina Dawes. Miss Silvester requests private sessions with Selina. During one of these



sessions, Peter Quick appears to Miss Silvester. Miss Silvester becomes so frightened that she begins to scream. In an attempt to calm Miss Silvester, Peter Quick slaps her. However, this only increases her hysteria. Mrs. Brink breaks into the room, sees the scene before her, and collapses from a prior heart ailment. It is this episode that causes Selina Dawes to go to jail.

Mrs. Brink

Mrs. Brink is a wealthy widow who lost her mother when she was very young. Mrs. Brink is obsessed with speaking to her mother in the spirit world. Mrs. Brink has hired multiple mediums to help her speak to her mother, but all the mediums previous to Selina Dawes had been frauds who cheated Mrs. Brink. When Mrs. Brink meets Selina, she believes she is destined to be the one to help Mrs. Brink speak to her mother because Selina looks like Mrs. Brink's mother when she was young. Mrs. Brink eventually welcomes Selina into her home, showering her with gifts and expensive clothing. However, Mrs. Brink has a heart ailment and during an intense private session, Mrs. Brink collapses and later dies.

Mr. Shillitoe

Mr. Shillitoe is the warden of Millbank Prison. Mr. Shillitoe had been an acquaintance of Mr. Prior and had often come to dinner in their home. Based on a conversation with Mr. Shillitoe during one of these meals, Miss Prior decides to begin visiting Millbank Prison. Both Miss Prior and Mr. Shillitoe believe that visits from Lady Visitors to the prisoners can help the prisoners aspire to a life without crime. As Miss Prior becomes obsessed with Selina Dawes and is warned to stay away from her, Mr. Shillitoe comes to Miss Prior's defense and allows her to continue her visits.

Miss Haxby

Miss Haxby is the head matron at Millbank Prison. Miss Haxby oversees all the female prisoners and the matrons who work on the wards. It is Miss Haxby who gives Miss Prior the rules she must follow while visiting with the prisoners. It is also Miss Haxby who attempts to keep Miss Prior from visiting Selina Dawes when she becomes aware that Miss Prior has seen Selina Dawes on nearly all her visits to the prison. Miss Prior comes to see Miss Haxby as the enemy, but in the end it appears that Miss Haxby had been correct in all she had said about Selina Dawes. Miss Haxby's advice might have protected Miss Prior from the heartache that would eventually come.

Mrs. Prior

Mrs. Prior is Miss Prior's mother. Mrs. Prior is a proper woman who is concerned with the happiness of all her children. Mrs. Prior takes a large role in the planning of her youngest daughter's wedding as well as the maintenance of her older daughter's health.



After Priscilla is married, Miss Prior finds herself expected to be her mother's constant companion. This depresses Miss Prior, leaving her feeling as though she will grow old in a sad, lonely life. In the end, Mrs. Prior attempts to keep her daughter from visiting Millbank Prison, but fails. Mrs. Prior leaves her daughter alone in London while she visits Priscilla at her new estate, allowing Selina her final insult against Miss Prior.

Mrs. Jelf

Mrs. Jelf is the matron on Selina's ward. Mrs. Jelf is a kind woman who often helps her prisoners in ways that she should not, like giving Power a flannel to keep warm while suffering from a cold. When Selina disappears, Miss Prior learns that Mrs. Jelf had helped her escape. Mrs. Jelf had once been married, but she had had an affair with a man that led to a pregnancy. Mrs. Jelf's husband had kicked her out and her lover had abandoned her. Mrs. Jelf has raised the child alone and is devastated when he dies at the age of four. Mrs. Jelf had been given a locket by Selina that was supposedly a gift from this dead child. However, Miss Prior recognizes the locket as her own. Mrs. Jelf then tells Miss Prior that Vigers, her maid, is actually the Ruth who had been maid to Selina at Mrs. Brink's house.



Objects/Places

Locket

Miss Prior owns a locket that her father gave her before his death. This locket disappears the same night Selina notices it during a visit with Miss Prior in her cell at Millbank Prison.

Lock of Hair

Miss Prior has a lock of blond hair in her locket that is originally implied to have belonged to her father. However, it is later revealed that the lock of hair belongs to Helen Prior, Miss Prior's sister-in-law and former lover.

Orange Blossoms

Miss Prior discusses the beauty of orange blossoms with Selina and the next day finds a bouquet of the blossoms in her room. Miss Prior is convinced by Selina that these flowers had been brought to her through spirits.

Diaries

Miss Prior has kept two diaries in her life. The first chronicles her affair with Helen. Miss Prior burns this diary before attempting suicide upon Helen's marriage to her brother, Stephen. The second diary chronicles Miss Prior's relationship with Selina Dawes. This diary is also burned when Miss Prior learns of Selina's betrayal.

