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Re-Imagining the Victorian Woman: Female Representations in Four Neo-Victorian Novels from 1990 to 2010

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Abstract

Neo-Victorian literature is a subgenre of historical fiction that is set during the reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 until 1901. There are divergent opinions on the emergence of the genre; however, the time frame established in this dissertation spans from 1990 until the present moment. One of the principal characteristic of neo-Victorian novels is that through their Victorian setting they display their involvement with contemporary issues. Such an engagement can be expressed in a variety of ways, yet a common approach involves a re-imagining of marginalized voices. This paper will focus on representations of real and fictitious Victorian women in four neo-Victorian novels: Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998); Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006); Jude Morgan's *Charlotte and Emily: A novel of the Brontës* (2010); and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). The analysis of each novel is divided into three parts, which focus on authorship/auto-biography, sexuality, as well as independence and occupation. This division seems to both highlight similarities between the novels, as well as draw attention to their differences. Through an emphasis on issues regarding a large group, that was generally repressed during the Victorian era, it is revealed that contrary to the statements of certain critics, neo-Victorian texts are more critical than nostalgic towards their historical setting.

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Introduction

In an article from a 2009 issue of *History Today* Juliet Gardiner notes that the upsurge of the historical novel, both in esteem and quantity of publications, has been substantial since the turn of the last century. In the text Gardiner states that due to the current expansion of the historical fiction genre, such a journal cannot continue to overlook these publications and accordingly reviews and discussions on historical fiction will become a part of *History Today* (54), which is the longest running historical monthly of the world. It can be supposed that this recent expansion in the magazine's repertoire arises from the fact that current conceptions in the fields of history and historiography tend to accept that representations of the past are always subject to bias, as well as a degree of fictionality, and thus there has come about a certain affiliation between the academic discipline and its literary correlative. When a literary field develops and grows it will inevitably propagate subgenres and that has been the case with the historical novel. One of the fastest growing and most popular of these subgenres is that of neo-Victorian literature, which as the name suggests is the category of historical fiction which is set during the reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 to 1901. The question of whether such a time frame is a sufficient requirement for novels to pertain to the genre is a problem which has been much discussed and will be taken up in more detail later in this dissertation. However, as demonstrated by the instigation of the online peer-reviewed journal, *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008, there is a real interest in the subject and an increasing number of works are being published that can be considered neo-Victorian, both fictional and academic.

The thematic scope of neo-Victorian fiction is vast, and multiple modes of storytelling and subject matters are being employed. It is also a literary field where the relatively recent demise of "[c]onfidence in a grand narrative of history peopled by monarchs and statesmen preoccupied with politics and economics" has been particularly evident (Gardiner 55). This is, in a sense, a development that has been ongoing since Georg Lukács published his famous work *The Historical Novel* in 1955, where he states that:

> What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in

> those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. (42)

However, whilst Lukács still expected great historical figures and major events to be at least marginally present in the text, more recent types of historical novels have increasingly ignored his precept and focused on: "people's history, this history from below, that had admitted not only a new constituency of the previously unrecorded or unheard – women and the poor in particular – but also gave weight to the power of irrationality, to the role of accident and contingency" (Gardiner 55-56). If it is the general tendency of neo-Victorian novels to deviate from Lukács' notions, they are also likely to play around with the standard definition of the historical novel that: "has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social condition of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Instead neo-Victorian novels "adopt a dual approach which combines a concern with the past and a concern with the present" (6), according to Louisa Hadley, author of *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. This can, for example, be achieved through a fragmented narrative, parody and pastiche, selective vocabulary, narratorial commentary, anachronistic insertions of modern theories and concepts, distrust of commonly accepted 'facts', or simply an awareness of contemporary discourses which shows through in the text.

Although some progress was made regarding the basic rights of women during the Victorian period, little or no advancement came about in relation to their political rights. Nevertheless, it is the era in which several foundations were laid for changes that occurred in the twentieth century. This ambivalent state of affairs provides a fertile ground for novelist to explore feminist awakenings and the manner in which women might have responded to societal repression. Moreover, as Katherine Copper and Emma Short claim in their introduction to *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction,* the interest of the Victorian period to modern readers has to do with the fact that the era "represents a similar consumerist industrial age to that in which contemporary readers find themselves", while the "supposed absence and infamous presence of sex/uality in Victorian Britain" (7, 9) also appears to contribute to the popularity of the genre. In the present epoch, despite the fact that sex is ubiquitous in

literature, film, and other media, attitudes towards its various representations continue to be contradictory and under constant debate. Still there lies great fascination for modern women in re-imagining the mind-set and sentiments of their Victorian predecessors, as well as in projecting upon them, and their context, contemporary concerns with aspects, such as women's writing and self-representation, sex and sexuality, along with autonomy, occupation and power relations – which is precisely what is being done by many authors writing within the neo-Victorian framework.

This feature of the genre will be the focus of this dissertation; that is, to seek to identify the ways in which contemporary British authors employ the often marginalized and limited existence of Victorian women to question and explore modern-day realities. In order to get a satisfactorily ample perspective on this topic I will examine four novels written during a twenty year period, which has been identified as a "crucial nodal point" of the genre (Hadley 2). These are A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006), and Jude Morgan's *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës* (2010). I have chosen these particular works because of several reasons: the novels all have female protagonists; they are stylistically different from each other; they also represent a decidedly distinct perspective on Victorian life; along with being tangibly conscious of their contemporary framework. Foregoing separate chapters on each of the novels are two introductory chapters; the former contains a brief outline of the lives of British women during the Victorian period, while the second is built up as a survey of the developments of neo-Victorian fiction, along with a discussion on the principal characteristics of the genre.

Historical Background

Most books and articles that have the Victorian period as their subject matter, introduce the topic by commenting on the contradictory notions many have of the Victorians and their social milieu. Conversely, other works set out to expose what they believe are common myths surrounding the era and its inhabitants. Although they might appear to contradict each other at first, the latter type of text actually functions on a principle not so different from the first; since it also represents two distinct aspects of the period, only that it opts for seeing one of them as more accurate than the other. However, what is

occasionally downplayed or ignored in shorter, or less critical works, is the fact that such ambiguities and paradoxes are unavoidable due to the simple fact that the Victorian period lasted almost 64 years, during which the United Kingdom underwent drastic transformations in almost every area mentionable. Moreover, the individuals referred to as Victorians are not the product of one single generation but two, or in some cases, even three. The focus of this dissertation are the female characters represented in neo-Victorian fiction; thus, in order to reach a better understanding of how they are re-imagined, an overview of their prototypes' history and situation is indispensable. Because, as Sally Mitchell states in her work *Daily Life in Victorian England*: “More nonsense has probably been written about the feminine ideal than any other aspect of Victorian life” (266). For a project of this kind a comprehensive outline is both unmanageable and unnecessary; therefore, its focus will be on the aspects of the lives of Victorian women that are most salient in the novels by Waters, Starling, Morgan, and Byatt. This does not signify that the scope will be narrow, since these works cover different parts of the epoch and contain female characters from all across the social spectrum.

Some scholars date the inauguration of the Victorian age from the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832, instead of the succession of Queen Victoria five years later. The historical importance of this reform to women is of a peculiar nature; since this was actually the first time they were formally barred from voting, because “the word *male* was specifically added to the description of eligible voters” (Mitchell, S. 3). However, as Mitchell explains, this official exclusion was not without reason, for it “suggests that lawmakers were beginning to realize that some women might want to claim the privilege” of participating in elections (3). During the first decades of the nineteenth century, individuals in favour of female suffrage in the United Kingdom were neither noticeable nor numerous; nevertheless, this gradually changed with the passing of the century. Indeed, many of the women's organizations that were formed during the Victorian period century, focused more on matters like slavery, religion, and poverty than on issues specifically related to women. Even so, one of the elements which increased female participation in social and political matters, as the era progressed, was the fact that there were more single young women living in the UK, since young men

were emigrating in much greater numbers than women (Mitchell 14). Some of these women would participate in the working environment and even join unions in the latter decades of the century. Those that did not have the necessity of seeking labour would also increasingly dedicate their efforts to areas unrelated to domesticity, for example: "through local government, charitable organizations, settlement houses, pressure groups, and (at the end of the century) renewed agitation for full suffrage and legal equality" (Mitchell, S. 14).

For anyone to be able to actively participate in public life, a degree of education is necessary. However, as Simon Morgan points out in his book *A Victorian Woman's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century,* many of the early nineteenth century advocates for improved female education mainly wished to make women better companions for the men of their household, as well as more suited for improving the domestic sphere (38). Moreover, as Morgan goes on to say:

> It was argued that women had a duty to develop their intellects in order to understand the challenges their husbands faced in public life. However, a distance needed to be maintained from the public sphere, in order that they could exercise a beneficial and calming influence. The Shirreff sisters believed that women should interest themselves in politics in order to become the conscience of the nation, but that this could not be achieved from a partisan position. (41)

Similar attitudes were abundant in Victorian society and this so-called "behind-the-scenes influence" was widely considered the most pertinent way for women to exercise their power for a great part of the century (Morgan, S. 130). Nonetheless, the connection between enhanced female education and a more active participation in social and political affairs is inevitable, thus progressively the voices for female suffrage became more insistent. In his text Morgan asserts "that women coming of age from 1870 onwards enjoyed far more opportunities for making their voices heard than their mothers had", although in that period and onwards the prosperity of women's movements was markedly stronger in larger urban areas (190). The first ballots were cast by Victorian women during the 1870s, in relation to education and local government, only shortly after "Ellen and Fanny Heaton collected signatures in Leeds for the earliest female parliamentary petition on women's suffrage" in 1866 (Morgan, S. 137). A further leap was made in 1874 when Emma Paterson formed the Women's Trade

Union League which made active involvement in social and political causes accessible to women of a more varied class background (Jordan 196). The Victorian culmination of women's suffrage came about in 1897 when different local suffrage organizations united under the denomination of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (Mitchell 92). Nevertheless, despite the vigorous battle of women, such as Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst, British women had to wait until after the First World War for the general right to vote, and even that major victory was only a single step in the gradual, but still incomplete, journey towards gender equality.

The attitudes towards women and professional occupation in the Victorian period were ambivalent. Women of the lower, or so-called working classes, were often forced to seek employment outside of the home to support their family, rather than because of a particular wish for economic freedom or emancipation. Moreover, this work would not replace their domestic duties, but rather resulted in long working days, within and outside of the home. A typical factory day for most of the century had the duration of approximately 12 hours, although some unions were able to get it shortened in the latter decades. Other less regulated workplaces had more fluctuating working hours, which also had the disadvantage of an irregular salary (Mitchell, S. 40). Women occupied a substantial part of the workforce and undertook innumerable positions, since "[i]n addition to their role as domestic servants and seamstresses, women worked in laundries, retail shops, textile mills, and other factories". Working-class women also carried out more traditionally masculine occupations, as described by Mitchell: "in brickmaking, chainmaking, and collecting trash from city streets. It was not unusual for women who did heavy and dirty work to wear trousers and appear almost indistinguishable from men in the same trades" (45). She goes on to mentions countless positions occupied by women during the nineteenth century, which demonstrates that seclusion to the domestic realm and a life of idleness was in no way the representative lifestyle of Victorian women in general. However, it remains a fact that "women in well-paid trades were more apt to remain single than those whose earnings were too low to provide adequate support". This was not merely a result of the gender imbalance in Victorian demography, according to Mitchell, but of the active decisions of financially independent young women to remain unattached (269).

Employment expectations for upper and middle class women were different from those of the working class. As Bessie Rayner Parkes declared in a speech made in 1859:

> If a lady has to work for her livelihood, it is universally considered to be a misfortune, an exception to the ordinary rule. All good fathers wish to provide for their daughters; all good husbands think it their bounden duty to keep their wives. All our laws are framed strictly in accordance with this hypothesis; and all our social customs adhere to it more strictly still. We make no room in our social framework for any other idea, and in no moral or practical sphere do the exceptions more lamentably and thoroughly prove the rule. (qtd. in Jordan 23)

All the same, complete leisure was a phenomenon reserved for a minute part of society. Especially in the early part of the Victorian period, many middle class women assisted their husbands or fathers in their trade or profession, and women of the upper-middle ranks of society often occupied the position of governess. Nonetheless, as is explained by Ellen Jordan in *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain*, throughout much of the Victorian age a stigma was associated with female participation in the labour market: "with the amount and kind of work the women of the family did being strongly related to the status pretensions of the family" (31). Such ambivalence towards professional women would inevitably have caused conflicts for those who desired a productive outlet for their education and talents, as well as increased autonomy, both from an economic perspective and a more personal one. It was considered demeaning for women pertaining to the gentry to receive a salary for any kind of work and they would be recommended to preserve their honour by rejecting remuneration for their professional efforts (Jordan 36). However, by the end of the period this attitude had slackened somewhat, although it was "assumed that work was desirable as a secular vocation rather than as something imposed by dire financial circumstances", in the case of women of the upper-middle classes. At that point they were considered viable for certain professions, such as "journalism, art, music, authorship, the stage, medicine, teaching, nursing, and rent-collecting" (Jordan 84), and thus could support themselves through these occupations.

The emphasis placed on respectability and propriety which played so strongly upon the ideas of women and employment, was evident in most aspects of Victorian

life, and the pressure of this abstract concept could be immense. According to Sally Mitchell, the principal values that were promoted for those of the working and middle classes were: “punctuality, early rising, orderliness, concern for little things, self-denial, self-control, initiative, constructive use of leisure, prudent marriage” (265). The obligation of maintaining high morals was more often than not laid upon women, and the conventional female ideal would make “the home a place of perfect peace, her husband and sons would not want to leave it for an evening's (morally suspect) entertainment elsewhere” (Mitchell, S. 266). However, the matrimonial sanctuary was also supposed to serve as protection for women: “from the shocks and dangers of the rude, competitive world ... Women had to be kept safe at home; their perfect compliance, obedience, innocence, and refinement would make them too easy to victimize in the competitive public world” (Mitchell 267), a degrading argument for women of any given period.

While ideas regarding female sexuality remained fairly constant during the Victorian period and some would “insist that a respectable girl should be completely ignorant about sex and sexuality until initiated by her husband on the wedding night”, the attitudes towards masculine sexual behaviour underwent quite a transformation. Hence, women were with increased frequency encouraged to become more conscious of sexual behaviour so they could avoid committing to “deviant” partners (Mitchell, S. 268-9). However, as Hadley claims, the dominant contemporary assumptions about “Victorian attitudes towards sex are seen to be grounded in the historical context of the Victorian era and [sustain] the equation between 'Victorian' and prudery”. The prevalent notion “that we are more liberated than our Victorian ancestors” (Hadley 11), can obviously not be applied to individual bedsteads; yet, because of the modern ability to openly speak, write, or read about sex and sexuality, from a scientific and literary point of view, this assumption is reasonable.

In his work *Inventing the Victorians,* Matthew Sweet sets out to debunk what he calls “the stereotypes which have shaped our thinking about the Victorians for the last hundred years” (ix). He blames historians and scholars, from Lytton Strachey's 1918 publication of *Eminent Victorians* and beyond, for creating erroneous ideas about life during the nineteenth century and systematically focusing on misleading sources from

the period (xxi). Conversely, Sweet aims "to suggest how we might liberate the Victorians from Stracheyite, Thatcherite and Freudian prejudices", while declaring that his book "is an attempt to conjure up the excitement, the permissiveness, the sense of pleasurable velocity that was central to the Victorian experience" (xxii). Such an attempt at an alternative Victorian history has received ambivalent reviews. *The Observer's* David Jays states that: "The scrupulous cultural historian wrestles the excitable hack, and loses", while Alexandra Mullen, writing for *The New Criterion* avows that: "The only way Sweet's sensationalistic claims can work, after all, is to blur distinctions between the huge and the minuscule, the important and the trivial, so as to render them all equal" (Jays 2001; Mullen 2002).

