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The Neo-Victorian Novel: Contemporary Trends in British Fiction

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I declare that the following M.A. thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

Ester Szilágyiová

Prague, August 30, 2010

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Introduction

In 1966 when Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Saragasso Sea* no one would have guessed that she was starting a new literary movement whose very essence dwelled in re-thinking and rewriting Victorian myths and stories which Sally Shuttleworth named "the retro-Victorian novel"[1]. As a matter of fact, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* published in 1969, brought to public attention "the parody of Victorian social, sexual and literary conventions"[2] but it was really in the 1980's and 1990's that many British novelists rekindled the great Victorian tradition.[3]

Retro- or neo-Victorian novels take up themes, motives, characters - which are either factual, as in Peter Ackroyd's *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, or fictitious, as in George McDonald Fraser's *Flashman* series. Neo-Victorian novels imitate texts from the Victorian era and in most cases they follow the Victorian narratives structurally, formally and/or thematically.[4]

These contemporary rewrites of the Victorian texts also seem to imitate the average physical length of Victorian novels in as much as they are often very hefty tomes indeed, something which may be problematic for many readers in the bit/byte generation. Structurally, in most cases the texts are divided into books or chapters, sometimes preceded by chapter summaries or epigraphs. They imitate the most popular genres of the nineteenth century, such as the Bildungsroman (*David*

[1] Sally Shuttleworth, 'Natural History: The retro-Victorian Novel' (*The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, Elinor Shaffer ed., Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998)
[2] Christian Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*, Amsterdam – New York, 2001. p. 5.
[3] Gutleben p. 6.
[4] Gutleben. *Nostalgic Postmodernis:The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary Novel.* p.6.

Copperfield, Great Expectations), or the social (*Middlemarch*), industrial (*North and South, Hard Times)* and sensation novels (*The Woman in White*) carefully blended with biographical aspects (*Life and Labours of John Ashworth. The profits to be devoted to the Chapel for the Destitute*) and (pseudo)historical novels (*A Tale of Two Cities*). All of these contribute to the hybridity of genres, rich in parody and pastiche, which is so characteristic of postmodern novelistic discourse[5].

The narrative design of these novels also follows the pattern of their Victorian predecessors' typical employment of narrative voice dominant in nineteenth-century texts. Using Gerald Genette's classification, neo-Victorian novels engage either the first person homodiegetic narrator (where the narrator is one of the protagonists of the story), or the third person (omniscient) heterodiegetic narrator who is not a character in the novel.[6]

Generally, the plots of neo-Victorian novels take place in the nineteenth century or span both the nineteenth and the twentieth century. They are usually set at least partly in England, most often in London or in the surrounding countryside of the home counties. Placed in the nineteenth century, which is often referred to as the "imperial century"[7], the geographical locations of the novels can vary between the heart of the empire and the colonies, or territories of interest. As Andrea Kirchknopf points out[8] the West-Indies, Australia or scenes of the Crimean War appear in

[5] Gutleben p. 8.
[6] Rimmon, Shlomith. "A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative" in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.*, p. 55.
[7] Hyam, Ronald. *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion*. Palgrave Macmillan from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire#refHyam2002
[8] Kirchknopf, Andrea. *(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts* in Neo-Victorian Studies 1:1 (Autumn 2008) p. 54.

particular novels. Furthermore, she notices that the twentieth-century plots oscillate between "England and its possible reverse coloniser, the United States"[9].

Thematically, the texts invoke typical Victorian controversies such as the definition and status of religion, contemporary trends in moral philosophy, and the rapid progress of science and its influence. They share the Victorian concerns about nationhood, national and individual identity and they are also engaged with the question of the re-evaluation of the aims and scope of cultural discourses and products, especially constructions of literary, political and social histories.[10] (For a non-chronological list of neo-Victorian novels see Appendix)

[9] Ibid., p. 54.
[10]Morgan, Maureen. *Victorian Literature and Culture*. (London: Continuum) p. 64.

In terms of artistic history the revival of bygone times can hardly be regarded as new or unique: for example, Renaissance aesthetics, neo-Gothicism and the Pre-Rafaelites have all employed artistic models from the past. However, as Christian Gutleben writes, postmodernism, - in the sense of being the age of deconstructionism, cannot be included with the above-mentioned movements. For Renaissance aesthetics, neo-Gothicism or the Pre-Rafaelites, a particular period in the history was considered as a "golden age"[11], which was a source of inspiration, a model to be followed and adopted in contrast to contemporary standards.[12] On the contrary, deconstructionism implies "debunking, undoing and/or subverting"[13] the concept of Victorianism.

This process of subversion and denial of myths had already started to emerge towards the end of the Victorian period. Some prominent late Victorians looked at their contemporaries with a very critical eye. As the late Victorian period inherited the contradictory mix of "cultural assurance and self doubt"[14] the late Victorians re-imagined it as a battle between the "outmoded values of the Victorian past and the rebellious, liberating possibilities of a more modern look".[15] Naturally, identity for many still depended on traditional and moral principles and codes of social conduct, nevertheless, as Moran writes, "a number of artists and intellectuals challenged the assumption of previous generations, rejecting orthodox religious belief, mainstream models of gender and sexuality, and established artistic conventions".[16]

[11] Gutleben, p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 6.
[13] Ibid., p. 6.
[14] Morgan, p. 3.
[15] Ibid., p. 3.
[16] Ibid., p. 3.

However, the most decisive writing, regarding its influence on the following generations was the appearance of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, a collection of biographical essays published in 1918. The book shamelessly undermines the substance and foundations of the Victorian consciousness by open mockery and derision, questioning the respectability and esteem of four iconic figures, pillars of the Victorian society.[17] Strachey's interpretation of the period shaped the general perceptions of the Victorian culture for many decades to come.[18] In the 20th Century with all its wars and the dismantling of the empire and its certainties, coupled with economic troubles and a society retooling for a modern era, the term "Victorian" acquired a range of derogatory connotations. These arose from caricatured presentations of the Victorians as "blindly imperialistic, self-satisfied, humourlessly religious, hypocritically sentimental, and above all sexually repressed".[19] By such means are myths born. Living as we do in the deconstructivist prime-time, the debunking and subversion of myths has apparently become the *raison d'être* of cultural criticism.

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[17] Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* is devoted to Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold and General Gordon. Cardinal Manning is depicted as a scheming, ambitious men rather than a pious representative of God. Florence Nightingale's biography suggests that Florence was a woman maniacally obsessed with work, whose personality was acerbic rather than saintly Strachey's Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School, is little more than a pompous, pedantic fool. The portrait of Gordon is the most complex of the four, showing a man who was driven to his demise by the contradictions in his own personality and the vacillation of the British government.

[18] Moran, p. 129.

[19] "Victorian" *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chris Baldick. Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Charles University - Main Account. 8 August
2009 <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t56.e1211>

Placing the trend of neo-Victorianism under scrutiny, it becomes obvious that the re-conceptualization of the nineteenth century does not solely apply to its literature. The neo-, retro- or post-Victorian vogue has been omnipresent in the lives of the British since the 1960's.