Velvet Collar

Selina Dawes had often been tied up and worn a velvet collar during her séances to prove her spirit guide's authenticity. One of these velvet collars finds its way into Miss Prior's private diary. Miss Prior wears it, feeling it brings her and Selina closer together.

Ship Tickets and Passports

Miss Prior arranges for passports and tickets on a ship so that she and Selina Dawes might escape to Italy upon Selina's escape from Millbank.



Luggage

Selina Dawes and Ruth Vigers steal the luggage Miss Prior has packed and prepared for her escape to Italy with Selina.

Little Dorritt

Miss Prior reads to her mother from Dickens' Little Dorritt every night after Priscilla's wedding in order to keep her mother company.

Chloral

Chloral is an English medication given to patients in order to help them sleep and to lessen emotional anxiety. Miss Prior is given this medication to help treat an emotional illness that had led to an attempted suicide.

Laudanum

Laudanum is a medication used to sedate patients and to relieve pain. Derived from opium, laudanum is highly addictive. Miss Prior is given this medication to treat depression. Miss Prior comes to believe that this medication helps make the spiritual connection between herself and Selina Dawes stronger.

Cells

The women imprisoned at Millbank Prison are kept in small cells and are only allowed a Bible, eating utensils, and work implements. The cells have two doors, a thin wooden one and a heavier metal one. The women of the Star Class are allowed to work with the outer doors open.

British National Association of Spiritualists

The British National Association of Spiritualists is a group of mediums and those who believe in mediums. Miss Prior accidentally finds herself outside their offices and goes inside where she reads newspaper articles about Selina Dawes' trial and conviction.

Millbank Prison

Millbank Prison is a prison not far from the home of Miss Prior in London. Miss Prior visits the prisoners in Millbank in an attempt to take her mind off her own emotional problems. It is here Miss Prior meets Selina Dawes and helps orchestrate her escape.



Themes

Unrequited Love

Miss Prior is a lesbian in a time when lesbianism was not recognized or talked about. Miss Prior is in a relationship with a young woman named Helen, a relationship that brings her a great amount of happiness. However, Helen ends the relationship and marries Miss Prior's brother, Stephen. Miss Prior must sit back and watch as the woman she had loved makes a life with the brother she adores. It is a difficult situation for Miss Prior, leaving her depressed and so despondent that she once attempts suicide. Now Miss Prior is on a constant dose of chloral to keep her from slipping into a suicidal depression once more.

Miss Prior begins visiting Millbank Prison to help her overcome her emotional struggles. Miss Prior is vulnerable and open to falling in love once again as she makes these visits. Therefore it is no surprise when she falls in love with Selina Dawes. Selina plays into Miss Prior's vulnerability, convincing her that they are soul mates who need to be with one another. Miss Prior aches to be with Selina Dawes, aches so much that she feels as though she can feel Selina in her room at night even though she is still locked in Millbank Prison.

As Miss Prior aches to be with Selina Dawes, Selina aches to be with her lover, Ruth Vigers. Selina and Ruth had been lovers in Mrs. Brink's home and they scheme to run away together by using both Miss Prior and Mrs. Jelf to help Selina escape. Selina shamelessly convinces both women she can help them, Mrs. Jelf with her powers to contact the dead and Miss Prior with her capacity to love. However, Selina has no intention of helping either woman. Selina is a cold con artist who uses people shamelessly to get what she wants. This leaves Miss Prior without the woman she thought she loved, making unrequited love a theme of the novel.

Spiritualism

Selina Dawes convinces everyone that she is a trance medium. Selina claims she can go into a trance and help people talk to their dead loved ones. At first Selina works in a hotel filled with other mediums. Here she learns all about spiritualism and ways to trick people into believing the events of a séance. Then Mrs. Brink comes to see Selina and she ends up moving into Mrs. Brink's home. Here, Selina supposedly finds her spirit medium and begins having séances that involve this spirit known as Peter Quick.

Spiritualism is something that few people understand, but many people want to understand. For this reason, it is easy for people to take advantage of a person's need to contact a dead loved one. Selina uses this need to get what she wants. First Selina's objective is money, but later it becomes her freedom. Selina uses her reputation as a medium to help Mrs. Jelf, the matron on her ward, speak to her son. Selina also



attempts to use these tactics on Miss Prior. However, Miss Prior is not as easily convinced as other people, therefore Selina must change tactics with her, eventually convincing Miss Prior that they are soul mates meant to be together.

Deceit

The entire novel is seen through Miss Prior's point of view with the exception of the diary excerpts written in Selina's voice. Miss Prior can only report those things of which she is aware. Therefore, the reader does not learn until the end of the novel that Vigers, a maid in the Prior household, is actually Ruth, Selina Dawes' maid. If Miss Prior had known this fact earlier, perhaps she would not have suffered the heartache she suffers at the end of the novel.