To completely refute the critiques of the detractors of *Inventing the Victorians* would be a difficult task; however, Sweet's contribution to exploring lesser known aspects of the Victorian age is a valid addition to the vast quantity of material which has been written so far. Moreover, it can be assumed that it is no mere coincidence that the publication of his work coincided with the expansion of the neo-Victorian novel, a genre which often explores fairly unrepresented individuals and aspects of the period. Some of these novels can, just as Sweet's text, be accused of wanting "to put the sex back into the 19th century" (Jays); yet, this does not have to be considered a negative feature. In literature this is not a falsification of history but rather a diversification, with a tinge of fictionalization. However, since all accounts are written from someone's perspective, it can be said that a degree of fiction is, in fact, a part of all historiography.

Neo-Victorian Fiction: Definition and Developments

The genre of neo-Victorian fiction is currently in expansion, and accordingly there does not exist a common consensus of its scope and constituents. In the 2008 inaugural issue of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies,* its editor, Marie-Luise Kohlke, says that neo-Victorianism "temporal and generic boundaries remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation by artists, writers, and theorists alike, a state of affairs that forms part of its strong attraction" (1). Some academics claim that almost everything written after the actual Victorian period concluded, but set between 1837 and 1901, can be categorized as neo-Victorian, whereas others link its beginnings to a postmodern

awakening in historical fiction during the 1960s. Then there are those who wish to classify it as a more contemporary phenomenon altogether, taking off shortly before the arrival of the 1990s (Hadley 2). The manner in which the genre is discussed is connected to its time frame, due to the impact of the moment of writing on the Victorian setting; hence, the first two delineations are overly broad to be considered in this dissertation. Consequently, the focus will be on novels written during the period mentioned last, that is, the two decades surrounding the last millennium; however, certain works will be mentioned as precursors of what is now termed neo-Victorian fiction. The definition of neo-Victorian literature that will be assumed in this text was composed by Mark Llewellyn. It takes into account texts, "which are consciously set in the Victorian period … or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (165).

The aspect which is most adamantly stressed by scholars of the neo-Victorian is the equivalent significance, for the field, of the contemporary and the Victorian. This can been seen in Louisa Hadley's *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*, whose subtitle highlights the duality of neo-Victorianism, as well as by Llewellyn's investigation into whether recent publications on all things Victorian "represent a neo-Victorian approach to critical work on the Victorians *and* on us" (165). Accordingly, the composition of a neo-Victorian work requires a dual approach, "which seeks to understand the present and the past in their own historical moments, while also drawing out the connections between them" (Hadley 112). The general reader's enjoyment of neo-Victorian fiction does not depend upon previous readings of Victorian literature, or a comprehensive knowledge of the period's social and political history, although an interest in the era is often what draws readers to neo-Victorian fiction. Still, from an academic perspective it is imperative to be aware of the conventions of Victorian novels, and the society which shaped them. However, they should not be viewed as being "more primary and original than the neo-Victorian novel, which is reduced to a secondary and derivative artifact". As Samantha J. Carroll says: "to encourage such a view of the neo-Victorian novel is deleterious to establishing the contemporary genre's credibility in its own right" (179). Furthermore, to consider the

Victorian and the neo-Victorian novel in association does not merely signify probing for intertextual references, or fact-checking historical assertions, but rather an awareness of Victorian modes of narration, underlying constraints and customs, as well as the development of discourse on the Victorians since the conclusion of the nineteenth century.

Any relationship with the past is contingent on situations in the present; hence, the general public's relationship with the Victorians continually evolves and alters. Hadley states that it is not coincidental that "the explosion of neo-Victorian fiction in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister and her adoption of Victorian values", along with a more Victorian focus in the British National Curriculum: "since they fit into a patriotic, and nostalgic, narrative of Britain's past accomplishments" (23-24; 119). What can be called an official promotion of a certain period, and its tenets, can have a bilateral effect, particularly in academia and the arts. On the one hand, its presence can influence discourse and be felt indirectly on an overall basis; while, on the other hand, it can inspire critique and a questioning of the legitimacy of the apparently sanctioned standards. As Hadley states, this double-sided result is apparent in neo-Victorian fiction since:

> neo-Victorian authors do not merely participate in the contemporary nostalgia for the Victorian era. Rather, they engage with questions that are central to the way in which we narrate the Victorian past, questions such as the relationship between the past as lived and the past as narrated and the extent to which individuals can be understood as 'representatives' of an historical age. (33)

This signifies a rejection of non-critical imitations of the modes of the past, a critique which has been made of fictional returns to the Victorian period that supposedly treat "the nineteenth-century past as the privileged site of return for a mal-adjusted present" (Carroll 176). However, neo-Victorian studies and literature are at variance with other regressions to the Victorian period, such as the reproduction of Victorian merchandise, or film and television adaptations of the costume drama variety, where the elaborateness of the setting and atmosphere often stifles the actual content. These tend to "flatten out the complexities of Victorian [and neo-Victorian] fiction and remove them from their specific historical circumstances" (Hadley 142), while also treating neo-Victorian fiction as indistinguishable from Victorian fiction, or the former simply the continuation

of the latter. Conversely, there is an emphasis in neo-Victorian novels on contemporary issues and interests; both those which have changed most dramatically since the Victorian period ended, and the ones which can feel almost eerily familiar. Therefore, neo-Victorian literature is "aware of the purposes the Victorians are made to serve and in returning to the Victorians self-consciously comment on the political and cultural uses of the Victorians in the present" (Hadley 14).

By limiting the period of neo-Victorian fiction under discussion to the decades surrounding the turn of the millennium, it takes on rather different characteristics than if the time frame were to remain more extensive. In this manner it is more detached from postmodernism than it would otherwise be, since neo-Victorian fiction is usually historically specific and can appear to have, as stated by Hadley, a "sense of responsibility to revive the past in the present", unlike more implicitly postmodern literature, which alter its setting in the past more freely (153-4). The Victorian setting and time frame are crucial in neo-Victorian novels; even though they tend to abound in modern world-views and expressions. The separation from postmodernism is otherwise of a varying degree and neo-Victorian novels generally contain several postmodern elements. Hence, Hadley's desire to separate neo-Victorian fiction from other contemporary genres, and link it more firmly with classical historical fiction, contributes to her making somewhat problematic claims regarding the genre's dependability and candour. She underlines the supposed realism and reliability of many narrators and seems to concord with the author Charles Palliser in that there is an understood trustworthiness in neo-Victorian narrations (Hadley 52).

Hadley's statement that "historical detail would have been unnecessary for a Victorian reader since the London in the pages of the novel would have been recognizable", and that consequently such detail emphasizes "the distance between the Victorian past and the contemporary present" (156), is rather far-fetched. There is no reason to assume that most Victorian readers would have recognized every corner of London. Moreover, a revision of London based Victorian novels, such as Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* will demonstrate the amount of detail employed in the description of locations:

> I came into Smithfield, and the shameful place, being all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of St. Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison. Following the wall of the jail, I found the roadway covered with straw to deaden the noise of passing vehicles … (189)

While Hadley writes of neo-Victorian literature's supposed distancing from postmodernism without much lamentation, Carroll declares "that neo-Victorian fiction's endurance as a robust contemporary genre depends on its reinstatement as a subgenre of postmodern fiction with its capacity to renovate textual representation" (173). She asserts that the 'neo' in neo-Victorian fiction is utterly tied to the dominant cultural studies that have coloured "the cloth from which neo-Victorian fiction is fashioned" (181). Accordingly, although overt characteristics of postmodernism have dwindled within the genre, they are still present. However, in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which are generally said to be the first neo-Victorian novels, or precursors of the genre, these influences are undoubtedly manifest.

The French Lieutenant's Woman contains the omnipresent narrator of many Victorian novels, though in a rather dissimilar format than the "all-knowing figure in whom the reader can have complete confidence" (Hadley 151). This voice speaks to the reading public of the late 1960s with much irony and awareness of the changes that have come about in the social sciences, and in general discourse, since the setting of the novel in 1867. The narrator goes from condemning the contemporary reader for indecent thoughts, since the innocent young women of the time could not possibly have had lesbian tendencies, while also describing the male characters as "more rational, more learned and altogether more nobly gendered" than the women (Fowles 156). Conversely, *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes use of several narrative voices that provide the reader with alternate perspectives of the occurrences within the novel. Moreover, as a hypertext of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* one of the most famous Victorian novels, it is an outpouring of intertextual references, which can also be said of *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* Irony, self-awareness, parody, intertextuality, and a fragmented narration are all features that can be found in contemporary neo-Victorian novels; for,

although many of them employ and transform Victorian narrative modes, neo-Victorian fiction does not lack twentieth century ways of writing and the scepticism that has dominated modern theory and literature.

One of the reasons Hadley names for twentieth and twenty-first century interest in the Victorians is the fact that they are "[c]lose enough for us to be aware that we have descended from them and yet far enough away for there to be significant differences in life-styles" (7). This holds especially well for many marginalised groups, whose social and political position is significantly better today than it was in the nineteenth century, even if tinges of former repressions and prejudices are still to be found. Woman make up the largest group that has had to endure subjugation and disadvantages. This is not only evident in actual historical accounts but also in works of historical fiction, where until recent decades: "there was a marked preference for narratives featuring male agency and female passivity, and in many of these texts ... female figures, real or imagined, were marginalized, and featured solely as romantic interests" (Cooper and Short 2). Nevertheless, this aspect of historical fiction has changed dramatically and neo-Victorian literature has played a significant part in the reassertion of female figures and female agency in historical fiction. As stated by Goggin and MacDonald in their article on neo-Victorianism and feminism, due to the:

> contentious and continuous debates over whether feminism – and/or society – has moved forward or backward, and how hierarchies are preserved by those in power, it is perhaps unsurprising that the exploration of feminist concerns through the nineteenth-century past are still very much alive today. (4)

However, even if there is, an "inherent confusion, disorientation, and sometimes pain involved in re-thinking Victorian gender roles and relations against the backdrop of various feminisms" (Goggin and MacDonald 2), neo-Victorian literature should not be thought of as a pessimistic genre. For, on the one hand, it reviews the present day and celebrates how much has been accomplished during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While, on the other hand, the authors of neo-Victorian novels often re-imagine and redeem the lives of Victorian women so that they can escape being victims of their epoch, an element which will be demonstrated through the analysis of the novels featured in this dissertation.

As stated above, the focus here will be on certain themes specifically related to the women in the neo-Victorian novels. Firstly, there is the theme of authorship/ autobiography and women self-expression through writing. Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* are first person narrations, so the reader gets an intimate insight into the life of the protagonist. Byatt's *Possession* and Morgan's *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës* are constructed differently, but nonetheless have women's writing as a major thematic concern.

Secondly, is the topic of sexuality and moral (in)decency. There is a connection between these and biography in Victorian and neo-Victorian literature, because "[t]he 'taste which fed' biography in the Victorian era was a concern with character", that is, a desire "for moral examples and models of conduct", while authors of biography should also "be guided by the principle of discretion" (Hadley 33-34; 36). Highly aware of this current, many neo-Victorian authors play around with emphasising sex and sexuality, along with any kind of 'deviant' behaviour, in order to accentuate the differences between now and then. Still, they are conscious of the fact that social mores and censorship were principal factors in the slight surfacing of sex in Victorian literature.

Finally, a discussion of autonomy and occupation is imperative when covering themes concerning the representation of women in neo-Victorian literature. The question of independence and career making, versus matrimony and child-rearing, is perhaps even more complicated at the present moment than it was during the nineteenth century. This is evidently the result of more choices rather than due to further restrictions, since Western women in the twenty-first century are generally free to enter all spheres of the labour market. Nevertheless, modern women are under considerable pressure to combine the expectations of higher education, and the employment opportunities that follow, with being dedicated homemakers. The right to combine these roles is enjoyed by many women; however, that should be a question of individual choice, not of societal expectations. A revision of these aspects in a Victorian setting, with a modern perspective, can be highly enlightening and will be an important issue in all of the following chapters.

Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet:* A Fin de Siècle Coming-Out Story

When female agency and sexuality within neo-Victorian fiction are the topic of discussion it is impossible not to mention the novels of Sarah Waters, three of whom undoubtedly fit the category of neo-Victorian literature. In a collection of critical essays on Waters' novels, Kaye Mitchell states that Waters' works have "been prominent in the emergence and development of 'neo-Victorianism' as a category of fiction and as a critical category", and that the notability of sex, especially non-heterosexual sex, as a feature of the genre, is derived from Waters' fictions (Critical Reception 7). In Diana Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel,* Waters' novels are also credited as "the most radical examples" of "texts [that] privilege the female point of view and thus expose the subjective and phallogocentric nature of mainstream history" (206). This chapter will look at her debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), which is mentioned in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* as the first in an avalanche of historical novels written by women, for women, and about women (Cooper and Short 3). The characters in *Tipping* are predominantly female, they come from different social classes and backgrounds, and their interactions range from being friendly to lustful, or violent. Moreover, the prominence and diversity of sexual and romantic relations is important in *Tipping,* since it adds a dimension to female interactions generally not seen in mainstream fiction.

Set up as the retrospective first-person narration of the now wiser and more mature protagonist of the novel, the style of *Tipping* is that of a *Bildungsroman.* This coming-out story is that of Nancy Astley, a small town oyster girl, who undergoes various transformations. Firstly, Nancy becomes Nan King, a music-hall masher (singing and dancing male-impersonator); secondly, a cross-dressing streetwalker; then the property/concubine of an influential widow; before finally finding love and joining a society of lesbian social workers and activists. The landscape of *Tipping* is primarily that of London's Roaring Nineties and what the novel does, according to Louisa Yates, is to reproduce "the cultural landscape even as it re-vises the sexuality of those who inhabit it" (189). Nancy, and the other female characters, are written into English history during a period when female homosexual tendencies and behaviour were thought of as

vicious, or side-effects of mental illness, and not worthy of much discussion or research (Beccalossi 18-19). Consequently, *Tipping* endeavours to show as many variations of female same-sex desires and relationships as can be accommodated in a single work of fiction. This is no casual whim, since as Louisa Hadley states: “Waters' recuperation of the past … is explicitly politically motivated” (89). Nevertheless, the presence of a particular agenda does not make the novel any less playful, and the following sections will demonstrate how the themes of women's self-representation, sexuality, and occupation in *Tipping,* constitute an impressive blend of historical accuracy and empowering anachronistic re-imaginings.

The Performing Author

In the manner of a stage performance, *Tipping the Velvet* concludes with “a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause” (Waters 472). Up until this final scene Nan's narrative has taken her audience through various stages of her development, both as a lover and as a performer. These two aspects of her life are invariably intertwined and Nan's rendition is always influenced by her romantic connections. She cohabits with all of her lovers; consequently, her narration and performances are continually under the influence of these women. Nancy's fictional autobiography is split into three parts, in the style of many Victorian novels that were published in three separate volumes, and each part is marked by a turn in her romantic affairs.

The traditional structure of *Tipping* establishes Nan as a typical Victorian realist narrator who is recollecting events from a certain point after their conclusion. This is marked by various foreboding observations, such as: “Later still I came to know it as the essence not of pleasure, but of grief. That, however, is to get ahead of my story” (6). Moreover, in terms of structure the novel appears to possess what was “valued in Victorian novels: rounded characters, a dramatic plot, and a neat ending”. The revival of these characteristics of classical Victorian fiction in some neo-Victorian works has prompted descriptions of the genre as imitative, and an “attempt to revive” Victorian literature (Hadley 141-2). Conversely, the adoption of a first person narration and the aforementioned elements (which are by no means present in all neo-Victorian novels) is merely another form of pastiche, which can serve to emphasize the *neo*-Victorian

content of the texts. The employment and tongue-in-cheek transformation of these common elements of the Victorian novel may be sufficient to denote the status of *Tipping* as a neo-Victorian work; nevertheless, it is Waters' creative use of language that gives the work the additional playfulness, which is characteristic of neo-Victorianism.