The twentieth century was the bloodiest period in recorded history. According to statistics, it was the century when more than hundred people died (of war alone) on average, every hour of the century. The bloodsheds of World War I and World War II, the inhumanity of the Nazis, Hiroshima or the Chinese Revolution and many other terrifying events, all contributed to a radical change in attitudes in British society, resulting in a broad crisis of morals and values.[20]

Since the post-war period the 'Victorian' has been politicized. As Kaplan writes the 1960's, the supposedly libertarian left's characterization of the Victorian was that of "the bullying bourgeois patriarch responsible for the twin cruelties of capitalism and empire"[21]. Nevertheless, in the 1980's and 1990's Victorian Values – "thrift, family, enterprise"[22] - were re-introduced as the positive ethic of the Conservative Government. The present moment, as Kaplan further explains, "has gone much further than Margaret Thatcher ever did – in extolling the virtues of the Victorian – it was in her interests to keep that association positive but vague"[23]

[20] Mrtin L. Cook, Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century. - Review - book review at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0IBR/is_2_31/ai_76496222/ June 29th 2009
[21] Kaplan , Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2007., p. 6
[22] Ibid., p. 5.
[23] Ibid., p. 6.

Contemporary BBC television programmes[24] keep endlessly praising' the Victorian inventions and enterprise. Tony Blair in 1996 described himself as a 'Christian Socialist' in order to create the sense of continuity of the political tradition of the Old Labour, the 'Bennite Left'. "Victorian" in the New Labour era has become a key term to refer to 'conservative modernity'.[25]

Dianne F. Sadoff in the introduction to *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* points out Gertrude Himmelfarb's criticism[26]. Himmelfarb's version of the nineteenth century represents the Victorian social system monolithically, as she attempts to embrace social conflicts in a universalized set of moral values. She characterizes the Victorians as though they were a homogenous society whose triumphant morality (defeating poverty was seen as a moral cause) becomes a model for post-modernism's nostalgic retrospective analysis of its own origins.[27]

Apart from political deployment of neo-Victorianism, the consumer culture has also dabbled in the postmodern nostalgia for the Victorian era. According to Sadoff and Kucich, the British use the Victorian past to aestheticize the rather bare contemporary reality. "Victorian fashions and furnishings are enjoying a resurgence that has spawned magazines such as *Victoria* and *Victorian*. Home-decorating books and magazines teach 20th century homeowners how to load a mantel with curious and

[24] 'What the Victorians Did for Us' BBC TV program
[25] Kaplan, pp. 6-7.
[26] Gertrude Himmefarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*. 1995
[27] Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich. *The Victorian Afterlife* xii

kitsch, people a wall with elaborately framed and sepia-toned family photos, and choose for the drawing room a patterned wallpaper or chintz." [28]

This social phenomenon supports the idea that the late twentieth and early twenty- first century is paradoxically a historical continuity and a deconstruction of the Victorian.

The aim of this dissertation is to come to an understanding of the reasons for the return to the Victorian period – to its cultural and social representations not only in literature but also in other fields of our twenty-first century lives. The chapter is entitled "History in Fiction" will be devoted to a detailed description of theories on the representation of history in fiction, which is absolutely inevitable regarding the merits of the neo-Victorian novel. Following the theoretical part of this work, in the chapter "Neo-Victorian applied" I shall apply the ideas from the introductory chapters on a number of novels hence proving them to be neo-Victorian novels too. The chapters "Affinity" and "Poor Things" shall be a detailed study of Sarah Waters's and Alasdair Gray's novels in which I will pay particular attention to the themes and topics the novels are dealing with – as it shall be obvious by then – that a particular treatment of even more particular topics are the quintessence of the neo-Victorian novel.

[28] Sadoff p. xii.

“History” in fiction?

At the turn of the twentieth to the twenty- first century, history has become one of the most extensively debated issues in a variety of contexts and with differing results. The talk, as Dietmar Böhnke suggests in “History in Literary and Cultural Theory”, is both of a “turn to history” and of the “end of history”. The historicity of various disciplines – including scientific ones – is scrutinized while simultaneously the literary or narrative character of historiography itself is highlighted. History is perceived as belonging to an “outmoded ‘Realist’ or humanist world-view or as the defining conditions of the postmodern world”[29]. There are several reasons for this current interest in history however, they are not always easy to detect.[30]

Indubitably the political developments such as the proliferation of new nations after the end of the Cold War or the problematic situation in the Balkans are as much part of the background as “postmodern” movements in the realm of philosophy and the social sciences that underline the ultimate historicity and thus the relativity of all human knowledge. In the sciences too, much attention has been devoted to “historical” research in areas such as the evolutionary process of various phenomena or the mysteries of the starting point and the development of the universe.[31]

Recently, there has been a growing awareness of the historicity of history itself, of the importance of specific historical, cultural and ideological systems for its construction and practice – this development has been frequently ascribed to

[29] Bohnke, D. ‘History in Literary Culture and Cultural Theory’ in *Shades of Gray*., p. 165.
[30] Ibid., p. 165.
[31] Ibid., p. 165.

postmodernism. In fact, history and its "problematic" nature are perceived by many critics as the central issue of the discussion on postmodernism. Even the first use of the term "postmodernism" is traced to a historian, Arnold Toynbee, the author of *Study of History*. Toynbee's ideas were further developed by two key literary critics, namely Michael Foucault and Hayden White. Both Foucault's emphasis on the "discursive" determination of knowledge and White's investigation in the narrative structures of history have contributed to the "turn to history" in literary studies and have been used as theoretical background for the study of literary works.[32]

New Historicism, a relatively recent trend in literary criticism, introduced by a very heterogeneous group of critics[33], brought this new historical emphasis into scope. Their theory mirrors a "lack of faith in objectivity, permanence and 'History'" – their emphasis is on the "role of 'histories' in the construction and representation of the past, which is seen as ineluctably influenced by present social, cultural and political positions."[34] This problematization of objective knowledge and the suspicion of the 'facts' as the central issue of postmodernism, particularly in the field of history, has however been attacked by other theorists. Stephen Earnshaw in *Direction of Literary Theory* accuses postmodernism of having:

> A vested interest in declaring […] 'the end of history' […and] positing itself as *the* master narrative, able to see itself as the fated closure of culture, society and, of course history, […] My distrust with this line of discourse of postmodernism, which I would suggest is fairly mainstream, is that it sets up the concept 'history' in a specific discursive field which it believes in can exempt itself from. The paradox is that postmodernism

[32] Böhnke, p. 167.
[33] Mainly American scholars including cultural materialists
[34] Böhnke, p. 167.

> can claim to be outside history, because historically speaking, it is at the end of history.[35]

Further on he continues accusing New Historicism, according to him the prime example of this postmodern notion of history, of "elid[ing] the dialectic between the past and present"[36], of destroying the grounds from which to differentiate versions of history and therefore being "part of the larger postmodern philosophical picture, which, in a nutshell, poses the following riddle: What happens if there is no objective truth? Are we consigned to a crippling, enervating relativism?".[37] As Böhnke sums up, Earnshaw basically presents a view of postmodernism as something "relativistic" and "irresponsible"[38]. He shares Earnshaw's concerns about the dangers of relativism, of the impossibility of judging between opposed versions of history, nevertheless he believes a more general tendency in postmodern thought – and in writing on history and literature in particular – is "to blur the boundaries and even to conflate differences into an all-embracing notion of texts"[39].

Postmodernism, however, is not ahistorical, since what is challenged is a totalizing and universal view of history and not history as such. Although the traditional view of history is clearly among the metanarratives that Lyotard believes postmodernism is challenging or deconstructing, it is important to stress that "to deconstruct does not mean abolish"[40], but rather "to challenge from within"[41].