Selina is cold to Miss Prior at the beginning of their relationship. This coldness quickly changes, however, as the novel progresses. Selina makes an attempt to help Miss Prior speak to her father, but when Miss Prior refuses to believe her, Selina changes tactics. In time, Selina gets Miss Prior to trust her and even convinces her that they are soul mates. Selina has lied to Miss Prior in an attempt to escape from Millbank Prison and run away with her true love, Ruth.

Deceit is an important theme to this novel because it is deceit that propels the plot. Selina uses trickery and deceit to make money before she goes to jail. It is deceit that leads to her imprisonment because her spirit guide, Peter Quick, is not really a spirit but her lover Ruth in disguise. Everything Selina has done since the beginning of the novel is based in deceit. However, this deceit is not revealed to Miss Prior until the end of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in a diary format, therefore the point of view is first person. The novel has excerpts from two different diaries, so there are two voices to narrate the plot. The first is Selina Dawes, a young trance medium whom the reader later learns has been incarcerated for fraud and assault. The second is Miss Prior, a young upper class woman who has suffered from depression since her father's death and has begun visiting inmates at Millbank Prison to help ease her own troubles. This causes Miss Prior to meet Selina Dawes and become intimately involved in her life.

The point of view of this novel is tightly woven into the format of the novel. The novel is told in a diary format, therefore everything the reader learns in the development of the plot comes from dated diary entries. This limits the knowledge of the reader because the reader can only know what the author of the diary herself understands. This is important to the overall plot of the novel because there is information that Miss Prior does not have about Selina Dawes that would have changed everything had she known. For this reason, the point of view of this novel works well with the overall plot.

Setting

The novel is set in London in the 1870s. This setting places the characters in a time period in which social class was of the utmost importance and where certain issues such as crime and homosexuality were looked upon from a point of view that is less tolerant than it might be in modern society. This creates a setting in which the main character, a young, upper class homosexual woman, feels like an outcast in society and within her own family. For this reason, Miss Prior is more susceptible to the illusion of love that Selina Dawes draws for her.

The setting of this novel is important for many reasons. First, the crimes for which Selina Dawes is convicted are crimes for which, in the modern world, she would most likely not be indicted, much less convicted. Second, the setting is of a time when homosexuality was not openly considered, creating an isolating, lonely world for the main character, Miss Prior. Finally, the setting is important because it sets up a situation in which Miss Prior is able to visit the women, all strangers, in Millbank Prison and fall in love with Selina Dawes. If the novel were set in a different time period or location it might not have the same impact on the characters, making this setting most appropriate to the plot of this novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is modern, but it has a sense of the more formal speech of the time period. While the narrator of this novel is an upper class woman living in 1874,



her language tends to be less formal than one might suspect a woman of her class and time period might use. However, the novel is more formal than a typical best seller in modern times, giving the novel an overall sense of the time period and the young woman narrating the story.

The language of this novel is appropriate to the plot because it is a mixture of formal and casual language that fits with the idea of a diary written by an upper class woman living in the 1870s. The language is also appropriate because it is filled with a beauty that describes the main characters' desire to fall in love and be loved, with a passion that makes the reader root for this woman and hope that everything she desires will eventually come true. In the end, the language also beautifully expresses Miss Prior's heartbreak and disappointment, describing her desire to commit suicide without ever coming right out and saying the brutal truth. Therefore, the language of this novel is a perfect expression of all the emotion trapped within the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is not divided into chapters, but is divided into diary entries. Each entry is headed by a date. There are two different diaries that are shown in this novel, therefore the type and style of writing for each diary is slightly different. There are five parts to the novel, each part telling the story and marking a change in attitude or events that impact the novel's overall plot. The novel is told almost entirely in exposition or a type of inner monologue, with many examples of the authorial voice as the author of the diary predicts things to come or makes comments on events that have taken place. However, there are examples of dialogue throughout the novel as the writer of the diary attempts to accurately record scenes that had taken place earlier in the day.

The novel has two main plots. The first plot is the most obvious one, the story of Miss Prior and her struggles to deal with her lost love affair. Miss Prior has had an episode of depression that led to a suicide attempt after her lover married Miss Prior's brother. This causes Miss Prior to be under constant scrutiny at home and to be forced to take medicine that can cause addiction. To counteract the boredom and depression she finds at home, Miss Prior begins visiting the local prison where she falls in love with and promises to run away with a young inmate. The other plot is one that lies under the story of Miss Prior. This other plot is the story of Selina Dawes and how she had come to be a trance medium. Selina appears on the surface, especially in Miss Prior's diary, to be a kind, talented, and misunderstood young woman. However, through some of Selina's own diary entries, the reader slowly comes to the realization that Selina is a con artist who is out to get something from everyone, Miss Prior included. It is not until the final section of the book that the reader and Miss Prior together become aware of this other plot, this other plan that lies hidden in the dark until the last possible moment. It is then that both plots collide and come to a crashing conclusion.