There is a metafictional quality to *Tipping* and what it achieves, according to Waters herself: “is to be more playful with history, to 'parade' history and to parade its own status as historical fiction” (Mitchell, K. Interv.131). An aspect of this self-reflexivity, which has been noted by most critics of the novel is the frequent use of the word 'queer'. It is repeated 43 times throughout the novel and while it usually signals its original meaning of peculiarity, it also tends to imply its more recent usage as a “word relating to sexual identity, dissidence, challenge, otherness”. As Jerome de Groot states, “Waters' use of the word seems a minor wink to the reader” (62). It simultaneously encourages the reader to ponder on the term's different uses in the past and present, and to consider the changes in the experiences and lifestyles of LGBT individuals in the Victorian era and the present moment. In one instance Nancy uses 'queer' to express her surprise at discovering feelings of desire for someone of her own sex: “I understood at last my wildness of the past seven days. I thought, how queer it is! - and yet how ordinary: *I am in love with you*” (33). However, in other cases 'queer' is less positive, although it encompasses an understanding of a wider range of sexual identities, as in a scene were Nancy cross-dresses and poses as a homosexual male prostitute: “The man had looked like Walter; I had pleasured him, in some queer way, for Kitty's sake; and the act had made me sicken” (199-200). The ambivalent use of the word 'queer' suggests that even though Waters wishes to insert and give visibility to homosexuality and non-traditional gender identities in the nineteenth century, she is not trying to present homosexual factions in a glorified light. In her article “Historical Fiction and the Revaluing of Historical Continuity in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*”, Mandy Koolen says that: “idealistic interpretations of the queer audience and community ignore the hierarchies that exist within these spaces” (389). An essentially lesbian neo-Victorian novel does not aim at an exaltation of homosexuality; rather it lays claims to representation and visibility, both in the past and present.

Alternative connotations and the suggestiveness of words also extends to some

of the names in the novel. A prime example of this is the use of the last name of the renowned queer theorist Judith Butler. Nancy's first love, as well as the person who draws her into the sphere of performance, is a cross-dressing singer called Kitty Butler. In her work *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction,* Helen Davies declares that "Waters' representation of gender as performance can … be understood as 'talking back' to Judith Butler's work" (137). This implies that *Tipping* provokes a discourse between diverse takes on what the notions of sex and gender constitute within contemporary theories that hold these concepts as central to their arguments. If Kitty and her stage act are representative of queer theory and Judith Butler's notion that: "performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer thought" (xxviii), then Nan's relationship and eventual disillusion with Kitty can be seen as both a tribute to queer theory and a move away from it towards a firmer association with lesbian-feminist theory.

When Nancy Astley begins her short career as a masher, she has to create a pseudonym for her stage persona, since similarly to many other female artists of the Victorian period she does not want to embarrass her family by involving their name with show business. The stage name she takes hides her origin, while highlighting the theatricality of Nan King, the drag king. Upon her donning the masher's outfit, it is noted by Nan's associates that something is not right with her appearance. Kitty claims "that Nan looks 'too real' when she is wearing a man's suit [which] highlights the social danger of actually passing as male, even in theatrical spaces where cross-dressing is celebrated" (Koolen 380). Hence, in order to be socially acceptable as a masher Nan must be "clad not exactly as a boy but, rather confusingly, as the boy [she] would have been, had [she] been more of a girl" (Waters 120).

In the article "From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters *Tipping the Velvet*", Cheryl A. Wilson explains that: "the working-class music hall performers, like their domestic counterparts, could not pose a direct threat to traditional masculine authority—the gender-crossing behaviours that were applauded on the stage were forbidden on the street (294). To be manipulated and limited in such a way in the act of creating her own identity is frustrating for Nan, and it is clear by her

narration that as a part of her and Kitty's double act, with Kitty's future husband as the manager, Nan is being closeted along with her newfound sexuality. When describing her reaction to having to conceal her feelings for Kitty, Nan says: "I felt as though I was bound and fettered with iron bands, chained and muzzled and blinkered" (127). By this it can be seen that her happiness is overshadowed by the concealment she has to constantly enact.

After the severe trauma Nan undergoes when Kitty leaves her for their manager, because Nan is "too much like a boy" (171), she seeks refuges in a masculine identity. This is at a time when she feels insecure and depressed, and as she says: "There was a darkness, a heaviness, a stillness at the very centre of me … I crossed my arms over my ribs, and embraced my dark and thickened heart like a lover" (190). When she first ventures into the streets of London by herself, after the separation from Kitty, Nancy cannot tolerate the harassment she receives from men, although she somehow condones it by saying of herself: "such a girl, I suppose, is a kind of invitation to sport and dalliances" (191), due to her distraught manner. And indeed it does seem that "to walk as a boy, as a handsome boy in a well-sewn suit, whom the people stared after only to envy, never to mock" (195), is for Nan, for a limited period of time, the only way to escape her confused notions of gender, sexuality and performance. Nevertheless, dressed a young boy she starts to receive invitations to sexually gratify men in exchange for money, and thus she takes on 'renting' with mixed emotions of masochism and misandry:

> I never felt my own lusts rise, raising theirs. I didn't even need the coins they gave me. I was like a person who, having once been robbed of all he owns and loves, turns thief himself – not to enjoy his neighbours' chattels, but to spoil them. My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience … a bold a knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (206).

Nan gets her wish to be watched granted before long by Diana, her next lover, who is a wealthy and influential widow and the leading member of an elite Sapphic society. Yet, it soon becomes evident that Diana is an abusive and domineering person who objectifies Nan and treats her as her cross-dressing puppet. The imbalance of power in the relationship between the feminine and self-confident Diana and Nancy, 'the Boy', as

she is called by Diana's circle: “shows that performing masculinity does not necessarily free women from gender constraints and the valuing of female bodies over minds” (Koolen 386).

In her next 'performance' Nancy takes up her old surname, Astley, in order to seek the aid of a young social worker, with whom she had crossed paths and been mildly attracted to. Initially, Nancy misinterprets Florence's living arrangement with her brother and their foster-child, and since she believes Florence to be married, she actually poses as a heterosexual woman who has had to suffer severe abuse by a male lover. However, due to the egalitarian and friendly society of Florence and her friends, Nan gradually sheds the last of her costumes and embraces her identity as a lesbian woman who prefers masculine attire. Nan receives “a sexual thrill from the double taboo of expressing same-sex desire while wearing male clothing” (Koolen 382), yet she also gradually eases into her new self without a sense of shame and guilt.

Having gone through all of these roles during her early twenties, Nancy has reached a point where she can step back and be her own biographer. In her life story there is no need for moral preoccupations, despite the “confessional tone of an autobiographical narrative … [with a] narrative voice at a point in the future [that] enables [the narrator] to pass judgement on his former actions and so reassures the reader” (Hadley 40). *Tipping the Velvet* thus transforms the traditional coming-of-age story of the Victorian period into a 'coming-out' neo-Victorian story.

From Sexual Diversity to Lesbian Conventionality

Tipping the Velvet oozes with sexuality and Waters has a talent for inserting coy innuendos throughout the novel. Its title is Victorian slang for cunnilingus, while Nancy's first occupation was that of opening oysters (with its reference to the vagina and transsexuality), each brim-full with “juice, naked and slippery” (48). Then there are more graphic instances of detailed descriptions of hired oral sex (199), and what could only be referred to as a gang-bang (281). Until this day *Tipping* continues to be among the more explicitly sexual neo-Victorian fictions, even as both a quantity and variety of sex is a common denominator for many of the works of the genre. This overt presence of sex is not without substantiation, for as Nadine Muller says:

> If sexuality and sexual performance function as means of self-definition in a time in which the nature of identity is becoming ever more fluid, then neo-Victorianism's obsession with sex is … a valid and effective avenuer through which we can critically explore this new, increasingly important and ever more publicized female sexual identity and its implications for women and feminist theory and practice. (Muller 129)

In *Tipping,* the predominance of sex arises partly from the fact that the discovery of her sexuality and sexual preferences, is a significant part of the protagonist's development into adulthood. Just like many Victorian *Bildungsroman* protagonists, Nancy experiences the arrival of love and erotic emotions for the first time, yet in a neo-Victorian novel these sentiments need not be kept *sub rosa*. During the period before Nancy and Kitty become lovers, the reader bears witness to Nancy's increasing arousal: "I would brush and fold her suit with trembling fingers … each [piece of clothing] seemed charged with a kind of power, and tingled or glowed (or so I imagined) beneath my hand" (36). However, as quite an empowering gesture, which also makes for an entertaining read, Waters' does not allow Nan to feel self-loathing, or to be anything more than "almost shameful" for her lesbian fantasies and her fetishizing of Kitty's objects. Her sentiments towards Kitty are stronger than society's preconceptions about female sexuality.

Many myths exist surrounding the Victorian period and quite a number of them are connected to sexual mores. For example, Queen Victoria "is commonly credited with dispensing the advice that married women should 'lie back and think of England' and claiming that lesbianism did not exist". While these and other stories have been debunked, they "neatly fit the contemporary perception of the Victorian era" (Hadley 30). The contrast between what some believe to be the oversexualization of the present moment, and the more chaste or sexually constricted Victorian period, is certainly a factor in the prevalence of sex in neo-Victorian fictions. Still, it is no mystery that there has been no great anatomical change in the human race in the last hundred years, causing us to be more sexual beings. Consequently, the alterations that have taken place in the attitude towards sex since the Victorian era are mostly the result of less censorship and legal amendments, as well as gradual changes in the unwritten social codes. To explore the subject of sex in an era when it was more of a taboo than it is today, gives authors the potential to look at the sexual politics of contemporary society.

Hence, according to Muller: "neo-Victorian fiction, with this ambiguous, sex-sational status as a symptom of and contributor to the mainstreaming of sex, offers itself as a medium for the representation of the risks and challenges these new uncertainties pose as well as of the new potentials they may offer" (129), through the conscious use of the temporal detachment between the present and the Victorian setting.

Because of the abundance of sex in her novels, Waters has been accused of being "an exploiter of the market value of two women making love" (Muller 122). This seems an absurd charge; for one because one would never hear of a heterosexual author being criticized for writing about his, or her, own sexual orientation. Moreover, if the myriad of dissimilar sexual experiences in *Tipping* form a part of why some critics state that "there is a degree of ambiguity in [Waters] handling of crucial feminist concerns" (Mitchell, K. Critical Reception 10), the critics' sense of ambiguity can be explained by divergent opinions regarding ideas about women and sex - the subject matter of the so-called 'sex wars' within feminist divisions. In "Representations of lesbian desires in the novels *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*", Joanne Bishton defends Waters from those who would imply that her works are pornographic. Bishton states that even though "Waters doesn't shy away from balancing the exposure of the body against the feminist anxiety surrounding objectification and pornography", the depiction of sex in her novels plays an integral part in their plot and is never gratuitous, as in pornography (3). *Tipping* celebrates female sexuality, thus when Waters delivers line after line of titillating erotic descriptions it is under the premise that they should, under most circumstances, be fun and sexy, and serve to liberate Victorian women from contemporary misconceptions about their frigidity and/or sexual ignorance. Furthermore, since the descriptions are mostly of lesbian sexual experiences they present a challenge for the neo-Victorian author. In an area of sexuality where there is almost a complete gap in Victorian history, there is much room for re-imaginings, as very little documentation can be found on the subject.

In any case, *Tipping* condemns sexual exploitation by showing it at work, while it also "depicts the power imbalance between Diana and Nan as erotically charged and shows that sex can blur the line between pleasure and exploitation" (Koolen 384). This is apparent in a comment which Nan makes rather late into her stay at the inaptly named

Felicity Place: “I was occasionally sulky, but … she found ways of turning my sulkiness to her own lewd advantage – in the end, I hardly knew if I were really cross or only feigning sulkiness for the sake of her letches” (301). Diana is a transformed female version of the Victorian novel's vicious gentleman, who would use his charm and superior social position to lure an innocent girl. However, in this case, the young girl is far from being a model of purity, which could induce some readers into victim blaming. Still, if Nan and Diana's exchanges are scrutinised it becomes clear that the latter's abuse of power and the gradual escalation of her manipulation are undeniable, as can be seen from Nan's irrational and co-dependent mindset regarding their affair:

> It was the first time she had spoken to me as a servant, and her words drove the lingering warmth of slumber quite from my limbs. Yet I took my leave, uncomplaining, and made my way to the pale room along the hall, where my own cold bed awaited. I liked her kisses, I liked her gifts still more; and if, to keep them, I must obey her – well, so be it. I was used to servicing gents in Soho at a pound a suck; obedience – to such a lady, and in such a setting – seemed at that moment a very trifling labour. (262).

Koolen offers a pertinent viewpoint when she says that: “Although Nan leaves the streets upon becoming Diana's tart, it is questionable whether she stops being a sex worker, since she is expected to share her body with the women she entertains, and Diana pays for Nan's sexual and theatrical services by providing her with erotic and material pleasures” (386-7). However, it could be argued that her position at Felicity Place is even worse than that of her days working as a streetwalker. During that period she did at least have a home of her own to return to, and although they were eccentric, she did have real friends. At Diana's mansion Nan is forbidden to leave the premises, so even though she does not realize it right away, she is actually Diana's prisoner. Nan's retrospective comment on the situation shows her mental numbness and lack of critical thinking at the time: “I did not mind my lack of liberty; as I have said, the warmth, the luxury, the kissing and the sleep made me grow stupid, and lazier than ever” (265).

Having grown accustomed to Diana's abuse, it is not until Nan witnesses the similar maltreatment of Diana's maid Zena, that she snaps out of her lethargy. This brings upon an intimacy between the two, and they “are kicked out after they are caught having sex, an act of class rebellion that allows them to resist Diana's sexual and

financial power" (Koolen 388). This is the first step, out of many, on Nan's way to general well-being. When she falls for Florence it is because of affection and respect and not the consequence of pure lust, or the excitement of the forbidden. Adjusting to a relationship where outward concealment, theatricality, and show are unnecessary is a considerable alteration for Nancy, and her 'outing' is most certainly liberating. Gradually, Nancy "begins the painful separation of her sexual identity from her music hall performances and the memories of Kitty that have pursued her" (Wilson 302). Consequently, when the story comes to an end, it is "Florence's passion, and hers alone, that had set the whole park fluttering", instead of being the other way around, when an audience was a factor in sexual excitement and passion for Nancy. On the whole, after quite a sexually colourful past the ending indicates a conventional future for Nancy, that is, within the lesbian context of the neo-Victorian novel.

Working Girl: Autonomy and Occupation

Although Nancy is not one of the working poor, she most definitely belongs to the working classes. As she says in the beginning of the first part of *Tipping*: "I was a fishmonger, because my parents were … I was raised an oyster girl, and steeped in all the flavours of the trade". Her time for leisure was limited, for the "working day began at seven, and ended twelve hours later" (4). This life of hers was by no means unpleasant, yet it is clear that the adolescent Nan has more glamorous aspirations, for she "had a fondness – you might say, a kind of passion – for the music hall; and more particularly for music-hall songs and the singing of them" (5). Keeping in mind that it is Nan herself who is the narrator of the events which led to her eventual career on the music-hall stage, and Waters' tendency to employ unreliable narrators (Mitchell, Critical Reception 6), it can be assumed that she might be giving a somewhat limited account of the circumstances. The series of events, leading up to her opportunity to escape her monotonous life for the glamour of the stage, appear coincidental; yet, this outcome could well have occurred to Nancy when she followed, flattered, and befriended Kitty. Then, despite the fact that it is Walter who verbalizes the suggestion that Nan join Kitty in a double act, it is she who voluntarily dresses up and joins Kitty in her singing at just the moment when he is expected. Moreover, Nancy knew that Walter was desperate for

a new twist in Kitty's performance.

How and why Nancy began her career as a performer might appear irrelevant; yet if one considers her reluctance to appear actively involved in such an unusual enterprise as a part of the narration, then it gains new significance. In all of the novels that will be featured in this dissertation, there are examples of women hesitating to enter spheres that are not traditionally welcoming to them. This reluctance has less to do with their own reservations than that of those around them, typically male relatives or partners. To not have to wait for opportunities to present themselves, but to be able to seek them was not a privilege afforded to all during the Victorian period. Today, however, with better access to education, most Western women and girls are able to do so without any dissimulation.