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[35] Earnshaw, Steven. *The Directions of Literary Theory*, p 61 in Shades of Gray p. 168.
[36] Ibid., p.63.
[37] Ibid., p.65.
[38] Bhönke, p. 168.
[39] Ibid p.169.
[40] Ibid., p. 170.
[41] Ibid., p. 170.

Therefore, to declare that postmodernism equals denial of history or the end of history is an erroneous simplification.

Another theory, according to Böhnke, unjustly accused of being ahistorical is Poststructuralism. Geoff Bennington and Robert Young write in their introduction to *Post-structuralism and the question of History*: "Post-structuralism and the question of history […], far from being a matter of the absence of history, involves nothing less than what Frederic Jameson has called 'the crisis of history itself'"[42]. Furthermore they point out that it is "resistance to totalisation and synthesis that is perhaps the major difficulty posed by post-structuralism to both traditional and dialectical accounts of history"[43]. In other words, poststructuralism problematizes or 'deconstructs' accounts of history, rather than being ahistorical or declaring the end of history.

Similarly to this, the postmodern movement of New Historicism, which is paradoxically sometimes accused of being ahistoric, is engaged to an equally complex view of the past and its relation to the present. This concept stresses the importance and potency of investigating the interconnections, as Jeremy Hawthorn writes:

> I believe that we misuse and undervalue literary works when we approach them with one eye closed – trying either to deny their pastness and assuming that they speak a universal language that knows no single time and place, or trying to deny that there is any continuity of human experience across time and cultural difference which allows a work of literature from the past to *live* in the present. Indeed, I think that we may have to confront the paradox that we can sometimes feel closest to

[42] Böhnke, p. 171.
[43] Ibid., p. 171.

> the life of the past at just the point at which we sense its difference and alien nature most strongly.[44]

The passage suggests an acute sense of ambivalence as we perceive history as something strange/distanced or fragmented. On the other hand it simultaneously has a relevance to the present.

Other notions that have to be considered – and carefully distinguished – are history and fiction. Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* writes:

> Unlike literary fictions, such as the novel, historical works are made up of events that exist outside the consciousness of the writer. The events reported in a novel can be invented in a way that they cannot be (or are not supposed to be) in a history. [...] Unlike the novelist, the historian confronts a veritable chaos of events *already constituted*, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell. He makes his story by including some events and excluding others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the interest of constructing a story of a particular kind. That is to say, he 'emplots' his story.[45]

Lawrence Lerner in his essay "History and Fiction" takes up a similar standing point as White and he suggests that history cannot be approached as naive empiricism or scepticism, but it requires a more complex approach.

> [I]f perception is not wholly objective, it does not follow that it must be wholly subjective: that would be to ignore the more complex possibility that it results from an interaction between the external world and our method of perceiving. I have claimed that any text can be related to at least three contexts: its ideology, its strategies of writing, and social reality. To

[44] Hawthorn , Jeremy. *Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate*. London and New York: Arnold. 1996., p. 6.
[45] White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe.*, p. 6.

> eliminate any of these completely is a dogmatic oversimplification: and a total rejection of positivism would be as naive – and fanatical – as its total acceptance.[46]

It becomes obvious that in this respect a golden middle is desirable and necessary, that is, it has to be admitted that history is complex and is influenced and dependent on ideological, political and narrative formations. Nevertheless, it is connected to moral and ethical judgements or "standards of legitimacy"[47].

[46] Lerner Laurence. 'History and Fiction' in *The Frontiers of Literature*. Oxford; New York, NY: B. Blackwell, 1988., p. 335.
[47] Böhnke, p. 174.

The developments, ideas and theories concerning the concept of history and it's relation to literature and culture which were briefly outlined above have been taken up by and have considerably influenced contemporary literature, not only in Britain but worldwide. Novels such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of solitude*, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Maggot* and more recently in Britain A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, Malcom Bradbury's *The History Man*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* or novels of Graham Swift, particularly *Waterland* and *Nice Work*, all testify this.

Looking back to the 1980's, Böhnke quotes Malcom Bradbury, who points out that "many novelists began looking back to history. Retrospective fiction now became highly popular; indeed the return to the past began to assume near-epidemic proportions during the decade"[48]. Bradbury contradicts what Christian Gutleben suggests, that is the return to history, particularly to the Victorian period stems from a sense of nostalgia[49]/[50], he says: "Perhaps it was less that novelists were returning to the fictional verities of the past than making relations of the past and present

[48] Bradbury, Malcolm. *The Modern British Novel*. quoted in Böhnke, p. 175.
[49] Christian Gutleben approaches neo-Victorian fiction by bringing up two assumptions; one is that "if postmodern fiction has a subversive approach to the past, its criticism of Victorianism should have repercussions on its own formal choices which ought to clearly diverge from the realistic premises of 19th century literature". The second assumption is that the neo-Victorian phenomenon may stem from a sense of nostalgia; however, in that case the aesthetic priorities are to be conservative. That is, if the aesthetic choices of this specific kind of the contemporary British novel are constructed, one ought to be able to tell whether the Victorian model serves to be ridiculed or imitated and describe the reasoning behind that motivation. By studying the concrete field of textual choices (in terms of modes and narrative strategies), one should be able to perceive the inferred, abstract field of ideological motivation.
[50] Gutleben p.7

narratives a matter for self-conscious literary examination. Among novelists, as historians themselves, the question of the nature of history and history writing was the issue."[51] This is why it can be suggested that the historical mode of narrative is one of the dominant fictional modes of the postmodern novels.

Obviously, this is another cross-road of literature and history that offers itself up for investigation. Probably the most helpful tool for analysis of this aspect is Linda Hutcheon's concept of "Historiographic Metafiction", which stresses precisely this "historical-theoretical" dimension in postmodern literature. Hutcheon's theory described in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* achieved a universal currency in writings on contemporary historical novels. Her definition of the category is:

> By ['historical metafiction'] I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages […] Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains [i.e. literature, history, theory]: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.[52]
>
> [H]istoriographic metafiction […] asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interpretations are historically determined and vary with time.[53]

[51] Bradbury p. 175.
[52] Hutcheon, Linda. *A poetics of Postmodernism*: *History,Theory,Fiction*. London: Routledge. 1988., p.5.
[53] Ibid., p. 105.

The neo-Victorian novel, a particularly lively subgenre of historiographic metafiction, then is doubtlessly motivated by contemporary concerns. It is not only the political influence of the Thatcherite[54] government – as explained in more detail previously – but as Bradbury suggests, there was a sense of a link to the 'apocalyptic' and end-of-century theme: "A good deal of [British Eighties fiction] felt like a *fin-de siècle* fiction, and it was in fact filled with strong, self-conscious echoes from the previous *fin-de-siècle*, when the clock seemed to stop on the edge of danger"[55] Clearly this timeframe supports the discussion of history in theory as well as literature. Bradbury writes:

> what we understand by history, the means by which we construct significant histories, and the way we relate those histories to our understanding of our own situation, are constantly in change, and such concerns are likely to sharpen when writers feel they come toward the close of an epoch, near the end of history – as, it seems many contemporary writers do.[56]

[54] "In the time when Mrs. Thatcher sought to restore 'Victorian values' and Charles Dickens and Victorian classics enjoyed a striking publishing revival", says Bradbury, "a good number of writers – encouraged, perhaps, by John Fowles' art of self-conscious retrospect – took to revisiting the era when individualism seems stronger, the social realities clearer, and our modern history was shaping, frequently pastiching past novels or writers in this recuperative process. The End of Empire remained a dominant theme […].
[55] Bradbury in Böhnke p.177.
[56] Ibid., p.177.