Quotes

"I was never so frightened as I am now." Prologue: 3 August 1873, pg. 1

"Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended." Part 1: 24 September 1874, pg. 7

"I thought, If I may not talk of my visit, then I can certainly sit and write about it, in my own book..." Part 1: 24 September 1874, pg. 29

"Death is dumb, when life is deaf." Part 1: 2 September 1872, pg. 31

"I might have watched and listened as another woman made her halting recitation, and then was praised for it, then left to silence; but I did not like to look at Dawes do that." Part 1: 6 October 1874, pg. 64

"He smiled. 'She is at Millbank. She must be guilty.'" Part 1: 17 October 1874, pg. 99

"The cells, however, remain so chill that the walls are wet with condensation, the lime upon them turned to a kind of bubbling curd, that marks the women's skirts with streaks of white."
Part 2: 28 October 1874, pg. 157

"They were not whitewashed, like the walls above, but rough, unfinished, and quite glistening with damp. Each was densely hung with iron—with rings and chains and fetters, and with other, nameless, complicated instruments whose purposes I could only, shuddering, guess at." Part 2: 2 November 1874, pg. 179

"It was two years, yesterday, since my own dear father died; and today my sister Priscilla was married at last, at Chelsea church, to Arthur Barclay." Part 3: 5 November 1874, pg. 199

"I looked again at the floor of her cell, for that smear of wax.—There was nothing." Part 3: 14 November 1874, pg. 211

"They come every day now, the tokens from Selina." Part 4: 21 December 1874, pg. 286

"One time, two years ago, I took a draught of morphia, meaning to end my life." Part 5: 21 January 1875, pg. 322



"Selina, you will be in sunlight soon. Your twisting is done—you have the last thread of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it?" Part 5, 21 January 1875, pg. 351



Topics for Discussion

Who is Miss Margaret Prior? Why has she begun this journal? What does she hope will come of this journal? Who died in Miss Prior's life? How has this death led Miss Prior to become a Lady Visitor at Millbank Prison? Why does Miss Prior return after her initial visit to the prison? Did she enjoy her first visit? What did she see on her first visit that enticed Miss Prior to return?

Why does Boyd quit working for the Prior household? How does Mrs. Prior react to Boyd's excuse for leaving? Who is hired in Boyd's place? What does Priscilla say about the new maid? Why does this statement come back to haunt Miss Prior later in the novel? What is remarkable about the hiring of this new maid, about the timing of the employment? Should this have tipped Miss Prior up to some sort of scam? Why does Miss Prior not remember the timing of this event when mysterious items begin showing up in her room? Should she have?

Who is Selina Dawes? What is a trance medium? Why does Selina repeatedly refuse to accept money for her work? Does Selina accept money for her work? Why does Selina make note of the money she has earned in her diary from her clients? How does this change when Selina goes to live with Mrs. Brink? Why does Selina go to work with Mrs. Brink? Are Selina's intentions pure in the beginning? Do they remain pure? Explain.

Who is Peter Quick? Why does he begin appearing to Selina? Has anything like this ever happened to Selina before? Why does Selina begin having dark circles, or séances, after Peter begins visiting her? What is peculiar about Peter Quick's behavior during these dark circles? To whom does Peter pay the most attention? To whom is he often rude or even cruel toward? For what reason?

Who is Mrs. Jelf? Why does Mrs. Jelf sneak a flannel to Power? Why is Mrs. Jelf punished for this action? Is Mrs. Jelf overstepping her role as matron by being kind to the prisoners? Explain. What is Mrs. Jelf's relationship with Selina? Why is Mrs. Jelf saddened when Selina hits Miss Brewer with a trencher? Why is Mrs. Jelf happy when Selina returns to her ward? Why does Mrs. Jelf help Selina escape? How does Miss Prior learn of this? What does Mrs. Jelf have that was once Miss Prior's? What does Mrs. Jelf know about Vigers that Miss Prior did not know? What might have happened had Miss Prior known of this?

Who is Miss Haxby? Why does Miss Haxby not want Miss Prior to continue visiting Selina Dawes? What does Miss Haxby tell Miss Prior? Mr. Stillitoe? Does Miss Haxby's argument have some merit? Does Miss Prior ignore these objections for good reasons or bad? Who turns out to be right? What might have happened had Miss Prior listened to Miss Haxby's arguments? Is Miss Haxby a cruel woman?

Discuss Millbank Prison. On what charges are most of the women sent to Millbank? Are any of these charges unusual? Would a woman be charged with all these offenses in a modern court? Why can the women not speak? Why can the women not have mail and



visits from their friends and relatives more than a few times a year? Why are the women forced to work? Did these methods turn women from crime upon their release? Was prison cruel in this time period as compared with today's penal system? Explain.