During the nineteenth century the extent and type of education a girl would receive depended on the social class she pertained to, although the general state of education for women was quite dismal. Women were not only limited by the scarce, or unsuitable, education that they received, but also through the pressure of finding 'respectable' work and not going after positions which were thought to be more suitable for men (Morgan, S. 38). Nevertheless, towards the latter part of the nineteenth century this was changing and women were entering more occupations that had previously been reserved for men. According to Jordan, this “seems to have been accompanied by a relaxation of the patriarchal constraints on working girls” (83). In *Tipping the Velvet* the idea that Victorian parents would never allow their daughter to pursue an untraditional vocation is refuted and even mocked:

> I wish, for sensation's sake, I could say that my parents heard one word of Kitty's proposal and forbade me, absolutely, to refer to it again; that when I pressed the matter, they cursed and shouted; that my mother wept, my father struck me; that I was obliged, in the end, to climb from a window at dawn … But if I said these things, I would be lying. My parents were reasonable, not passionate, people. (58)

The fact that Nan's parents are loving and supportive in her choice of profession implies that they might also have understood her living an otherwise alternative lifestyle. Thus, her abandonment of them is more tragic and points to the isolation that accompanies 'the closet'. This idea is emphasized by Nancy's allusion to the possibility of a re-encounter at the end of the novel, when she has properly embraced her sexuality and identity

through her relationship with Florence.

Out of all the prominent female characters in *Tipping,* not a single one (and there are many) is without an occupation. Rich, middle-class, or poor, these women demonstrate that a life of idleness was neither desired, nor the norm for Victorian women. The damaging effect of imposed leisure is thoroughly demonstrated by Nan's slothfulness and stupor during her time with Diana. At one point, she even says that she "has not seen the sun for a week. In a house kept uniformly warm by the labour of servants … even the seasons lost their meanings" (283). This forms a part of Diana's abuse of Nancy, for it causes her to be less critical and more forgiving of Diana's mistreatment, partly because of the melodrama it brings to her days of constant boredom. Diana, on the other hand, is careful not to become idle herself. She is aware of the influence she can obtain through many distinct activities and genuinely wishes to work for the women's movement. Hence, even though she is destructive in her private persona, many of her actions and projects are positive for women in general, which makes her an interesting and multifaceted villain.

Despite often being in the company of the vocal feminist friends of Diana, Nan remains unconcerned with women's issues during her stay at Felicity Place. This is due to the fact that she is not treated as their equal; thus, she does not experience their undertakings as having any relation to herself. A feeling of indifference accompanies her to her next residency with the social worker Florence Banner, in the East End. There is an underlying class criticism in the depicted difference between the social work of the upper-class ladies and that of Florence and her friends. Early on in her stay at the Banners, Nan asks Florence what the word 'cooperative' means. This is followed by Nan's comment that "[i]t was not a word I had ever heard used at Felicity Place" (378), which serves to emphasize Diana's selfish motives in her undertakings. Florence, on the other hand, along with her primary occupation at a girls home, also "volunteered for a thing called the Woman's Cooperative Guild: it was Guild work … which had kept her up so late on the night of [Nancy's] arrival at her home – and which, indeed, kept her late on many subsequent nights, balancing budgets and writing letters" (377). Hence, it is Nancy's admiration of Florence, rather than a fervent believe in the cause which lead her ending up as an orator at a the Socialist Demonstration in Victoria Park.

Although Florence and her friends are involved in helping all kinds of people, for “they all had lists of cripples, or immigrants, or orphaned girls, whom it was their continual ambition to set up in jobs, houses, and friendly societies” (376-7), their priority are the women of their neighbourhood. When talking about her own sister, Florence points out the almost all-encompassing reality of being a sexually active woman in late nineteenth century, whether destitute or not: “She'll be dragged down having babies all her life, and her good looks will be spoiled, and she'll die worn out at forty-three, like our own mother did” (376). Florence's pragmatic, yet hopeful, view of the situation of working-class women is one of the many aspects which make her one of the most interesting and dynamic character in *Tipping,* despite Nan's insistence on calling her 'plain'.

Whereas Nancy puts on masculine attire for the sake of performance, and her own pleasure, the 'butch' Florence is in many ways the educated and independent New Woman personified. In her article on *Tipping,* Wilson states that:

> Anxieties over the New Woman’s redefinition of gender identities through her increased participation in intellectual and athletic endeavours, formation of politically active clubs and organizations, and rejection of traditional feminine roles— perhaps best represented by the rejection of the traditional Victorian dress —prompted depictions of her as a hypermasculine 'wild woman'. (Wilson 294)

Florence not only preaches for, but also lives in, an environment of gender equality. When Nan discovers that Ralph, Florence's brother, happily takes an active part in raising their foster-child she demonstrates genuine surprise at the fact. She is amazed to notice that when “the baby cried: [Florence] tilted her head, but didn't stir; it was Ralph who, all ungrudgingly, rose to see to it. She simply worked on: writing, reading, comparing pages, addressing envelopes” (356). Though numerous characters in the novel provide a marginal viewpoint, it is clear that Florence is the sort of character that Cooper and Short have in mind when they speak of the presence in texts “of the historical female figure, re-distributing narrative power and providing detailed and complex portrayals of her, at odds with her accustomed place as a one-dimensional, supporting character in *his*story” (14). This establishes Florence as a quintessential neo-Victorian character, since she develops from being the protagonist's romantic interest into a multifaceted heroine - who combines independence, occupation, fulfilment, and

family despite the limitations set upon her by society.

Coda

Through the employment of lesbian characters and diverse sexual practices, Sarah Waters has transformed a Victorian *Bildungroman* into a more playful neo-Victorian shape. The retention of certain conventional Victorian elements, such as the confessional autobiographical narration and the three 'volume' division, serves to further draw attention to the unfamiliarity of late twentieth century discourse and attitudes in the landscape of Victorian England. Moreover, the ease with which Nancy Astley comes into contact with various lesbian factions in late nineteenth century London, is an example of the manner in which neo-Victorian novels shape the cultural landscape in order to address the contemporary issues at stake. The fact that the majority of its characters are women adds a seldom seen dimension to their interactions: the women in *Tipping the Velvet* are both active and passive; villains and victims; as well as philanderers and devoted lovers. That some of these women engage in sexual activities together does not represent a sexualization of women; conversely, it is an important part of the neo-Victorianism of the novel. A novel like *Tipping* does not only give its fictional women possibilities and voices that their Victorian counterparts were lacking, but it also introduces the lives and loves of lesbian women into the mainstream of contemporary fiction.

Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage:* A Diary of Porn and Parody

Just as Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) is the debut novel of its author. However, unlike Waters, who has had the opportunity to write many subsequent novels, Starling's first book was also her last. This dissertation is not concerned with the intent of its author; nevertheless, in the context of the critical discourse on *Dora Damage* it is interesting to be aware of the fact that the novel was published after Starling's demise, for this seems to affect the manner in which it is approached. Since certain elements, which are here considered to contribute to the novel's self-conscious parody of its own genre, are seen by some critics

as manifestations of Starling's inexperience as a neo-Victorian writer.

Authors of neo-Victorian literature are working within a relatively new genre, with a reputation for being rather lowbrow, thus they have usually stayed with certain traditions of political correctness, feminist agenda, and liberating sexuality – making the present work for the past. While novels, such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* were unaware of being a marking point for a upcoming genre, *Dora Damage* is decidedly conscious of belonging to a convention, which it aims to both follow and disrupt. Such a contradictory and parodic treatment of generic conventions serves to enlarge and diversify neo-Victorian literature. In "Those Very 'Other' Victorians: Interrogating Neo-Victorian Feminism in *The Journal of Dora Damage*", Caterina Novák argues that the novel calls "for a self-critically metatextual dimension within neo-Victorian feminist fiction that denies itself a sense of smug satisfaction at … the success of such writing's political mission" (131-2). Hence, it parodies many of the conventions of neo-Victorian literature, which can "become caught between the conflicting demands of historical authenticity, marketability and its political agendas" (Nóvak 131). This kind of self-awareness can make the novel's stand towards racial and feminist concerns seem problematic; however, it will be argued below that in the neo-Victorian context of today, a distancing from political correctness can be a more effective method of accentuating certain issues.

The Journal of Dora Damage is set in London in 1859, the same year as the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, an event which does not seem to concern the protagonist. Instead Dora's story is packed with just about any theme one could possibly imagine in a neo-Victorian work of fiction: illegal activities and underground organizations; ex-slaves and the American Civil War; pornography and sexual descriptions in plenitude; and women who are oppressed and threatened with the madhouse. The following discussion of the previously mentioned subjects of authorship/autobiography, sexuality and moral (in)decency, as well as personal and occupational autonomy in relation to the female characters of *Dora Damage,* will demonstrate how the novel consciously steps back from a political agenda, in order to deal with problematic and ambiguous themes with a certain degree of flippancy.

Cover versus Content: The Autobiography of a Female Book-Binder

Although Dora is an adult, both a wife and a mother, already at the beginning of the novel, *The Journal of Dora Damage* could easily be classified as a *Bildungsroman*, since despite her age and previous occupations, Dora has not really grown into her full capacity as a woman. In her work *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Diaries and Letters*, Kym Brindle states that a majority of stories in the diary form “are typically secret, self-addressed texts responding to a need to record one's subjective experience” (62), and in a sense *Dora Damage* adheres to this paradigm, since it was supposedly never intended for publication. In the epilogue, Dora's daughter, Lucinda, states that the journal was published, quite coincidentally right before Dora's death, for the sake of raising money for charity. However, it would make sense for someone like Dora to only want her secrets out posthumously. She states that the book she is writing in was the first copy she ever bound, and subsequently describes in detail the cover of the would-be Bible turned autobiography. Setting the tone of ambiguity for the rest of the novel Dora goes into a lofty metaphor about books representing life, after which she states:

> I have no such pretensions for what follows on these pages. This book is more likely to jump out of my hand, waggle its finger at me and tease me about the events I am trying to make sense of … Or it may have a greater sense of responsibility, and less of a sense of humour, and reveal within it some approximation of the truth. (2)

Thus, the narrator has already given out a warning that her tale cannot be taken at face value, while pointing to its ambiguous stance between responsibility and humour. However, to make things more complicated Dora then makes some contradictory statements about the purpose of her story and ends the prologue with another grand description of the book in question: “For whatever one makes of its curious binding, it conceals the contents of my heart, as clearly as if I had cut it open with a scalpel for the anatomists to read” (2). This might sound like a claim of humble honesty, yet it also points towards the pornographic 'anatomy' books that Dora binds later in the novel.

That a woman would take over the family business when her husband is too ill to work appears straightforward to most modern readers. However, the Victorian context of *Dora Damage* allows for a demonstration of extreme prejudice against the ability of

women to successfully dominate what was traditionally a male sphere in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is not until after a dramatic couple of days, which Dora spent pawning her belongings, considering becoming a prostitute (46), eating stale crusts and getting “to know the torture of a mother who cannot feed her own child” (31), that she tries to convince her ailing husband, Peter, of letting her run their book binding business. The way she goes about basically begging Peter to let her save him from debtor's prison is filled with exaggerations and irony.

At first, Dora treats her husband's mediocre work with surpassing respect, as she declares: “Peter, I will only be, as it were, your hands, instructed by your brain, and the commands from your mouth” (65). This suggestion is ridiculed by Peter who goes from being shocked and angry by the absurdity of Dora doing such work, to applying a subtler tactic, typical of a certain Victorian rhetoric against women's rights. His speech appears copied directly out of the latest article by the most conservative social orator of the nineteenth century:

> You delicate creature … you are too good for manual labour, too precious for the arts. Let us pity those poor women who are forced to make their own way in the world and earn their own keep, when they should be husbanding the wages of their menfolk … Let us praise your dependent existence, and work to your strengths, that of embellishing the house and cheering the heart of your husband. (65)

When Dora realizes that being flattering and submissive is not the right manoeuvre for Peter's frame of mind, she opts for another approach, which makes the intellectual gap between husband and wife even more apparent. She directly quotes the fearsome Lady Macbeth with great force, “for Peter would never recognise the quotation”, but she simultaneously wonders if “like Lady Macbeth, was I leading my lord into a evil trap? Was I unsexing myself, or worse, him?”. Still, Dora quickly comes to the conclusion that “[h]e had already unsexed himself. He was impotent” (67), thus making use of the same discourse as Peter, where physical and mental vigour are synonymous with masculinity. Her employment of such terms makes their sexist connotations more evident, than if they would have been uttered by a belligerent male character.

Up to a point, does Dora's 'crafty' persuasion of Peter, as well as her rapid mastery of bookbinding, fit “the well-established neo-Victorian trope of an unconventional woman beating patriarchy at its own game”. Nevertheless, as Novák

also points out, the novel "defies a straight-forward reading of its heroine, or any other woman in the book, as either an innocent victim of or victor over Victorian patriarchy" (116). As the narrator of the story Dora partakes in shaping the image of the women around her and the clichéd descriptions make feminist interpretations problematic. This applies, for example to Lady Sylvia, the wife of the Dora's principal client, Sir Jocelyn Knightly. Sylvia is presented, through Dora's observations, as a caricature of the Victorian aristocratic woman; hence, she "appears deliberately designed to deflect the reader's sympathies and serve as a foil for Dora" (Novák 121). When they first meet, Sylvia is "lying on a mauve chaise-longue", in "a paradise of femininity and sweetness", filled with a smell of roses and the song of birds. The elaborate description of the elegant surroundings goes on until Dora pauses at Sylvia's face and appears to immediately 'read' Sylvia's countenance. Dora declares that "her features were meaner than the expensiveness of the room would have suggested … Her mouth was thin … she smiled at me close-lipped and practised … Descriptions such as 'enigmatic' and 'wan' would no doubt have pleased her" (130-1). Moreover, as a tell-tale sign of Sylvia's faulty character, Dora devotes an entire paragraph to describing her ill treatment of books (131-2).

Later in the narrative when Lady Sylvia comes to Dora for assistance and shelter, after her husband has accused her of adultery, Dora is no less detailed in her observations on Sylvia's unjust criticisms and shortcomings. Sylvia is amazed by, and extremely verbal about, the scarcity of furniture and lack of space in Dora's home, as if she had never imagined people living more scarcely than herself. Besides being rude and commanding, along with threatening to strike Dora, Sylvia's defects are emphasized through her initial aversion to her infant son and the idea of having to breast-feed him. Such an outlook is portrayed as being the result of an aristocratic upbringing and is firmly grounded in the social gap between Mrs. Damage and Mrs. Knightly, with Dora being the recipient of contemporary sympathies. Then when Dora is contemplating to go to America with her African-American lover, Din, in the midst of the Civil War, Sylvia is the voice of nineteenth century 'reason': "one foolish white woman endangers all other white women! Think of your American sisters! Your impropriety will have completely changed that man's expectations of them … Your actions have served to

weaken the very Empire!" (394). To have Sylvia appear so highly unsympathetic emphasizes one of the novel's grand gestures of parody and exaggeration. Since, as Novák states Sylvia becomes "rehabilitated by her 'conversion' to feminism" (121) at the end of *Dora Damage*, as well as literally overcoming her snobbishness through interclass intimacy. She says to Dora: "give me a man who knows nothing of my title, my money, my breeding; bring me a workman, a bricklayer, a mechanic, with strong arms and dirty fingers … and I shall show you the extent of *this* woman's lust" (431); hence, portraying a completely transformed character from the beginning of the novel.

In the epilogue it is revealed that it is only after Dora's death, and the year after the conclusion of the Victorian era, that her journal is published. Hence, it is implied that: "rather than finding a means of speaking out against the race- and gender-based injustices of the Victorian period, Dora's voice can only be heard in post-Victorian times when many of these injustices … have already become a thing of the past" (Novák 130). The twentieth century voice of a grown-up Lucinda does not give away much about herself, yet she is careful to neatly wrap up the tranquil life of her mother after leaving behind the co-operation with Sir Jocelyn Knightley and the rest of the bibliophiles in *Les Sauvages Nobles* - a society of men interested in the collection of rare and erotic books. Even though it might be said that her mother's encounter with the pornographic industry left her literally brandished for life, as she was at one point kidnapped and tattooed by one of the members of *Les Sauvages Nobles*, Lucinda is straightforward and objective in her commentary regarding a trade which she is sure has come to stay.