Neo-Victorian applied

Structures

After focusing on the theories analyzing the relationship between history and fiction, this passage shall proceed with the scrutiny of the global organization of the neo-Victorian novels. This part of this study shall try to find out the patterns the contemporary British novel follows. Furthermore, it shall attempt to come to a conclusion whether the architecture and discursive contents of these novels are derived from the Victorian model, or on the contrary they disrupt and subvert the nineteenth-century prototype.

As the first step, the problem of narrative structure should be considered. To be able to compare the contemporary and the Victorian narrative organization, a definition of both is necessary. William Cohen describes the mechanism of the Victorian narrative the following way:

> While it ought to be obvious, it has not been remarked that scandal [...] structures the usual plot of the realist novel in the Victorian period. The typical story of a Victorian novel involves the loss and eventual recovery of a fortune, benefactor, parent, child, sibling or spouse. The course of recovery necessitates disclosure of a secret, which has been hidden because it is in some way immoral or illegal; most often, it involves adultery or illegitimacy. The plot of the novel unfolds by threatening and finally effecting the exposure of this secret to the community, and once it revelation has occurs, the goods (property, family) are redistributed, now more justly among those who survive. The novelistic plot distilled in this way, is analogous to the form of the scandal.[57]

[57] William Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 16-17. in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, pp. 51-52

The scandal-based narrative with its strategy of narrative shock is also present in the neo-Victorian novels. Fowles uses adultery in *The French Lietenant's Woman*, Byatt's *Possession* tells of an adulterous love affair and an illegitimate child of two famous Victorian poets, 'Morpho Eugenia' by the same author and Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* are based on incestuous relationship between (half)brother and sister in the first case, father and daughter in the second. Sarah Waters' *Affinity* deals with the theme of betrayal of the lesbian protagonist towards her naive lover.

Gutleben believes that these instances of 'misbehaviour' are mostly diegetic events and they do not necessarily affect the structural construction of the novels. Nevertheless, their importance lies in the fact that they constitute the "narrative highlights" of their novels and this is why they are placed at the ending of the narration.[58] In other words, the organization of these novels is aiming at creating a high narrative shock value.

'Morpho Eugenia' and *Possession* seem to be exemplary in their reliance on a last-minute revelation of a secret. In 'Morpho Eugenia' the entire story circulates around the discovery of the incestuous relationship of Eugenia and her half-brother Edgar, however to increase the shock value of the exposure, the crucial scene (when Eugenia's husband William finds the lovers *in flagrante*) is withheld until the very end of the narrative. The employment of this particular structure serves to surprise the reader.

[58] Gutleben, p. 52.

Possession's structure is the one of the detective novel, but whereas in a traditional detective novel there is a crime to be investigated, in *Possession* it is a mystery to be solved. The mystery is the existence of a secret romantic liaison between two eminent Victorian poets. The main 'detective', Roland, who is a Randolph Henry Ash scholar, leads the reader through the route of numerous clues and hints and false tracks to the final revelation which occurs in a sensational episode. The evidence is literally unearthed from the grave of Ash. Both 'Morpho Eugenia' and *Possession* unfold in a traditionally chronological order due to the necessity of the narrative revelation, that is, the narrative interest dictates the structure of the novel. It appears that both contemporary novels follow the pattern of the suspense of narrative which is one of the traditional features of the nineteenth-century novel[59].

Apparently then, the contemporary presentation of the Victorian world goes hand in hand with the practice of the traditional narrative art which brings up the question whether the neo-Victorian novel follows the pattern of its Victorian archetype. To be able to answer this question it is essential to know the definition of the nineteenth-century descriptive practise. David Lodge characterizes the realistic fiction "dominantly metonymic" as "it connects actions that are contiguous in time and space and connected by cause and effect, but since it cannot describe exhaustively, the narrative *sujet* is always in a metonymic (or synecdochic) relation to the *fabula*"[60]. The most fundamental in Lodge's analysis according to Gutleben is

[59] Geoffrey Hemmestedt, 'The Novel' in *The Victorians*, Laurence Lerner ed. (New York:Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978) p. 13.
[60] David Lodge, *Working With Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p. 22. in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 54.

"the principle of coherence ascribed to the art of description"[61]. Metonymy works on the association between the part and whole, cause and effect, supposes a chain between the general (setting) and the particular (a character) so that each descriptive detail is relevant towards the understanding of the attached object.[62] Slomith Rimon-Kenan further develops the idea by suggesting that all the indications "in a character's physical surrounding (room, house, street, town) as well as [in] his human environment (family, social class) become trait-connoting metonymies"[63]. To rephrase what has been suggested, descriptions in Victorian novels serve to link the characters, their personality and behaviour to their time and space.

However, the Victorian art of description did not restrict itself to the character and his/her environment, it broadly comments upon its specific time and society. The nineteenth-century novel pays a strict attention to the manners of the portrayed age.

> It involves not only the respect for the factual data of history, but also a historical realism that permeates the entire imaginative tissue of the fiction, from precise description of topography and events to authentic domestic details of clothing and possessions.[64]

The contemporary fiction also engages in the truthful description of history and geography as they, just like the authorial voices analysed in the previous chapter, create an effect of reality. This historical realism resembles the documentary character of the Victorian didactic fiction.

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[61] Gutleben, p. 55.
[62] Lodge, p. 21.
[63] Slomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983) p. 66.
[64] Adrian Mathews, *Survey of English Literature: Romantics and Victorians* in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 59.

Besides other contemporary novelists' works[65], Matthew Kneale's retro-Victorian novel, which was greatly inspired by Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* from the early 1860's, *Sweet Thames* gives a detailed description of London of the nineteenth-century. After the master examples of Dickens of Gissing, Kneale's presentation of London slums is almost indistinguishable from the Victorian text. To support this idea the paper shall use an extract from Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Kneale's *Sweet Thames*.

> A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. [...] Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main streets, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound to all appearance, on no very well- disposed or harmless errands.[66]

> If the hostel had seemed a grim spot, our next destination made it seem nothing less than an oasis of calm and comfort. A single room in a tottering house, it was inhabited by at least ten people, though whether they were of one family or two was impossible to say, the confusion was too great. Most of the space was quite taken up with beds, which – despite the lateness of morning and crisis all around – still had several sleeping occupants, enwrapped in their sheets like mummified Egyptian Pharaohs. The floor was stained with the vilest of spillings, which nobody had thought to clean away, and the air stank beyond description.[67]

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[65] Charles Pallisier *The Quincunx*, Tom Holland *Supping With Panthers*, Sarah Waters *Affinity*
[66] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p. 103.
[67] Matthew Kneale, *Sweet Thames* (London: Penguin, 2001) pp. 251-2.

Both Dickens and Kneale hyperbolically emphasize the poverty of certain London areas, their particular use of vocabulary aims at creating the impression one could perceive through senses, that is by smell and sight. It is obvious that *Sweet Thames* imitates the Victorian fiction's description of urban misery and social inequality.

The pioneer figure in denunciation of Victorian poverty in contemporary fiction is indubitably John Fowles, who incidentally also refers to Mayhew[68]. In 1969 though, the way Fowles included social criticism in his narrative was unprecedented.[69] Firstly, his historical presentation of the Victorian era was fundamentally problematic and paradoxical since it presented itself "as a documentary history *and* as artifice" thus forcing the reader to "come to terms with the referential and non-referential nature of literature at the same time"[70]. He inserts actual Victorian documents in epigraphs, footnotes and in the flow of the narration thus creating a mixture of fiction and non-fiction. The outcome of this practice is a "generic and formal hybridity which was truly instrumental in the breakthrough of postmodernist Britain".[71]

From the aesthetic perspective, the documentary character of the social information provided in the novel links the neo-Victorian novels to the realism of their predecessors. Whereas postmodernism problematizes and questions fiction's relationship to historical knowledge, these novels tend to reproduce the use of history

[68] Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. p. 261.
[69] Gutleben, p. 64
[70] Ibid., p. 64.
[71] Ibid., p. 64.

"as a model of the realistic pole of representation".[72] This suggests that the contemporary novel with its revitalization of the Victorian times is stimulated not only by the nineteenth-century referent but also by the era's aesthetic program.

[72] Gutleben, p. 66.

British novelists of the 80's and 90's have been resurrecting voices of the past, particularly those of the Victorian period and this brings about a paradoxical state of affairs: the postmodern novel resounds with echoes that predate the modernist age.

Linda Hutcheon, as stated in *Narcissitic Narrative*, believes that the myth of Narcissus was the leading principle behind postmodern metafiction and its "textual self awareness" defined as "self reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational".[73] Considering the contemporary novel's tendency to restore the forgotten voices of the past, one has to agree with Gutleben, who claims that the emblematic figure of the present is Echo. After Narcissus's death Echo takes over as a model for contemporary art. "After having been in love with itself in the 60's and 70's, it seems that the novel in the 80's and 90's has fallen in love with its forbears."[74] That is, after the reflection of and the voice of the self, come the voice of and reflection on the past. The question arises whether contemporary fiction, like Echo is destined to have no voice of its own and to repeat the words of others.[75]

Indubitably, the presence of Victorian voices in the neo-Victorian novel is obvious by the extensive use of quotations and citations. The nineteenth-century texts are usually centred on the page and are isolated from the rest of the narrative which makes them distinguishable. In one hand it can suggest a kind of tribute, or respect to the original text, on the other hand it can provide a burlesque effect. Nevertheless, in

[73] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox.* Canada:Wilfrid Lauriel University Press. 1980., p. 1-2.
[74] Gutleben, p. 16.
[75] Ibid., p. 16.

most cases the Victorian borrowings do not serve as basis of comic rewriting, in the novels they are used to establish more serious thematic, aesthetic or ideological links.

The epigraphs, for example, as traditionally, create a series of direct or ironic links with the characters, themes or plots in the texts in which they occur, but they do not have an influence on the work of art from an aesthetic point of view. The epigraph placed at the beginning of the novel is the novel's miniature reproduction, its aesthetic thesis and it is chosen for its character, prestige and the choice of the Victorian 'voice' shows the postmodern admiration of the text being cited. [76] As far as the system of echoes is concerned, the introductory epigraph is the novel's initial voice, its tuning- up, as it were. Gutleben suggests that "to begin a novel in someone else's voice means to acknowledge its eminence and pretence: the I-could-not-say-it-better implication seems unmistakable"[77]. This implies that Victorian voices have precedence so that when Byatt quotes Browning in her epigraph to *Possession* or Lodge invokes Disraeli in *Nice Work* both authors clearly ascribe authority to the authentic Victorian and by implication inferiority and subordination to theirs. Furthermore, they copy a Victorian practice; Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins, for example, cite Fielding, Drayton and Bunyan in their opening epigraphs to *Oliver Twist*, *Felix Holt* and *Man and Wife respectively.*[78]

The tradition of the use of epigraphs for different chapters was reinstituted by John Fowles in *French Lieutenant's Woman* and then later taken up by David Lodge

[76] Gutleben, p. 18.
[77] Ibid., p. 18.
[78] Ibid., p. 19.

in *Nice Work.*[79] In both works it is overwhelmingly the great Victorian poets and novelists who are being quoted. The presence of these canonical writers clearly indicates the contemporary fascination for the great voices of the past, as if they were to serve as warrants for the literary quality of the works being created; a minting mark if you will. However, the very fact that neo-Victorian novels never quote any present-day artists in their epigraphs cannot be overlooked. These novels employ the literary ornaments of a bygone epoch and avoid the foregrounding of the texts of their own culture. Whether this practice indicates a sense of nostalgia or, as Gutleben suggests, a sign of postmodern "powerlessness" and a "complex of inferiority"[80] is hard to say.

The Victorian quotations in the body of the neo-Victorian text, as it has been mentioned earlier, are clearly distinguished from the rest of the narration. They get a centred position showing the pre-eminence of the framed text. The use of quoted texts can serve different purposes: It can either be a pastiche or, it can function as a form of destabilizing parody.

Linda Hutcheon describes the use of borrowed texts as a "trans-contextualization with comic effect" [81]. (She warns of the shortcomings of equalizing parody and quotation, even though trans-contextualization is a feature of parody- to refer to a text as parody is not the same as to refer to it as a quotation.)

As an example, Lodge's rather cheeky use of Tennyson's famous lines from 'Locksley Hall' in *Nice Work* is charged with mischievous parodic energy: "Woman

[79] Ibid., p. 17.
[80] Ibid., p. 19.
[81] Linda Hutcheon, *The theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York and London: Metheuen, 1985), p. 41.

is a lesser man, and all thy passions, match'd with mine/ Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine"[82] These lines are addressed by Vic, a prototype of a conservative industrialist to Robyn, the feminist academic, thereby converting the quotation into a mockery of a phallocentric provocation and establishing the face-off between fundamental opposites; between male chauvinism and radical feminism.

In numerous cases however, it becomes difficult to distinguish whether the quoted text is an actual quotation of a nineteenth-century work or it is an outcome of an imitative process of pastiche. Ihab Hassan defines pastiche as "a form of the mutant replication of genres" which "enrich[es] *re*-representation"[83], which basically makes pastiche subordinate and dependent on other works.[84]

In *Possession*, an 'actual' extract from Crabb Robinson's diary is placed side by side with several invented ones. In this case the difference between the quotation and pastiche is almost unnoticeable. The eminent Victorian's voice is seemingly faithfully recorded (then forged) to serve the authorial intention to create the illusion of reality and authenticity. To mention Crabb Robinson at once means to invoke the voice of historical discourse, however, this discourse originates from pastiche thus the result is ironic. The voice of the Victorian man of letters which is supposed to be the voice of veracity to legitimize the voice of fiction is, as a matter of fact, fictional.

> JUNE 4 Read several dramatic poems from Randolph Ash's new book. I noted particularly those purporting to be spoken by Augustine of Hippo, the ninth-century Saxon monk, Gotteschalk and 'Neighbour Pliable' from *Pilgrim's Process*.

[82] Lodge, p. 340.
[83] Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, pp. 167-187. in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 25.
[84] Gutleben, p. 25.