Therefore, it does not ring quite true when Nadine Muller claims that in *Dora Damage:* "Pornography is thus presented … as physically and psychologically harmful for women, and as being responsible for their subordination" (128). For the conclusion of the novel underlines the fact that Dora "knew she had seen it all", and without being any the worse for it (445). On the contrary, the reasons why she and Lucinda do suffer are her former neighbours' disdain and prejudice, since they have all decided that Dora must be a prostitute (254). In addition, it is only through Dora's involvement in the binding of illegal texts that she is able to house, feed, and clothe Lucinda, whose epilepsy is also treated by Sir Jocelyn. It might be added that despite the fact that Dora found some aspects of the pornography she was exposed to offensive, she did not

dislike all of it.

The contradictions presented in the novel's attitude towards pornography are not its only discrepancies. These, as well as the highly saturated plot and numerous hyperboles have caused some of its critics to treat it as a mere rough draft of what Belinda Starling might have done if she had not passed away at such an early age. This is, for example, evident in James Flint's review for *The Telegraph,* where he says about what he believes to be the novel's shortcomings, that: “these are faults that Starling would no doubt have gone on to correct. How sad that she should be denied the opportunity”. Even without mentioning that Flint is ignoring the fact that *Dora Damage* was more than ready for publication when Starling was hospitalized, it is also clear that he is focusing on Starling's employment of common neo-Victorian tropes, while overlooking her adept parodying of those very same elements through the fictional autobiographical account of a Victorian female book-binder.

“No Place for Shock”: Sexuality in *The Journal of Dora Damage*

There has seldom been such a rapid conversion from 'blissful' ignorance to profound knowledge of sexuality for a protagonist in a commercial novel, as in *Dora Damage.* At the beginning of Dora's story she has had intercourse only three times with her preposterously prudish and asexual husband of several years, who even “kept the medical anatomies from” her (12). During those few times Peter keeps physical contact to a minimum, even after the required thorough scrub with “carbolic soap and baking soda” (24). Therefore, it is in accordance with her life so far when Dora states: “I had never imagined that there would be such things as naughty books … I had heard of the Vice Society, but had always thought that the members were the proponents of the thing itself, that is, the vice” (156). Consequently, the transformation is acute when over a short period of time Dora becomes exposed to increasingly more sensational pornography, and initiates an affair with an African-American ex-slave, who is also her employee. Dora's reception of her new subject matter for binding is mixed, to say the least. At one point she claims to have been sometimes “repelled, sometimes charmed, but always arrested, never bored”, while shortly afterwards she says that “eventually even the more vulgar literature ceased to raise a flush in my face: I started to find the

endless litany of bodily parts rather tedious". Then Dora appears to have a change of heart and declares: "in truth I was deeply discomfited by some of what I was confronting". However, there is a reasonable explanation for her confusion, for as she subsequently discloses: "my upbringing and society has not prepared me … I read words of love uttered by fortunate tongues that had tasted its bittersweet juices, and they led me into dark caves of sin, and left me there in torment and confusion (162-4). As a result, it may be assumed that Dora's bewilderment is principally a consequence of having been held captive in a well of sexual ignorance for most of her life; the power of knowledge being more easily digested when served in gradual doses.

In her review of *Dora Damage,* for the online journal *Neo-Victorian Studies,* Marie-Luise Kohlke argues that: "The finely honed irony of Starling's novel lies in the fact that its heroine becomes both a skilful manipulator of, and profiteer from, the very gender, class, and race based injustices of Victorian society she abhors" (197). As true as that statement is, Kohlke fails to see the extent to which this applies to Dora's relationship with Din. While she compliments Starling for "passages of genuine sensuality", she also sees the depiction of Dora and Din's relationship as "one of the weak points of Starling's novel, inevitably recycling the black man/white woman fantasy" (198). What Kohlke, along with other commentators, has failed to notice is the manner in which Dora's 'open-mindedness' and supposed lack of prejudice is turned into a parody of unconventional relationships in neo-Victorian fiction. This sort of interaction between them starts when Dora is adamant to know Din's reaction to *My Bondage and My Freedom* by Frederick Douglass. Having had mostly negative relationships with white women up until this point in his life, Din is not at all eager to share his innermost thoughts with his new employer. Instead he starts to toy with Dora's insatiable curiosity and leads the conversation towards the sexual advantage taken of him by a group of aristocratic women.

Din is able to jest about with this horrendous experience, and responds to Dora's claim that this must have been degrading for him, with the simple fact that: "They the ones degradin' themselves. They the fools". Dora herself appears quite foolish as she "giggled nervously like a young girl" at Din's story and pressures him into giving her more sordid details of his experience, by saying: "I want to know *everything* Din! Don't

do this to me!”. As inappropriate as Dora's reaction to Din's story is, her observations which are reserved for the reader are even more out of place: “'Oh my! Din!' I cried. 'How monstrous!' *But how fabulous, too! What knowledge!*” (209, emphasis mine). Then with this awareness, when Din does not show up for work Dora wonders if perhaps Din had “been ravished to death by Lady Knightley and her lustful ladies? Given that she would be nearly eight months' pregnant by now I doubted it, but the thought at least brought a sorry chuckle to my throat” (255). As can been seen by her comments Dora clearly finds gratification in objectifying Din, although her attraction to him makes the idea of other doing the same gradually less enjoyable. Furthermore, even as her thoughts reveal the extents to which her sexual pleasure is heightened by the forbiddingness of their lovemaking, she is infuriated by the idea that Din's satisfaction might partly arise from similar causes. Dora fantasizes about being “a white Eve with my black Adam; or was he the black serpent hiding in the tree?”, and relishes the thought of having “violated every moral, social and religious taboo”, resulting in a “shame mixed curiously with a wondrous, golden sensation of glory”. However, when she subsequently gets the idea that Din might get aroused by the idea of an inverted power balance, which he denies, Dora's reaction is severe: “'You, you violator! … I want to spit on you!' Actually, I wanted to vomit, and gouge his eyes out at the same time” (366). This serves as an example of the double-standards we apply to ourselves and others - for example, ourselves and the Victorians.

In Nadine Muller's article “Sexual f(r)ictions: Pornography in neo-Victorian women's fiction”, she discusses the way in which Starling's novel goes about “exploring women's roles in the male-dominated marketplace in which [pornographic] publications were and have since been created and circulated” (Muller 115). In the nineteenth century, a female participant, in either the 'behind the scenes' production of pornography or its consumption, would have been exceedingly rare. However, as Muller states, now that women are increasingly becoming users of pornography their “positions explode and blur the supposedly mutually exclusive roles as victim, accomplice and emancipated sexual agent which various feminist factions have established for them”. She then goes on to say that twentieth century theoretical discourse has generally assumed that “pornography – as a cultural product ... *either* creates *or* represents society

and its gender relations, most notably violence toward and the oppression of women" (115-6). The plot of *Dora Damage* seems to reject such a dichotomy, or at least imply that there is nothing black and white, so to speak, about the proliferation of such a huge industry that revolves around one of the most primal of human needs. The vehement manner in which Dora, at times, condemns the pornographic texts she is commissioned to bind can readily be read as parody, particularly since she occasionally does find the reading of them quite exciting:

> these books were temporary balm and permanent antagonist to the needs, twists and wounds of an already tortured mind … the books would have to be held in furtive hands, which no doubt would have preferred to have been free to whip the nether regions into a similar torment as the mind. Was it really, I had to ask, possible to have *fun* in this manner? (168-9)

Consequently, even though most neo-Victorian aspects of *Dora Damage* are filled with what Novák calls "exaggerated mimicry" (120), the interminable descriptions of omnifarious sexual activities, and proclivities, within the text make it "a veritable freak show of Victorian sexual deviance" (Novák 120). There is, as an example, an entire paragraph dedicated to describing different types of phalluses in hilarious euphemistic terms, followed by *Les Sauvages Nobles'* extensive menu of carnal appetites that appears to include just about any sexual preferences imaginable. Such a surplus of sexual details mocks the supposed oversexualization of the present compared to the Victorian era, while also making light of both the characteristic titillating elements of neo-Victorian fiction, and the criticism it receives for catering to "our contemporary desire for neo-Victorian fiction's 'politically correct' yet sexsational critiques of the past" (Muller 126).

An Ambiguous Representation of an Independent 'Meantimer'

The picture Starling paints of her protagonist is often confusing, and always contradictory. In *Dora Damage* "Starling exaggerates a standard neo-Victorian trope, namely that of the bookish, over-educated and emancipated heroine that is intended to facilitate readerly identification" (Novák 126). For example, even though Dora speaks in a submissive manner to her ignorant, brutish, and chauvinistic husband, her thoughts constantly reveal that she knows better; she is, as a matter of fact, rather

anachronistically adept at "playful referencing of twentieth-century feminist theory", as well as psychoanalysis and several schools of philosophy (Novák 127). She is also competent in Latin and French, while boasting of a high degree of general knowledge, rather at odds with her situation. She has apparently read incessantly (although clandestinely) in her life, and her preference is conveniently for the reading of "the legislative proposals, the academic theses, the histories, the memoirs of notables, and the primers for success in commerce". However, since being a female intellectual was not suited to her station, Dora "learnt the expediency of placing *bell-jars*" over her passion for "books, philosophy, politics and art" (12, emphasis mine).

When Dora takes over the family's book-binding business it is after only one attempt that she surpasses Peter's skill at the profession. Her amazing proficiency makes a startling contrast with his low opinion of women's capacity for bookbinding, since he believes that: "They're not strong enough; nay, they are not *straight* enough. Bookbinding requires a linear mind, a firm hand, a sense of direction and rectitude … To *finish* a job is too great a burden for them" (18). For a while, the reader gloats at the way in which Dora shows Peter who is in fact master of their trade, especially because of his many demeaning speeches of this kind: "I shall not have you adding to the many vulgar examples of your sex who steal from honest workers and their poor families, and who threaten the very structure of family life upon which England became great" (64). However, in the end the text appears to prove some of his points, and thus parodies the seemingly overt feminist message. One of Peter's main objections to women entering his business is his believe that: "Women are *meantimers*! 'I'll get married soon but I'll work in the meantime'" (18). And although Dora does not remarry after Peter's death she does abandon the book bindery as soon as it is not an economical necessity. She gives it to her apprentice Jack, who according to Lucinda "proved capable, unlike my mother" of running a company in a masculine business environment (442).

In this statement, made by Lucinda in the epilogue, Starling's parodying of neo-Victorian conventions is even more subtle than usual; since the man who supersedes Dora is no model of heterosexual masculinity. For Jack, the only white man in the book who is not an odious misogynist, is previously shown to be arrested and sentenced to prison for being, as Dora puts it: one of the "Mary Annes … Mandrakes. Inverts. Bin-

dogs. Sodomites" (311). When Dora rescues Jack from having to serve his ten year sentence he comes up with a solution for keeping himself out of trouble; that is, marrying Pansy, Dora's capable and endearing domestic help. In the epilogue, Lucinda also says that: "it made perfect sense to them and us all … her barrenness is no obstacle to someone of his proclivities" (442). Here again the text signals its striking contradictions and double-standards in attitudes towards female sexual behaviour. An aristocratic woman like Sylvia follows her libido in order to be happy and independent, while a working-class girl is supposed to be ecstatic over the possibility of any marriage. Still, this conforms with the novel's parodic transformation of literary clichés, since Pansy is another neo-Victorian caricature; she is an example of everything that could possibly go wrong for a poor adolescent in nineteenth century London. An orphan with nine siblings, she had to work double shifts to make ends meet, before meeting Dora. However, to get sufficient hard labour was becoming a problem for Pansy, since after a horrific abortion, following a workplace rape, she is considered too promiscuous to be desirable at the bindery where her attack took place, an event which Pansy recounts rather offhandedly to Dora (245-7).

At the end of *The Journal of Dora Damage,* Jack and Pansy are not the only ones to form a non-heteronormative family. Since, when their economic situation improves, Sylvia and Dora decide to start over outside of London, where "[t]hey offer mutual love, support and comfort … and devoted their future to themselves and their children" (442). When discussing their new life at Gravesend, Lucinda repeatedly emphasizes that being watched and talked about by their new neighbours did not bother either of the women. The insistence of this matter is significant, given that "*Dora Damage* differs from other novels in the degree of attention that the narrator gives to this issue [Foucaultian-like surveillance], at times making Dora appear almost paranoid" (Novák 124). It is repeatedly stated in the novel that a "woman's life could never truly lack visibility, no matter how low or high her rank: women who went to market were exhibits; women who never went to market were exhibited at balls and parties instead" (97). This is a major factor for Dora, whose insecurity before the many events leading to her emancipation, made her particularly vulnerable to the objectifying male gaze. At one point she declares: "unaccompanied, I became a public woman … Oh, for an escort on

to whose arm I could cling, to allay my fellow street-goers' curiosity and render me invisible" (53). The frequent repetition of this motif is a part of the neo-Victorian parody which dominates the novel, since both the self-regulating Foucaultian gaze and the objectifying male gaze are a common feature in neo-Victorian literature. However, Dora's ultimate indifference and even encouragement of the attention of outsiders is also a proclamation, which says that women are free to want to be gazed at, if that is their desire; or to be absolutely unaffected by gazes that they have not invited themselves.

Coda

Although *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Journal of Dora Damage* have certain elements in common, they are less alike than their status as 'sexsational' neo-Victorian novels might imply. They are published with over an eight year interval, which is evident by the manner in which *Dora Damage* parodies conventions that were relatively recent when *Tipping* was written, or which it might even have taken part in forming. Moreover, while they are both fictional autobiographical narratives, it is only *Dora Damage* that can present a frame narrative of posthumous publication, since it ends in the protagonist's abandonment of the 'improper' relationship, not its continuation. The unusual treatment of neo-Victorian tropes in *Dora Damage* has puzzled many critics, who are unsure of how to react to its many ambiguities. However, these contradictions are a part of its inventive satire of neo-Victorianism anachronistic appropriation of the Victorian for their own political purposes. Therefore when previously liberating acts and ideas are inverted in the text it is for sake of emphasizing the parody, and does not make the novel's depiction of female emancipation any less effective.

Fictionalizing Real Victorians: Jude Morgan's *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës*

The nineteenth century in Britain was a time and place were novel writing and publishing were becoming increasingly prolific and many of the novelists were women. As the century progressed the concept of the novel evolved and it became a more prestigious form. With this development the presence of male novelists increased, while

"women remained relegated to the popular novel with which they had been associated traditionally" (Fortin and Tuchman 74). Some of the female authors of the Victorian period admittedly wrote what George Eliot called "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"; while others were respected, as well as successful, and still rank highly in critical esteem. Those include Eliot herself, along with Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and the Brontë sisters - to mention just a few. Of these, the Brontës in particular have continued to fascinate, both as individual writers and as the complementing triad that they are sometimes considered to be.

Since Elizabeth Gaskell wrote her 1857 biography of Charlotte Brontë, a vast amount of material has been written on the Brontë family. Hence, it is evident that not only does their fiction attract writers and readers, but rather the entire 'mythology' of the Brontë family. What seems to be the latest trend in Brontë writings, is fictional material which takes as its basis the limited factual material available on the family. The gaps are then filled in through the use of the existing works by the Brontës, gossip, myths and legends, or simply the imagination. These novels (for example, *The Crimes of Charlotte Brontë: The secret history of the mysterious events at Haworth* (1999), *Emily's Journal* (2006), *Emily's Ghost: A Novel of the Brontë sisters* (2009), and *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* (2009)) undoubtedly belong to the genre of neo-Victorian fiction, as would most re-imaginings of the lives of nineteenth century figures.