> [...] Ash treats Pliable, with whom he might be supposed to sympathise, with more apparent spleen than he directs to his monstrous monk whose ravings have a certain real sublimity. It is difficult to know where to *have* Randolph Ash. I fear he will never become a popular poet. [...] When I read Ash, I think of the younger Coleridge, reciting with gusto his epigram upon Donne.[85]

By imitating Crabb Robinson's voice Byatt plays a double game. First, as already pointed out, she creates confusion between the genuine and the spurious, reality and invention, fiction and history, making the novel's pseudo-historical discourse clearly a sham. Secondly, the author engages in the imitative process of pastiche, in which she identifies and reproduces the cultural context and the stylistic features of Robinson.

Another well-known Victorian voice is reproduced in Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid*. It is the celebrated Victorian poetess, Elizabeth Barret-Browning whose voice is reproduced in numerous passages of the novel. Next to the third-person narrator Forster employs direct speech to let Browning express herself. In this way the novel allows the implied truth of the Sotto Voce autobiography as the reader learns of a clandestine relationship between the poetess and her maid, Wilson.

There are two aspects to this employment of Browning's voice which are very important. On one hand, the novel takes up a widely appealing subject and provides a vignette into the private life of a celebrity. On the other hand, it sets out to evaluate, or even to judge its subject. To achieve this, Forster counterfeits the voice of the poetess and attributes to her words she had never said or written. The letters allegedly written by Browning's voice to her maid for example form a testimony of the

[85] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance,* p. 23-24.

mistress's dependence on her servant. In the novel the letter is presented as a real document, signed by the Victorian poetess, which inevitably creates an ambiguity of its existence. By pretending that the letter is a genuine document, Forster prosecutes the postmodern taste for mixing fiction and reality. In this way, Alison Lee claims, the author forces the reader "to come to terms with the referential and non-referential nature of literature at the same time"[86].

Lady's Maid very much relies on the Victorian writer's remarkable destiny. The narrative closely follows the actual landmarks of the Brownings' adventure, particularly the drama of their famous elopement. The character of Elizabeth Wilson, the lady's maid of the novel, from whose perspective the story is told, is reduced to a mere witness of another story, a story the reader already knows. Wilson's voice is recorded in numerous letters she sends to her relatives and friends. Nevertheless, her letters serve as chronicles and records and give a testimony of E.B.Browning's life. It is only late in the novel when Wilson manages to leave her mistress to concentrate on her own story that the narrative coalesces and gives the reader another unknown story.

The retro-Victorian novel chooses to resuscitate famous Victorian voices – be they real, like Elizabeth Barret-Browning in *Lady's Maid*, Arthur Hallam and Alfred Tennyson in *Angels and Insects*, Oscar Wilde in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, or fictional like Jane Eyre in *Charlotte: The final journey of Jane Eyre* or Tess in Tennant's *Tess* and many others. One could suggest that A.S. Byatt's alternative takes the revival of Victorian voices to a sui generis different level. Both Randolph

[86] Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 36.

Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, the main protagonists of *Possession* are invented, fake illustrious Victorian characters. Even though the advertising of the novel from the very beginning insisted on the correspondence between the protagonists to be perceived as letters between Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti, so that the novel could be decoded by existing historical models behind the fictional figures.[87] By presenting Ash as one of the most prestigious poets of the era, by quoting extracts from writings of actual Victorian figures where Ash and his poetry are lengthily described, by reproducing extensive passages of both (fictional) poets' writings which closely imitate the stylistic, thematic and constructional conventions of the Victorian canon, Byatt intentionally plays with the illusion of a prestigious referent. Gutleben quotes Jean Vaché, an academic, who reports that "the effect of verisimilitude is so hallucinating and the inveiglement with the Victorian reality so perfect that one might imagine one of our students suggesting a dissertation on Ash and LaMotte"[88]

However, the retro-Victorian novel also presents a whole range of characters which do not correspond to the Victorian canon; these characters could be termed Victorian 'outcasts'. The most famous Victorian outcast is indubitably Sarah Woodruff, John Fowles's heroine of *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* a young woman of poor social background and of doubtful reputation.

Sarah's low social status (she is a governess) definitely cannot be considered as a feature of novelty, as Victorian novels also employ socially humble characters. The major difference between the nineteenth-century novel and its postmodern

[87] Gutleben, p. 30.
[88] Jean Vaché, 'Fiction Romanesque et poésie fictive dans *Possession* de A.S. Byatt' (Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines, N°1, 1992.) p. 74 in Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, p. 36.

reworking is that whereas the Victorian protagonists like Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit or Jane Eyre eventually prove to be of noble origin, their twentieth-century counterparts are often a priori, socially unremarkable.[89] Sarah Woodruff's character is interesting because she is clearly aware of (and audibly expresses) her socially marginal position in society. This is absolutely unimaginable for a heroine of a Victorian novel. Sarah thus becomes the first "un-Victorian" or "anti-Victorian" character, she is an outcast of the society and at the same time she is the agency of its criticism.[90]

> You cannot [understand], Mr. Smithson. Because you are not a woman. Because you are not a woman who was born to be a farmer's wife but educated to be something…better. […] You were not born a woman with a natural respect, a love of intelligence, beauty, learning…I don't know how to say it, I have no right to desire these things, but my heart craves them and I cannot believe it is all vanity. […] And you are not a governess, Mr. Smithson, a young woman without children paid to look after children. You cannot know that the sweeter they are the more intolerable the pain is. […] I am powerless.[91]
>
> I gave myself to him. […] So I am a doubly dishonoured woman. By circumstances. And by choice. [...] I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people *should* point at me, *should* say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore – oh, yes, let the word be said. So that they should know I have suffered, and suffer, as others suffer in every town and village in this land. [...] What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. [...] And they will never understand the reason for my crime. [...] Sometimes I almost pity them. I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human anymore. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore.[92]

Resuscitating certain Victorian voices has been the practice of contemporary British novels for the last three decades. These nineteenth-century voices appearing in

[89] Gutleben, p. 35.
[90] Ibid., p. 35.
[91] John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, p. 165-7.
[92] Ibid., p. 170-1.

neo-Victorian novels suggest a kind of tribute, or respect to the original text implying the mastery of the Victorian authors, or they work as means of subversion, providing a burlesque effect.

Victorian voices are easy to track as they are either nineteenth-century texts quoted in the epigraphs of these novels (or particular chapters), or they appear in the body of the narrative. In these cases they are always clearly distinguished from the rest of the narrative. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated, the Victorian voices are not necessarily genuine voices of real nineteenth-century figures. The fictional voices imitate their Victorian counterparts so as to lend the narrative something of the authority of the original.

Affinity

In 1911 Wells, echoing Stephen, doubted whether anyone a century later would "consent to live in the houses the Victorians built, travel by their roads or railways, value the furnishings they made to live among, or esteem, except for curious or historical reasons, their prevalent art and clipped and limited literature that satisfied their souls"[93]. Stephen was convinced that "however far the rage of revivalism [might] be pushed, nobody [would] ever want to revive the nineteenth century"[94]. The fact that British novelists of the 80's and 90's have been resurrecting voices of the past t – particularly those of the Victorian period – proves Sir Leslie Stephen and H.G. Wells terribly wrong. As stated in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, Victoriana and the neo-Victorian novels enjoy a great popularity which brings about a paradoxical state of affairs, that is, one can claim that the postmodern novel resounds with echoes that predate the modernist age.

In Marie-Louise Kolhke's words historical fiction offers women writers and their female characters "a way into history through the back door. […] As the symbolic Other of the white western male historical subject, women have repeatedly been relegated to the realm of myth and sentenced to discursive non being in the prison-house of patriarchal *His*tory"[95]. Just like Margaret Prior, Sarah Waters's protagonist notes on Millbank Prison that "no-one in it – not the women, not the

[93] Deidre, David. *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001), p.2
[94] Ibid., p. 1
[95] Kohlke, Marie-Louise. 'Into history through the Back Door: The 'Past historic' in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*' in *Women: a cultural* review. Vol 15. No. 2. 2004., p. 153

matrons, not even myself when I am there – seem quite substantial or quite real"[96]. Historical fiction turns the power politics of self-representation upside down -- myths are meeting 'real' time and 'not quite real' characters and contexts live in a symbiosis with actual historical persons and events by witch it shatters the presumed objective bases of historical knowledge.[97] The neo-Victorian novel is aiming at changing the 'anvil of history' by two means, firstly, by deconstructing the presumed difference between historical writing and fictional narrative, secondly, by pointing out how gender defines the organization and perception of historical knowledge.[98]

As Kohlke points out the male-centred historical narrative omits its own "gender, race and class biases under the guise of scientific objectivity and impartiality"[99] in its endeavours in "shaping the past into a coherent, unified and legible text"[100]. In opposition to this phenomenon, the neo-Victorian novels written by (not only) women authors are taking a self-conscious focus on their gendered subjectivity, and their politics is not that one of representing the past as much as the creation of it.[101] These neo-Victorian novels are a specific type of postmodern "historiographic metafiction", that is fiction that employs historical contexts in "intensely self-reflexive ways" and "problematize[s] the entire question of historical knowledge. It asserts the "multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to

[96] Waters, Sarah. *Affinity*. London: Virago. 2005., p. 134.
[97] Kolhke, p. 154.
[98] Ibid., p. 154.
[99] Ibid., p. 155.
[100] Ibid., p. 155.
[101] Ibid., p. 155.

the specificity of place and culture"[102] and arguably to the gendered specificity of the narrator or 'truth-teller'.

These novels seem to emphasize much more the narrativity of history as the novels' own textuality. The overwhelming majority of neo-Victorian novels employ as primary narrators and historical commentators socially marginal characters, this way they metaphorically give voice to the historically silenced and forgotten, those who have no history. Paul Hamilton in the chapter 'Herstory' of his book *Historicism* claims that "critiquing the blind spots in 'official' history's methodology, [these novels] query the basis of its partisan authority, which legitimates one gender, class, race and sex's speech at the expense of its excluded Others, inventively imagined out of the historical record, just as historical fiction imagines them back in."[103]

Over the last forty years the reading public has been witnessing the rise of historical fiction set in the Victorian period in which women writers have played a substantial role. One of the most important authors of neo-Victorian novels is Sarah Waters, who, together with A.S. Byatt or Margaret Forster, explores Victorian issues in contemporary novels and engages in rewriting history, particularly from the perspective of women, whose voice has been hardly heard within the traditional accounts of the past.

Sarah Waters is a gifted and prolific storyteller whose chronicles of the forbidden and forgotten passions of Victorian Londoners became a trademark of her fiction. Her interest in the notions of marginality and illegitimacy and in the

[102] Hutcheon, p. 474.
[103] Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism.* London and New York: Routledge., p. 171.

exploration of the narrative and critical possibilities offered by the vibrant metropolitan settings is characteristic for all of her novels.[104] *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002) all revive and reinterpret the Victorian narrative strategies and physical locations of the nineteenth-century novels, that is they engage with the literary devices of domestic melodrama, gothic fiction and the sensation novel.

As mentioned above, *Affinity* revisits the Victorian era with a masterful combination of originality and tradition. The novel is innovative in its focus as it presents a story of a Sapphic relationship, however for its immensely readable style and adventurous narrative the novel manages to retain a feeling of nineteenth-century authenticity.

Waters's use of historical fiction is an intentional resuscitation of popular, and more crucially, highly established subgenres of the Victorian novel. Interestingly, even if all of the novels mentioned above lend themselves to be read as 'coming out' stories, Waters's narrative form of choice is not the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of formation. Instead of charting the development of the characters' sense and self and exploring the integration of the individual within society – the subject of serious, high-brow realist novels – Waters adopts the conventions of popular Victorian fiction: the gothic novel, the melodrama of feuilleton, the sensational novel. As the stress of the novels is on the protagonists' apparent moral and emotional progress in their 'sentimental education', it seriously impairs the novels' credibility. Thus the

[104] http://literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/ciocia.html

Victorian *Bildungsroman* loses its edifying blow and becomes a provocative fictional cross-breed, much like the gothic and sensation novel.

Ciocia claims that besides the attention-grabbing plots Waters's narrative leads to a low-key critique of patriarchal ideology and to the testing and trying out of alternative rules. The marks of fantastic and/or improbable are projected onto a sound realistic grounding.[105] That is "the picaresque, the gothic and the sensation novel are all hybrid genres, combining formulaic plots, stock characters and larger-than-life scenarios with a minute realism; the latter two forms in particular often rely on the representation, and implicit questioning of female domestic life"[106]. The sequences of adventures, the gothic suspense and the sensationalist melodrama, when focused on female experience – which the gothic and particularly the sensation novel do almost by definition – voices women's displeasure with the *status quo* and expresses their ambivalent feelings towards the rules of patriarchy. Waters skilfully exploits the subversive characters of the selected subgenres providing an outlet for the expression of women's rage against patriarchy. She is well aware of the paradoxical double bind her writing suggests, as it immediately implies the easiest ways of containing and controlling of those rebellious urges.

Affinity explores the gothic topos of the (women) identity between the space of the home and that of prison. It charts two parallel stories of domestic and criminal horror, with Margaret Prior's doomed spinsterhood and captivity in her family home and Selina Dawes's detention at Millbank, charged with fraud and assault committed

[105] http://literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/ciocia.html
[106] Ibid

in the practice of her dubitable profession as a spiritualist medium. In *Gothic feminism: the professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* Diane Long Hoeveler clearly distinguishes between "female" and "male" gothic plots. She believes that "female" narratives essentially aim to expose the social and economic evils plaguing women – their confinement to the sphere of domesticity, their lack of independent identity and legal status – while "male" gothic tales usually revolve around the recognition of the evil other as one's self, and therefore rely on the creation of psychological horror.[107]

In *Affinity* Waters applies the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement as a means of undermining and transgressing sexual and spatial boundaries. Many Victorians became occupied with "morbid sensitivities" that were expressed and harnessed by the movement during the mid-nineteenth century.[108] Doubtlessly, one of the main reasons for its popularity was the sensational atmosphere of séances, which took place in private homes. The informal conditions of séances gave the Victorian middle classes a chance to act out inner fantasies and disregard some of the social moral restraints under which they normally lived. Despite the movement's popularity, however, spirit mediums were associated with all kinds of deviances. Mark Llewellyn states in his essay ''Queer? I Should Say it is Criminal': Sarah Waters' Affinity' that "for the Victorians mediumship was simultaneously fascinating, monstrous and socially criminal, transgressing not only he life/death boundary but also strict societal

[107] Long Hoeveler, Diane. *Gothic feminism: the professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*.Liverpool: Loverpool University Press, 1998. , p. 17.
[108] Finucane, R. C. *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts.* London: Junction, 1982. p. 190.

codes"[109]. During séances, for example, mediums would go to great and fraudulent lengths to convincingly demonstrate otherworldly communication, from sneakily rapping the table themselves to performing "fake" ghostly materialisations.[110] Waters makes use of both the positive and negative aspects of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement in *Affinity*, showing it to facilitate, as well as undermine, alternative ways of being.