The work that will be the focus of this chapter is *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës* (2009), or *The Taste of Sorrow* as it was called in its original publication, by the pseudonymous Jude Morgan. As in the majority of books that have the Brontës as their subject matter, Charlotte occupies slightly more textual space than the rest of the family. Still, the American title of the novel is misleading, since Anne's presence in *Charlotte and Emily* is at least as salient as that of her sister, Emily. In addition, insight is given into several other characters, including other members of the Brontë family, along with a few friends and associates. Unlike in the previously featured novels by Waters and Starling, *Charlotte and Emily* is mostly devoid of anachronistic insertions and references to present day theories and concepts, although Morgan's prose and style are decidedly contemporary. Nevertheless, there are many subtle ways in which modern concerns and insights weave their way through this biographical neo-Victorian novel,

since the past is mediated through what Llewellyn calls the “processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” (168). As a novel about what is now regarded as the foremost literary family of the Victorian period, notions concerning creativity, women's writing, and real versus fictional narratives abound in the text. Likewise, the combined lives of the renowned sisters lend themselves naturally to expressing thoughts on female autonomy, particularly in relation to matrimony and occupation. Out of the aspects that this dissertation focuses on, the subject of female sexuality is perhaps the least tangible one in *Charlotte and Emily.* There again it differentiates itself from the novels of the previous chapters in that it privileges a mental liberation over a sexual one. However, by turning the reader into a voyeuristic observer of the sisters' innermost thoughts Morgan combines all of these themes in his three-volume novel on three female authors that defined, unsettled, and shaped Victorian literary traditions.

Authorship: “Anonymous, or pseudonymous”

The subtitle of *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës* stresses the fictionality of the historical novel. This is in accordance with a postmodern tendency towards cultural relativism, instead of the previously practised attempts at historical accuracy, in the genre of historical fiction. Accordingly, even though historical novels deal with real people and events: “Readers and audiences no longer expect to find a verifiable … history within these narratives … [thus] contemporary readers are able to suspend their disbelief, and seem unconcerned as to whether the narratives they consume are factual or fictional” (Cooper and Short 5). Unlike an actual academic work of history, a novel does not have to name dates, make references, or introduce more characters than are necessary to sustain its plot. However, when a novel does imitate the style of a historical document, by citing specific data, the effect can be powerful.

In Morgan’s novel there is a short section where the demises of female students at Cowan Bridge are listed in a matter-of-fact manner, in the textual interval between the deaths of the two oldest Brontë sisters. To have Elizabeth Brontë's sick bed susurrations interrupted eight times by statements like “Mary Chester left the Clergy Daughters' School, Cowan Bridge, in ill health on 18 February 1825, and died at home

on 26 April" (62), underlines the reality of these events, as well as positioning them in a distinct pre-Victorian distance. Moreover, the imitation of early nineteenth century parish registers points to the authenticity of these specific accounts. When later in the novel Charlotte is asked to tone down her account of Cowan Bridge, the sentiment that novels should sustains certain facts through their fictionality is echoed: "Keep them. Keep the truth. Maria and Elizabeth died, but the truth does not" (302).

Despite the frequent shifts in focus, the stream of consciousness narrative mode that Morgan sometimes employs, as well as the multiple voices that combine to tell the story of the Brontës, *Charlotte and Emily* does in some ways adhere to nineteenth century standards in biography. For example, even though a third person narrator is present at all times in the story, the narration fades into the background and seems to blend in with the dialogue. This can be seen when Emily responds to a pupil's question regarding her distress over the disappearance of a dog: "'I care for Hanno a good deal more than any of you. As you must know.' This is just information; and that's what she is here to dispense, after all" (146). Whether the latter part of this fragment is a part of Emily's though process, or an ironic comment made by the narrator, is hard to tell. This adheres to the idea that "the mode of representation, or even the fact of representation, should be effaced so that all the reader sees is the subject" (Hadley 37). Through this type of commentary the characters in the novel are given more dimension than through any nuanced description.

Similarly to other neo-Victorian works concerned with biography *Charlotte and Emily* explores "the relationship between the lived life and the written account of that life". According to Hadley, such novels "raise questions about the possibility of accessing the past" (42), through their fictional endeavours to reimagine situations which can never be properly accessed. In *Charlotte and Emily* this aspect is further complicated by intimations that sources from this period, or indeed any sources of a personal nature, cannot be trusted, since there are "[t]hings you can't say … that's what most things are". Yet, these limitations are not presented as an impassable obstacle, because "[i]f you want to express them, you have to find another way" (272): that of a release in fiction. Charlotte and Anne in particular, are depicted in their discovery of finding emotional release for their traumas through the process of writing. However,

that does not equate the work with its author, which critiques by the Brontës' contemporaries are show to do; for example, when Charlotte is accused of "[e]motional unhealthiness. A painful and sickly preoccupation with love, surely unbecoming in what is now generally known to be an authoress" (361). Still, occasionally it seems to be suggested that there is a real proximity between truth and fiction, as when Charlotte asks Anne about a scene from *Agnes Grey*, and she responds: "It's all real" (283). This slight collision between fact and fantasy lies at the heart of the appeal of neo-Victorian fiction, since it satiates a desire for fathoming the past through literature, while negating this same knowledge because of its fictionality.

The methods and processes behind the Brontës' writing are a principal theme in *Charlotte and Emily*, and the mechanics of Victorian writing are often exposed through the sisters' observations on the subject. There are many examples of neo-Victorian works that will try to demonstrate the discrepancy between the modern and the Victorian author's 'code of ethics', by inserting in their novels an extravagance of material, which would never have passed Victorian censorship. In *Charlotte and Emily* it suffices to have Charlotte say that "there are certain things one cannot do in fiction, as you know. One cannot disgust the reader – as life too often disgusts us" (354). However, this is not the only way in which differences are hinted at through the act of writing.

The Brontës at their writing are pictured as witches, "three around the lamplit table [who] need new spells to practise", while they also conjure up false fronts to alter the effect of their fictional 'spells'. When discussing the idea of publishing under pseudonyms, Anne says to her sisters: "if we use female names they'll judge us differently … not as writers but as women" (280). In addition, the narrator draws an analogy between exposure through writing and physical exposure that would generally not ring true of young siblings in present day Britain. When they begin to reveal their works to each other there is an atmosphere of "incredible mutual shyness – as if they are thrown back to being children and seeing each other undressed or bathing" (276). Yet, even though this comparison gives an impression of temporal authenticity, it is not devoid of modern connotations equating the female body with feminine language.

Sexuality as an Undercurrent, not a Wave

The opening scene in *Charlotte and Emily* depicts the deathbed anguish of Maria Branwell Brontë, the mother of the six Brontë children. By the manner in which Maria's last moments are rendered, they appear anything but peaceful. The parish doctor concludes that the cause of death is "[*t*]*oo many children, too quickly*" (8), and this is echoed by all concurrent references to sex and sexuality, which reek of force and brutality. The narration, focalized through the Reverend Patrick Brontë, sees Maria's final bitterness and desperation as a work of the devil, whom he imagines "[e]ntering her … He must put aside the dark surge that is like jealousy at that thought" (3). Patrick pictures himself in a battle over his wife's soul, as well as her body, while trying to justify the implications that it is because of his "strong desires" that she is about to perish. Sex is described as a burden for women but also as "[w]oman's lot", particularly its consequences: pregnancies and child-rearing. A married woman was supposed to be "dutiful" whenever her husband wanted to have intercourse with her; she could have no control over the repercussions of "everything that happened in the darkness" (5-6). It is not explicitly stated in the text that Maria Brontë dislikes the sexual advances of her husband. However, it is certainly suggested that the sexual act is often forceful, and that she bitterly resents her lack of control over its frequency. For it is when Patrick "holds her down on the pillow", grasping her by her wasted shoulders so that their shadows form "that familiar humped union", that Maria "devilishly" asks him: "Oh, Patrick, do you seek the freedom of my bed *now* – even *now*?" (3).

Such a representation of sex as a destructive force for women points to the difficulty of depicting joyous female sexuality in times when the sexual act was ultimately tied to conception. For many women, including Charlotte Brontë and her mother, to 'give themselves away' in marriage would equate the signing of their own death sentence. The unlikelihood of longevity affected social patterns, for as Sally Mitchell states: "By some estimates, as many children lived in single-parent families in Victorian times as today, although the cause was death rather than divorce or lack of marriage" (147). This suggestion is rarely a part of the discourse on marital life in the Victorian novel, where marriage is mostly presented as a happy ending and its possible effects on women's health are left unmentioned. A neo-Victorian novel like *Charlotte*

and Emily thus provides "the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today" (Llewyllyn 175). The portrayal of a life without contraception and the liberty to control one's own body points to the importance of protecting this freedom in contemporary society.

Another woman in the novel who is burdened by the constant state of pregnancy is Madame Heger. She is described as "a true realist", in the sense that she believes that since "childbearing takes its toll on the figure and spirits", it would be normal for her husband to exchange her for someone younger, "presentable and trim-figured" (234). The text states that "Madame Heger labours under several disadvantages – those of being content, fulfilled, reciprocally in love, a model mother, and successful in her chosen career" (230), meaning that there is much depending on her being able to "manage very well". This is shown to be quite a skill, even an obsession, for "[m]ess is her aversion … [Madame Heger] ensures that all is well, all going smoothly. Smooth as her skin, smooth as the hair she brushes for a good twenty minutes each night. Madame Heger cannot pass a coverlet or a drape without smoothing it: she has to do it" (206-7). Nevertheless, Madame Heger not only has to administer her own business and affairs; she primarily needs to manage her husband, for it "is not only her marriage and family but her school" that depend on his fidelity (234).

Hence, Madame Heger is portrayed as someone who uses sex as an instrument to exercise control over her husband. Each time she approaches the subject of Charlotte's departure she makes sexual innuendos, and kisses and caresses Mr Heger, while mentioning their the needs of their children in order to get him to spend less time with Charlotte (236, 244-5). In the representations of the Hegers in *Charlotte and Emily,* there seem to be certain antiquated stereotypes at work. On the one hand, is Mr Heger, a powerful intellectual who becomes childlike in the face of female seduction. When he is shown to have strong emotions, Madame Heger "wondered if he quite understood himself" (252), while she also remarks that "he is a man … and it is possible that he might with a great shudder of generosity give away not a fortune but himself" (234), almost involuntarily. On the other hand, there is Madame Heger, a conniving callous tyrant who hides behind a mask of feminine sweetness. These stereotypes are, for example, confirmed through Madame Heger's statement that "men must be children

sometimes. You have to allow them it … they are so thankful for it. Rather like the sex: it is almost pitiable how much they want such a commonplace thing. Anyone would think you granted them a fortune" (233). However, when the description of Madame Heger is compared with that of Maria Brontë it can be seen that they are not so different, since even though the former can more easily bear the burden of constant work and childbearing, she also cannot know pleasure without consequence. Furthermore, the portrayal of Madame Heger is more complex than just of someone who uses sex as a tool for self-preservation. In fact, she "is a firm friend to her own sex", and a "strong supporter of female education", whose actions are described as resultant of pressure from society (232).

Charlotte, who passed away at only thirty-eight, is nevertheless the Brontë sister who lived the longest, and therefore also had the opportunity to write more than the others. Due to this, and the fact that Charlotte communed with other eminent Victorians, it might be easiest to give a fictional version of her textual substance. The detailed manner in which the reader gets to observe Morgan's version of Charlotte, dealing with the entire spectrum of feelings, from love and compassion, to resentment, envy, and hatred, borders on the voyeuristic. In the Victorian era, biographical accounts would be limited by ideas regarding decency, for example Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was "felt to have transgressed the boundaries of decorum with the revelation that … Branwell, had had an affair with a married woman" at the time of its publication in 1857. Conversely, as Hadley explains: "Gaskell is more frequently criticized by contemporary commentators for failing to reveal the true nature of Charlotte's feelings for M. Heger" (36). While Morgan's fictional biography of the Brontës is not preoccupied by notions of propriety, there is one sentiment which interestingly enough does not surface in the account of Charlotte, at least not in its simplest form, and that is a feeling of sexual arousal. All through her agony over Mr. Heger, and her more superficial attraction to her publisher, George Smith, there is no mention of physical sensations. However, when Charlotte's marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls is impending she starts to consider the "complex and demanding obstacle", which is unlike "[e]very other important thing in your life"; since those "you approached with *some* knowledge, some preparation" (370).

Despite the lack of explicit sexual descriptions in *Charlotte and Emily* it would be false to say that it tries to masquerade as a Victorian novel by its comparative chastity, though. When Charlotte thinks about her expectations for the wedding night, they merely amount to the following: “not that there is anything she does expect, except perhaps a vague image of tigerish pouncing and despatch” (371). As a neo-Victorian novel it has no intention of appearing censored, rather it wishes to depict a lack of sexual knowledge: not only verbally, but also in the absence of words. Moreover, given the Brontë sisters' achievements in life, they do not have to be sexy to be subversive.

Disposable Women Become Indispensable

Jude Morgan's novel of the Brontës contains not just one, but all the voices of the members of the renowned literary family. Nevertheless, since the voices of Charlotte, Anne, and Emily, respectively, are predominant, it appears as if the textual space in the novel were to mirror the actual amount of text available by each Brontë. In what might be called a literary biography, this is quite ordinary, because, as declared in “Making up, or making over: Reconstructing the modern female author”, by Emma Short: “the line between fact and fiction can become increasingly blurred as the biographer not only relates the significant events of an author's life, but also, more often than not, does so through allusions to that author's writings” (41). In his novel Morgan thus plays with commonly accepted ideas about the appearance of identity in each sister's writings. In a segment where they are gathered around their communal writing table, it is stated that in *Wuthering Heights* you can “feel the weight of the thought like a slab across you”, whereas in *Agnes Gray* there is “such melancholy … unsuspected … in writing one takes oneself off like a garment, says Anne”. Charlotte's work, however, is represented as being more self-conscious, “bulbous and misshapen with self, as she sees it” (276).

Charlotte and Emily is a neo-Victorian work of fiction, which centres on the three female novelists of the Brontë family; even so, the presence of the two Brontë men can be felt through much of the text. The figure of Patrick Brontë is presented as cold, distant, and demanding, a man who “is very proud of his son and very fond of all the children in his way – not a demonstrative way perhaps, but he must keep the citadel of self intact” (7). The preference and high expectations that he has for his only son,

Branwell, are reiterated throughout the novel. He imagines his daughters' bleak future, “with no money to entice husbands”, yet he can glimpse some hope, since “thank heaven, the one boy: the son. Ah, he has it in his power to change everything” (15). This imbalance of regard does not alter with the passing of the years, in spite of his daughters' success and Branwell's steady decline. For a contemporary reader there is a poignant sense of irony in the hesitant manner in which Charlotte, Emily and Anne tell their father about being published authors. There is “a thrill of fear” in the act, “[p]erhaps because the person doing this isn't Branwell” (307). The absurdity of shame over the surpassing of female over male prowess, becomes even more intense a few segments later, when the sisters are portrayed keeping “the books and the reviews out of [Branwell's] way”. The Brontë sisters are shown to be aware of the incongruity of these actions, as when Charlotte reflects that: “it would reveal an unseemly bitterness … to point out that where the slightest achievement of Branwell was proclaimed loudly enough to make the rafters ring, the greater achievements of his sisters are kept quiet: so as not to disturb him” (308). Therefore, when Patrick, after Branwell's death, exclaims: “'I could have borne any loss better” (331), the reader can only sigh and disagree on the behalf of literature, and posterity.

The Brontë sisters' acute awareness of societal expectations and norms for young women is a theme that is made much of in *Charlotte and Emily.* One of the most powerful sections in the book is the one that takes place at Cowan Bridge, a place which affected all of their lives, even that of Anne who never set a foot in the institution. There they are faced with appalling admonitions; such as the “lesson: don't be clever. Or if you are, hide it” (41). Even though the point of the school is to prepare them for working as governesses, as “[t]he children of a clergyman of slender means, alas, must prepare themselves to earn a living in a suitable way” (95), the scope of their education is limited by the evasive concept of “their station in life” (26). Governessing is portrayed as a dismal life by the narrator, who ironically reflects on the fact that: “The pittance Charlotte earned would still be put to good use, paying the fees to educate a different sister so that she in turn could go forth and educate other girls for a pittance, perhaps preparing them to earn their own pittance by educating girls … So *ad infinitum*, or rather *ad nauseam*” (119). Charlotte is of the opinion that this depressing cycle will

eventually turn anyone "into a drudge or a snarling harpy", while her friend, Martha Taylor satirically states that: "we disposable women have to be realistic in this life, you know. Else we get itchy and discontented and start contemplating the kitchen knife and wondering whether it wouldn't look nice between someone's shoulder-blades" (125).

Any neo-Victorian re-imagination of the Brontë sisters cannot but underline their extraordinary position as Victorian women whose intellect and courage brought their ideas forth from rural isolation and into the vast world. The extent of their achievements is made even more singular when it is contrasted with the following statements from the novel, the former of which is a segment of an actual letter from the poet Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, while the latter is attributed to their father in the text:

> *Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation.* (133)
>
> The profession of letters, which entails a degree of public exposure, must always be a dubious one for a woman to enter, unless she is duly safeguarded by reputable independence or by *marriage* … there is danger to her character … in choosing to apportion so much of her time to the dreaming of dreams, the weaving of fancies. (131, emphasis mine)

To credit matrimony as one of two means of autonomy for women, when that was certainly not always the case, clarifies the often expressed antipathy towards the idea in *Charlotte and Emily.* At one point a young Charlotte says to herself: "if that was the height of female aspiration – what did it say about the world? If having your dimples and curls assessed and approved and then matrimonially sequestered by some bland young curate represented earthly heaven, how unfathomably deep must hell reach below it?" (91-2). Consequently, when the novel reaches Arthur Bell's marriage proposal to Charlotte the sequence of events has to be carefully laid out in order for this very real event not to seem to unlikely in the neo-Victorian fictional world.

In the short section which covers Charlotte's engagement and honeymoon, her sudden attraction to Arthur is ironically juxtaposed with Elizabeth Gaskell's declaration that: "Only when the gentleman presses his suit are we allowed to look into our hearts and see there – great heaven, I love him, and I didn't know it" (362). Nevertheless, Charlotte's self-possession is emphasized when after her marriage she reaches the conclusion that "[s]he is still herself, free to look outward" (372), even though she has

'given herself' to a man. Furthermore, it is underscored that she is “given away in marriage by a woman, and a learned and independent woman, there ought to be some significance in this for Currer Bell, the creator of Jane Eyre and other women who will not know their place” (369). However, what could have been the conventional 'happy ending' for the last surviving Brontë sister is a recipe for disaster, since in accordance with actuality it is followed by the author's note, stating the date, time, place, and the probable pregnancy related cause of Charlotte death.

Coda

The neo-Victorian approach of *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës* is quite different from the aforementioned novels. Its tone is often sombre, particularly when relating the extent to which many Victorian women were affected by the choices and actions of their male relatives and partners. The emphasis of the novel lies in the exploration of the fictional inner lives of real historical Victorian women, and draws attention to their difficult and often unjust position, rather than reimagining them in unlikely situations, that have the purpose of exploring contemporary concerns. However, this does not mean that the novel is unconcerned with modern issues, since it is partaking in the neo-Victorian wave of absorption in the Brontës, as well as adjusting its focus according to that same interest in their private persona. The desire to penetrate the minds of Victorian authors is related to a need to understand their motifs from a contemporary perspective, which again can be connected to applying modern theoretical analysis on Victorian works – a process that is as crucial for the understanding of the present, as of the works themselves.

Issues regarding gender hierarchies, sexuality, independence, and female self-representation are all featured in the text; however, it emerges that the Brontës' best option for dealing with those is through their fiction. The importance of fiction writing is shown to be twofold: it is, on the one hand, a mental escape from the burdens of daily life; while on the other hand, it provides an actual means of economic independence. Nevertheless, unlike in the other novels discussed in this dissertation, the male author of *Charlotte and Emily* does not insert actual examples of the writings of the female protagonists into the text, since their writings will already be familiar to the reader.

Instead Morgan offers a 'behind the scenes' insight into the imagination and methods of writing of Charlotte, Emily and Anne; these highly dissimilar authoresses, who are pictured supporting and facilitating each other's writing.

A Meeting of Times in A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

In her work on neo-Victorian fiction Louisa Hadley employs the publication of A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) as a starting point for the upsurge of fictional works set in the Victorian period. *Possession* received exceptional reviews and was that year's recipient of the Man Booker Prize; moreover, as Hadley remarks, it “catapulted neo-Victorian fiction into the main-stream” (2). However, the interest in the novel for this dissertation lies primarily in its intriguing dual plot structure, as well as the insertion of a vast quantity of 'original' material by the fictional Victorian protagonists, with “more than 100 pages of invented ... journal extracts [and] in excess of 1,700 lines of original poetry” (Jordison). Or as stated by Siân Harris, “*Possession* … incorporates a literary canon of invention and intertextuality within the neo-Victorianism of the narrative” (171). On one level it is a story of two academics in the 1980s, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, who are thrust together by material that unexpectedly connects their Victorian subjects, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash, to one another. Their narrative is interspersed with a metatheoretical discourse on the complications of modern insights into Victorian textual lives. The second plot-level tells the nineteenth century story of the two writers and their creative and romantic affair, both expanding on and going beyond the modern research. The way in which the two connect also “explicitly dramatize[s] the relationship between the present and the past” (Hadley 4), since Maud and Roland discover that Maud's great-grandmother May, was the illegitimate daughter of Christabel and Randolph.

Because of the two dimensional aspect of *Possession*, which encompasses real and fictitious characters and texts: “The boundaries between the past and the present, history and fiction, text and truth, are blurred, and the process of their negotiations is a constantly evolving dynamic” (Harris 171). The novel not only contains various representations of Victorian women, it also incorporates the intellectual interconnection of twentieth century women with their predecessors. Furthermore, the nuanced

descriptions of academic life in the 1980s "intensifies the experience of the novel as doubly historical, and effectively highlights the temporality of the historical moment" for its present day readers (Harris 182). Since, despite the generally positive response to *Possession* a number of critics have found fault with its supposed conservatism and, as Louise Yelin, have connected it to "the Tory Victorian revivals of Margaret Thatcher" (40). In consequence, what the editor of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Marie-Luise Kohlke, declares will be the eventual employment of neo-Victorian works of fiction is already noticeable to present day readers of *Possession*. That is, to "be read for the insight they afford into twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural history and socio-political concerns" (13); in this case of Thatcherite England. The following sections will focus on the Victorian female characters in *Possession*; in particular through their private or public writing. With some support from the academic discourse of the twentieth century part of the novel, these will provide ample material to discuss the aforementioned themes of independence and occupation, sexuality, and self-representation through writing.

The Private Nature of Public Writing

The prominent women in the Victorian part of *Possession* all express themselves through writing, and "many of the female characters portrayed … are, rather than being passive and mute, actively involved in the production of their own narratives" (Harris 178). While Christabel LaMotte writes letters, fairy tales, and poetry, both Ellen Ash and Blanche Glover, Christabel's companion, keep journals. The extent to which the texts of each woman represent her inner self varies, and contrary to what one might expect, the diary is by no means the most transparent type of self-expression. The candour and transparency of the writing is shown to depend on whether or not the author of the diary entries believes them to be of any interest to posterity. In the case of Blanche, there are certain sections in her journal where she describes a deep need for keeping her thoughts private. In retelling a conversation she had with "a young and opinionated university liberal", she proudly claims to have mostly kept quiet, smiled, and nodded. Yet, Blanche goes on to say that: "He would have been much surpris'd to know my true Opinion on these matters, but I did not chuse to let him be so much

familiar, I kept mum … keeping my Thoughts to myself" (44). Moreover, from other entries it can be assumed that she does not expect her ponderings to be seen by Christabel, despite the fact that Blanche resents Christabel's own need for privacy. This can be seen by her tone when addressing Christabel's mysterious correspondence: "Letters, letters, letters. Not for me. I am not meant to see or know. I am no blind mouldiwarp, my Lady, nor no well-trained lady's maid to turn my head and not see what is stated not to concern me" (46). Conversely, in her suicide note, which Blanche expects to be widely read, she includes stinging remarks designed to reach Christabel, yet subtle enough to escape outside attention, at least during the Victorian period when information was not looked for "in the metaphors – in the omissions" (Byatt 221).

Just as LaMotte scholars are depicted going through Blanche's journal in search of material on Christabel and her works, the academics who study Ash occasionally seek answers in "the boxes of papers – letters, laundry lists, receipt-books, the volumes of the daily journal and other slimmer books of more private occasional writing" of Ash's wife, Ellen. However, the female scholar and R.H. Ash enthusiast, Beatrice Nest, is shown to have become an expert on Ellen Ash almost by accident. Her expectations when pushed into editing Ellen's documents were that of "intimacy with the author of the poems, with that fine mind and passionate nature" (114). Yet, as the work progressed Beatrice became less and less occupied with Randolph Ash, and instead "became implicated, began to share Ellen's long days of prostration in darkened rooms … This life became important to her; a kind of defensiveness rose up in her". Through her submersion in Ellen's quotidian expressions Beatrice becomes aware of "a *blanket* dutiful pleasure in her responses", while also observing "other, less bland, tones of voice" (115, emphasis mine). Now and then Ellen carefully expresses a disdain for masculine ideas of intellectual superiority, which contradicts the twentieth century male academics' statements that Ellen "was not the most suitable partner for" Randolph (115). These comments appear particularly in her writings about her exchanges with the local priest. On one occasion she writes that the Reverend Baulk "tells me I should not trouble my intellect with questions which my intuition (which he qualifies as womanly, virtuous, pure and so on and so on) can distinguish to be vain" (223). Then, on another occasion after she has challenged him to a game of chess Ellen satirically states that:

"He was pleased to tell me that I played very well for a lady – I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely" (227).

Other sections of Ellen's diary reveal her aversion for the curiosity "of greedy hands furrowing through Dickens's desk for his private papers, for these records of personal sentiment that were his and his only" (131). Her awareness and distaste of the public's inquisitiveness regarding the personal lives of eminent individuals, affects the manner in which she documents her own, and therefore also her husband's, private world. When Randolph sends her a gift during his travels in Yorkshire (with Christabel), she writes about her delight at receiving such a token. Apparently, following this she intended to intimate some difficulties in their marriage, but the document shows the phrase 'despite all' to have been crossed over. Instead, Ellen underlines their marital bliss and ends by saying that even their "separations contribute to the trust and deep affection that" they share (229). Her circumlocution, through which she reveals "the mystery of privacy, which Ellen, for all her expansive ordinary eloquence, was protecting" (115) is evident in several other instances. For example, due to the reader's knowledge of the affair between Ash and LaMotte, it is possible to decipher the figure of Blanche Glover out of an "importune visitor" which Ellen receives. This is followed by an understanding of her subsequent exhaustion, and of the undertone in her statement that Randolph is "acquainted with more of the variety and vagaries of human nature than ever Wordsworth was, who looked customarily inward" (231); since, Blanche revealed the full truth of Randolph's affair to Ellen during her visit.

The scrutiny of women's diaries, and personal correspondence, infused with formal letters and authoritative historical accounts, demonstrates that an "engagement with unofficial historical and cultural narratives does not entail ignoring or replacing official narratives … Therefore, rather than claiming to offer a complete and authoritative female account of the past … [*Possession* takes] an investigative approach" (Harris 177). Through their investigation, Maud and Roland discover that Ellen had knowledge of her husband's affair with Christabel; however, since not everything is documented they never get to fully understand her quiet acceptance of the extramarital liaison. In one of three Victorian scenes which the twentieth century literary scholars do not get access to, an omniscient narrator gives insight into Ellen's

unyielding devotion to Randolph. The narrator describes “the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence … She became his slave. Quivering at every word” (459), thus it is revealed that Ellen was terrified of sexual relations, and that the marriage was never consummated. By means of this disclosure the reader can make sense of several of Ellen's 'blanket' expressions, such as: “I lack many things in which my dear mother was both proficient and naturally greatly endowed” (222), taking into account that her mother gave “birth to fifteen infants” (225). This privileged revelation, and others of its kind suggest and expand upon the tradition “that it is only the omniscient narrator who can reveal the final 'truth' of the past” (Wallace 215), in a typical Victorian novel.

The correspondence of Christabel LaMotte is often enigmatic and full of poetic allusions. In one of her letters to Randolph Ash she includes a riddle about an egg. Towards the end of the letter she declares: “I am my own riddle … Shattering an Egg is unworthy of you, no Pass time for men. Think what you would have in your hand if you put forth your Giant strength and crushed the solid stone. Something slippery and cold and unthinkably disagreeable” (137). By this she is advising Ash to keep his distance, both physically and on an intellectual level, since he might not find her innermost thoughts agreeable. However, what stands out in much of their correspondence is LaMotte's frequent comparison of her own supposedly inferior ability as a female artist, with Ash's “great works” (159). In an early letter she tells him of her intention to write an epic, while adding that she, “a poor breathless woman with no staying-power and only a *Lunar Learning* [cannot] confess such an ambition to the author of the *Ragnarök*” (161). However, it is suggested that these self-derogatory comments might merely be a reflection and mockery of Victorian attitudes towards male versus female proficiency in arts, since when Blanche writes of Christabel in her journal she states that: “She is in no real need of epistolary adulation. She knows her own worth” (46).

Nevertheless, these remarks both reflect upon the dissimilar twentieth century treatment of the two writers, and serve to further connect the two narrative levels. Since, in the 1980s narrative, Bailey and Michell underline “the self-conscious nature of their entwined stories”, through the study of “LaMotte's provocative and revealing remarks about her own identity as a writer” (Harris 178). The intricate structure of the novel, as

well as the various levels of knowledge within it, serve to both distance, and bind together, the Victorian era and modern times. While *Possession* "re-establishes a lost matrilineal genealogy, as the female protagonist discovers the story of a foremother" (Wallace 212), it also shows how histories, especially those of women, cannot be fully known. Thus, the novel justifies its own neo-Victorian mission of not merely researching and presenting the limited attainable facts, but also imagining and creatively engaging with the lives of the Victorians – including the gritty details.

Multilayered Historical Sexuality

In *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative*, Louisa Hadley speaks of the sexual nature of post-Freudian concern with the inner life in neo-Victorian fiction. There she states that the "interest in Victorian sexuality is based on both a nostalgic perception of the Victorian past as a time of sexual innocence and a paradoxical belief that the Victorians were 'just like us' beneath their repressed exteriors" (46). This aspect is particularly evident in *Possession* due to what Siân Harris calls the novel's "multilayered historical sensibility" (182). Firstly, one can look at the censored depiction of sexual matters in Ellen's discreet journal entries. She circumvents the topic of her servant's illegitimate pregnancy by merely saying that her sister made "a shrewd guess as to what" (225) was ailing Bertha, without actually mentioning what that guess was. There are further intimations on her worries regarding this subject, yet Ellen avoids explicitly documenting Bertha's condition, while there are sentences in her diary that have been "crossed out illegibly" (231). Ellen's suppressed journal entries provide a contrast to the uncensored insights into her memories of her and Randolph's honeymoon, when she could not overcome her terror of the "complex thing, the naked male, curly hairs and shining wet, at once bovine and dolphin-like, its scent feral and overwhelming" (459). Those conform to extreme notions of Victorian constraint and sexual ignorance, while from the perspective of narrative and style they are decidedly more modern and rhythmic than Ellen's writing, thus signalling her acute mental distress.

Another representation of female sexuality within the novel is its appearance in the works of Christabel LaMotte. How to interpret stories like "The Glass Coffin", or

epic poetry, such as “The Fairy Melusina”, within the neo-Victorian context is a complex matter. As mentioned above, these works are creations of A.S. Byatt, with influences from various sources, such as “the medieval *Roman de Melusine ou l'Histoire des Lusignan*, by Jean d'Arras” (Lara 93), that construe a metafictional intertextuality by appearing in the text in conjunction with actual historical texts. Thus it is not only that “[t]he depth and detail of imagination displayed are enticing, but [they] also establish the foundations upon which to construct the narrative” (Harris 173). It is impossible for a reader of *Possession* not to form a personal opinion of LaMotte's works, yet the text also provides a variety of critiques, and insights, from both periods. In an account by a late 1940s fictional biographer it is stated of LaMotte's epic that: “It is now deservedly forgotten. Christabel's reputation, modest but secure, rests on the restrained and delicate lyrics, product of a fine sensibility” (37). Moreover, while some of LaMotte's contemporaries “admired her 'sweet simplicity' and 'noble resignation'” (49), the twentieth century feminist critics “see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males” (34). The academics behind such readings, are shown to be generally influenced by LaMotte's supposed homosexuality, as when “scholar Silvia Veggetti Finzi sees Melusina's 'monstrous' body … as a product of female auto-erotic fantasies of generation without copulation”, in one of the fictional reviews within *Possession* (246).

However, from the privileged standpoint of the reader, who has knowledge of the relationship between LaMotte and Ash, it is difficult not to interpret him as her “dubious Muse” and see references to heterosexual passion in some of LaMotte's verse: “*The grassy knoll/ Shivers in His embrace ... His Face/ Smiles hot and gold/ Over the small hill's brow/ And every fold/ Contracts and stiffens – now*” (201). The apparent prevalence of heterosexual love in both epochs is an element that has prompted several scholars to claim that Byatt's “experimental form conceals conservative politics” (Wallace 218). Diana Wallace claims that *Possession* is ultimately a product of a Thatcherite nostalgia for a more conservative and stable past, a political appropriation which Louisa Hadley also partly credits for the neo-Victorian novel's upsurge (Hadley 8-9). Moreover, Wallace states that:

The novel's recuperation of the heterosexual happy ending is presented as

> radical because it is 'unfashionable' but it is done at the expense of the lesbians in the text. Christabel LaMotte's defining relationship as a writer is not the long-term relationship she has with Blanche Glover but the brief affair with Ash. Blanche's suicide erases her from the text. Moreover, Leonora Stern, the twentieth-century lesbian, reverts to heterosexuality with Blackadder. (216-7)

This opinion is reaffirmed by Samantha J. Carroll who finds that Byatt "does little to depart from unflattering lesbian stereotypes … the vacuous impotence of Blanche Glover to the butch predation of Leonora Stern" (184). Meanwhile, a connection is established between twentieth century sexual "*powerlessness*" and the complex language of modern academia. After reading one of Stern's gynocentric texts on LaMotte, Mitchell asks Bailey: "Do you never have the sense that metaphors *eat up* our world?" He then describes his sentiment that everything in literary criticism is eventually "reduced like boiling jam to – human sexuality" (253), which indeed seems to be the case in *Possession.*

However, what Regina Rudaitytë calls Byatt's "ambivalence towards and unease about the postmodern … particularly poststructuralism and feminist criticism" (116), should not be equated with conservatism and a desire for a 'simpler' time, as some critics tend to do. In Wallace's section on *Possession* in *The Woman's Historical Novel* she moreover states that it:

> is a text which is driven by nostalgia, which looks back from a preset moment it perceives as fractured and alienated to a past which appears to represent stability and wholeness … In this, *Possession* is very much a text of the 1980s and replicates the Conservative project to 'restore' Britain to its former greatness. (216)

That *Possession* questions the methods of various strains of literary criticism is undeniable; yet, it is far from being evident that the Victorian period is presented as superior to the late twentieth century. For, it is in the times of sexual knowing, and not sexual backwardness, that the protagonists are able to form a fulfilling relationship. Also, the figure of the tragic lesbian is certainly present in the Victorian context; yet, to read the modern Leonora Stern as a lesbian feminist failure, rather than a sexually liberated bisexual woman, has the appearance of forcing her into the same tragic form. Moreover, the Victorians all suffer deeply from the consequences of sex, or lack thereof, and not just from a philosophical perspective. Consequently, *Possession* conforms to

Hadley's statement that “even those neo-Victorian texts that adopt a nostalgic view … recognize the distance between the Victorian and the contemporary moment. They accept that it is not possible, and perhaps not even desirable, to return to the Victorian past” (143). The past should be enjoyed in the forms that are available to us, as a presence rather than as something which has been lost.

The Home as a Safe Haven

The salient Victorian women in *Possession* have in common that they lead a fairly quiet and leisurely life. Nonetheless, that does not mean that they are idle; on the contrary, the absence of hard labour gives them time to pursue either their passions, or what they believe is their duty. For Christabel LaMotte, the production of stories and poetry is linked to both of these aspects. In a letter to a young niece, Christabel writes that “[i]f you can order your Thoughts and shape them into Art, good: if you can live in the obligations and affections of Daily Life, good … The first is a matter of Will”. As Maud Bailey subsequently states, in 1886 to consider art as a matter of will, rather than inspiration, was “[n]ot a fashionable view for a woman. Or maybe for anyone” (41). However, as important as both determination and artistic ability are, it is recurrently suggested in the text that certain other prerogatives have to exist for artistic creation to be able to take place.

In the early entries to her journal Blanche Glover expresses a profound happiness with her current living situation. This contentment she derives from her rather unexpected autonomy, which has come about due to her relationship with Christabel, who is the beneficiary of “a small independence, left her by a maiden aunt … [which] enabled her to set up house … with a young woman friend” (36). The persuasion of Virginia Woolf, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (6), or create art of any sorts, is confirmed vehemently by Blanche's writing. To be able ”to close our own dear front door behind us”, is the greatest of privileges for unmarried women she says, for then they can partake of ”the higher pleasures of Art and Thought ... with none to forbid or criticise”. The importance of economic freedom is invaluable to Blanche, since the alternative to having “one's *own home*” was to be able to expect nothing better of life than “an allowed place at the

extreme corner of someone's drawing-room carpet" (45). However, as Blanche soon finds out, to derive one's own independence from others, even if that other is another woman, is actually far from self-reliance.

The aforementioned suicide note of Blanche Glover is perhaps the most ardent feminist statement of the entire novel, at least on the surface. She states poverty, pride, and failure of ideals as the reasons for taking her own life; yet, as the reader discovers, along with Bailey and Michell, in such a public letter Blanche cannot be entirely honest about her motifs. As she had before said in a letter to Ellen Ash, Christabel's affair with Ash was for her *"no less than a matter of life and death*" (233), since a separation from Christabel was the actual catalyst behind Blanche's current economical and emotional state. However, what Blanche publicly say about the matter is: "I cannot again demean myself to enter anyone's home as a *governess.* Such a life is hell on earth … and I would rather not live than be a slave". For a poor but educated woman, who no longer wishes to accept the financial aid of a former lover, governessing would be one of very few options available. Blanche's ideas "about the possibility, for independent single women, of living useful and fully human lives, in each other's company, and without resource to help from the outside world, or men", have, according to her, failed - both because of themselves, and the world. Nevertheless, a note of optimism for other women who wish to seek a similar path, can be discerned in Blanche's farewell letter. This can be understood from the fact that *Possession* and other similar works: "With one foot in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth … highlight the need to understand neo-Victorian fiction within both its contemporary and its Victorian context" (Hadley 15). Accordingly, Blanche's wishes are reflected in the 1980s plot; whose socio-political aspects are further reverberated in the twenty-first century.

The need for a women's only personal space is also suggested in the early letters that LaMotte sends to Ash. There she declares: "my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing that I have … If you opened the little gate, I would not hop away – but oh how I sing in my gold cage" (137). This recurrent notion of women as either "*Helpmeets* without irony" (31) (a reference to Beatrice Nest's work about the wives of famous poets, including Ellen Ash), or the bearers of "capacities – great and here unwanted and unused – for love and for creative Work …. a superfluous creature" (309), suggests the

difficulty for women in achieving personal fulfilment in the times before feminism. The correspondence between LaMotte and Ash highlights the difference between how women artists were supposed to consider themselves, and how they might do in actuality. As the letters become more numerous LaMotte begins to express her real pretensions as a poetess, instead of what she believes to be expected of her:

> I am deeply flattered – and no less deeply alarmed – that you remembered it so – for I spoke – or affected to speak – idly on the matter, as about something which might be pleasant to Toy with – or pretty to investigate – one of these unoccupied days – *Whereas in verity* – I have it in my head to write an epic … how can a poor breathless woman … confess such an ambition. (161, emphasis mine)

Christabel also alludes to two conflicting sides of womanhood through the character, the fairy Melusina. Hence, Byatt "turns to myth as a way of imagining female powers and autonomy which have rarely been central to 'factual' history" (Wallace 213). In one of the letters, Christabel states: "how can I be supposing that you want my life-history in place of my Melusina-epic? Yet they are so *intertwined*". The Breton mythic fairy "has two aspects – an Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and *handy* woman" (174). There are many intimations in Christabel's writings that every woman is "a combination of the orderly and humane with the unnatural and the Wild" (179). Creativity is tied up with the monstrous side of the female; therefore, privacy is of such an importance to the Victorian woman artist, since otherwise she would be exposed.

For the twentieth century second-wave feminists in *Possession,* it is not difficult to accentuate the wild, rather than the gentle, in LaMotte's works. Conversely, to do so in Ellen Ash's writing is more challenging, at least according to Blackadder, Michell's superior. Blackadder declares that: "the feminists … think Randolph Ash suppressed Ellen's writing and fed off her imagination. They'd have a hard time proving that, I think, if they were interested in proof, which I'm not sure they are". The problem with Blackadder is that he has decided :"that Ellen Ash is *dull*", or just another footnote in the life of Randolph Henry Ash (31). Moreover, not only has he underestimated Ellen, but also his own co-worker, Beatrice Nest. He degradingly refers to "[p]oor old Beatrice", who "began by wanting to show how self-denying and supportive Ellen Ash was … and woke up finding that no one wanted self-denial and dedication any more". It may be true that this was Nest's initial idea; however, she soon saw something similar to

what 'the feminists' were looking for: “that Ellen was raging with rebellion and pain and untapped talent” (31), but out of a kind of empathy she is unwilling to facilitate Ellen's exposure. Due to what Ellen experiences as her personal failings, she strives to fulfil the notion of ideal womanhood in all other aspects of her life. Nevertheless, her dedication and the so-called success of her marriage to Randolph, should not be read as Byatt's approval of conservative values; since the modern insights into what appears to be a perfect marriage, destroy the immaculate facade.

Coda

Through its two narrative levels *Possession: A Romance* offers a different perspective on women's writing than the other neo-Victorian novels discussed here above. In a sense, its dual structure even incorporates the main features of all the other approaches: playfulness and multifaceted female interactions; parody, along with modern theoretical references; as well as a voyeuristic outside gaze, and a sober perspective. While the novel appears rather cynical towards certain theoretical schools, it nonetheless celebrates literary research and textual scrutiny on its own terms. As in *Charlotte and Emily* it is highlighted that written documents from the Victorian period will never give us complete access to the past, and that the image they present might even be tainted by misrepresentation or censorship. Accordingly, it is suggested that to look for what is in the omissions and fill them in through fiction, or literary analysis, can reveal much about the present; such as when Maud Bailey discovers that she is a direct descendant of Christabel LaMotte, as a result of her and Michell's investigation. The idea that *Possession* “tends to privilege stylistic criteria over the … capacity for revisionary narratives” (Carroll 184), through a supposed sanctioning of conservative values, has been refuted here above. This is in accordance with the argument that neo-Victorian literature, despite looking into the past in order to ponder on contemporary concerns, does not endow it with a superior position. Hence, even as the women from the 1980s section struggle with notions regarding their independence and sexuality, their psychological crisis is preferable to the Victorian women's more tangible plights.

Conclusion

The reasons why readers either enjoy or dislike neo-Victorian fiction are, of course, subjective; however, as stated above the key to any critical appreciation of works pertaining to the genre must take into account that no neo-Victorian novel is an imitation, or reproduction, of a Victorian novel. As has been demonstrated through multiple examples in this dissertation, the principal aspect that characterizes all neo-Victorian literature, is that it is at least as much a reflection of its own time, as of the Victorian period. Therefore, the time frame which is established for the genre is highly pertinent for any discussion of its features. To limit that time frame to a period of twenty years, reaching almost to the present moment, will inevitably affect how certain contemporary aspects show through in the novels featured in this dissertation. A good example of this would be the manifestation of feminist theory in the texts, since the movements and ideologies of feminism have evolved considerably since the publication of the earliest neo-Victorian novel mentioned here, in 1990. Hence, if this paper would include works written before the developments of third-wave feminism the depiction of issues connected to womanhood could be quite different. Although this dissertation makes no claims of being a feminist analysis, it has tried to bring out representations of women in neo-Victorian fiction and show that theories relating to gender and feminism are overtly present in *Tipping the Velvet, The Journal of Dora Damage* and *Possession: A Romance*, along with having obvious association with *Charlotte and Emily: A Novel of the Brontës.*

The chapters on individual novels were divided into three main sections, each representing a recurring topic in neo-Victorian literature: the question of women's writing, authorship and autobiography; sex and female sexuality; and the idea of female autonomy in relation to occupation and family. The expected result of considering these divergent neo-Victorian novels from parallel perspectives was not to discover them to be thematically identical. Nevertheless, they were found to share several similar ideas regarding womanhood – although to varying degrees. These themes tend to surface in neo-Victorian novels due to the manner in which the present enters in a dialogue with the Victorian past. Out of the four novels, *Charlotte and Emily* is most different from the others, in that it is less sexual, devoid of manifest references to modern theories, as

well as having a more serious tone. This might partially be related to the fact that its characters are real historical figures; however, it is not the sole cause, since other neo-Victorian novels portraying the Brontës, or other real personages, have been written more in line with ”the neo-Victorian paradox of authenticity versus anachronism, re-vision versus reproduction, [which] is playful rather than radically confrontational” (Yates 191). Still, what can be termed that particular novel's solemnity does not make it any less of a neo-Victorian novel, while it also serves to demonstrate the versatility of the genre.

An interesting feature concerning the themes related to authorship, was that apart from the aspect of autobiographical writing, all of the female protagonists expressed themselves through an art of some sorts. Christabel LaMotte and the Brontës are writers and poets, thus they find an outlet in fiction, while also leaving behind a textual source from which coming generations of women can seek inspiration. Conversely, although both Dora Damage and Nancy Astley write their own story, in order to make sense of the most eventful time of their lives, they cannot be called authoresses in the same sense as the other women. Nevertheless, both Dora and Nancy seek self-expression in other ways; Nancy by means of her performance, on or off the stage, and Dora through her ingenious book-binding. On the question of sexuality, however, these women differ substantially. Nancy and Dora gain tremendous sexual experience, both positive and negative, over the lapse of their narrative; yet, while Dora's encounter with sex is mostly from the exposure of pornographic texts and images, Nancy's experience is wholly somatic. For Christabel and the Brontës, on the other hand, the principal concern regarding sex is not related to the physical intimacy it can provide, but the official bonds that would traditionally accompany it. In both novels a sexual relationship outside of the confines of matrimony has disastrous consequences for the parties involved, while a marriage is also no guarantee for a joyous sexual experience. The idea of female autonomy, on the other hand, is quite uniform between the four novels. These women all crave an existence without unwanted interference, a prerogative for which is “a room of one's own”, as well as economic and emotional independence.

Detractors of neo-Victorian fiction have at times claimed that such literature contains a certain tint of fetishism in its treatment of the period, while other critics have

suggested that neo-Victorianism is both a celebration and a critique of the Victorian. It is, however, my conclusion that on issues concerning women, works of neo-Victorian literature are considerably more critical than celebratory of the Victorian period. Still, to see the grim aspects and criticize some of the period's social conventions, does not signify rejecting an aesthetic pleasure in the pre-twentieth century land- or cityscape, as well as in other aspects of the Victorian era. Nonetheless, the most tangible causes for reader gratification in neo-Victorian novels, rather than originating from stylistic details or the surroundings, are usually related to the breaking of social conventions, or to concrete signs of social change. As a result, even as neo-Victorian fiction draws attention to important and controversial contemporary subjects, it vehemently refutes any suggestion that a return to the mores of a past epoch could represent any kind of solution to those issues. In point of fact, neo-Victorian fiction can be seen as different from much of contemporary literature, in the sense that it is, in fact, rather jubilant about a present that has broken many of the Victorian taboos. Whether this aspect will remain unchanged in future neo-Victorian works is difficult to say; however, it is certain that the genre has yet to evolve and that its potential is far from being fully realized.

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