Spiritualism – and more specifically the séance – has been utilised for the expression of closeted female desire in other contemporary novels set in the nineteenth century. A. S. Byatt, for example, makes use of the Victorian Spiritualist movement and the séance in her subtle suggestion of lesbianism in *Possession: A Romance*. Christabel LaMotte's female companion Blanche Glover commits suicide by loading her pockets with stones and throwing herself in the river after she thinks herself forsaken. Glover's presence seemingly re-materialises at a séance attended by LaMotte, accompanied by voices saying, "Remember the stones," and the sounds of "flowing water and waves"[111]. "Lesbianism," notes Jenni Millbank in 'It's About This: Lesbians, Prison, Desire', "is a rupture that crosses"[112]. In *Affinity* Waters, like Byatt, uses the Victorian spiritualist movement to signify the "crossing over" of lesbianism from the dark spaces in which it was confined.

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[109] Llewellyn, Mark "'Queer? I Should Say it is Criminal': Sarah Waters' Affinity." Journal of Gender Studies 13.3 (2004): 203-14 p. 210.
[110] Finucane, p. 182.
[111] Byatt, A. S., p. 396.
[112] Millbank, Jenny. It's About This: Lesbians, Prison, Desire *Social and Legal Studies* 13.2 (2004): 155-90., p. 159.

Affinity's imprisoning spaces and spectral visitations clearly draw on the Gothic tradition. Palmer and Macpherson both claim *Affinity* as an example of "lesbian Gothic fiction."[113] Works of this genre appropriate "Gothic motifs and imagery as a vehicle for lesbian representation" and explore from a lesbian perspective "erotic female relations and their transgressive dimensions"[114]. Palmer lists a number of Gothic subsets that writers of the lesbian Gothic genre utilise, including "ghost stories, vampire narratives, Gothic thrillers and texts centring on the witch"[115]. Of these possibilities, however, it is the first that has proved the most popular in lesbian Gothic fiction.[116] Waters works within the tradition of the ghost story to represent female same-sex desire in *Affinity*.

The traditional metaphoric "ghosting" of lesbian desire in literature, according to Terry Castle, is a process of "derealization"[117]. "Derealization" refers to attempts to make the lesbian disappear, make her non-existent and drained of "any sensual or moral authority".[118] Castle argues that the literary history of lesbianism since the eighteenth century has been derealized in that "one woman or another must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one"[119]. The character of Miss Wade in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, for example, demonstrates an unnatural interest in a young and angry maid nicknamed Tattycoram. Mr Meagles, Tattycoram's patriarchal employer, defines Miss Wade thus: "You were a mystery to all of us, and had nothing

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[113] Palmer, Paulina. *Lesbian Gothic* p. 119 and Heidi S. Macpherson. "Prison, Passion, and the Female Gaze: Twentieth-Century Representations of Nineteenth-Century Panopticons." p. 215
[114] Palmer, p. 4.
[115] Ibid., p.118.
[116] Ibid., 59.
[117] Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993., p. 6.
[118] Ibid., p. 32.
[119] Ibid., p. 34.

in common with any of us […] I don't know what you are, but you don't hide, can't hide, what a dark spirit you have within you"[120]. Miss Wade's passion for Tattycoram is ghosted. Rather than being named, her desires are depicted as a spiritual force. Waters alludes to parts of *Little Dorrit* in *Affinity*. Selina's surname "Dawes" is also the name of a character who torments Miss Wade when she works as a governess. Dickens's Dawes character is described by Miss Wade as someone who uses "artful devices"[121]. Unlike Margaret, who is blind to Selina's artful ways, Miss Wade claims that she "saw through [Dawes's devices] from the first"[122]. Margaret, in *Affinity*, reads *Little Dorrit* to her mother but she never quite makes it to Book Two, chapter 22, in which Miss Wade discusses the manipulative behaviour of Dawes. Instead, Margaret actually falls for Dawes's ghostly devices.

As Castle suggests, ghostly depictions of sexually transgressive women such as Dickens's have been re-appropriated by twentieth-century lesbian writers. Castle notes that one of the features of modern lesbian literature is a "tendency to hark back, by way of intertextual references, to earlier works on the same subject"[123]. Instead of making the lesbian disappear, however, these writers have "been able for the most part to ignore the negative backdrop against which [the apparitional lesbian] has been traditionally (de)materialised [… and] have succeeded in transforming her from a negative to an affirming presence"[124]. Llewellyn reads *Affinity* in this way, claiming

[120] Dickens, Charles. *Little Dorrit.* p. 312.
[121] Dickens, p. 629.
[122] Ibid., p. 630.
[123] Castle p. 63.
[124] Ibid p. 64.

that spiritualism allows for the expression of lesbian sexuality in the novel.[125] Middle-class women, restricted by societal convention, are subtly able to express/indulge their often unconscious desires behind the smokescreen of spiritualism in the text. As a result, the "ghosting" of women in *Affinity* may be read, on one level, as affirming, since it provides an enabling metaphor, albeit a limited one, for lesbianism.

The apparitional tradition allows Margaret, the novel's main protagonist, to ambiguously express her lesbianism with limited risk of censure. Margaret, like a number of women in *Affinity*, is not comfortable with her sexuality. For example, when she learns that some of the women prisoners in Millbank make "pals" of each other – after a prisoner named Jarvis asks her to carry a note to her sweetheart – she finds that the reality of the situation makes her uneasy:

> I have heard them talk of 'pals' before, and have used the word myself, but it disturbed me to find that the term had that particular meaning and I hadn't known it. Nor, somehow, do I care to think that I had almost played medium, innocently, to Jarvis' dark passion …[126]

Margaret prefers ghostly expressions of desire which appear to transcend the mundane barriers of her domestic life whilst remaining imperceptible to those around her. However, the ghosting of lesbianism is not treated as inherently affirming in *Affinity*. Instead, Waters problematises modern apparitional representations by showing them, in the case of Margaret, to be ultimately ineffective and unsatisfying.

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[125] Llewellyn, p. 210.
[126] Waters, Sarah. *Affinity.*, p. 67., original ellipsis

Although Waters's deployment of Spiritualism works, on the one hand, to facilitate expressions of lesbianism in *Affinity*, on the other it implies that if lesbians are to achieve real expression of their desires, they must negotiate material, not ghostly, conditions. By cunningly manipulating the Spiritualist movement, Selina and her maid Ruth Vigers are able to enact their lesbianism materially in *Affinity*. Waters first establishes the link between lesbianism and apparitional motifs in the house of Mrs Margery Brink, where Selina lives prior to her incarceration at Millbank. Selina's diary entries concerning the period in which she lives at Mrs Brink's Sydenham residence are unevenly distributed with Margaret's throughout *Affinity*. As a result, it is not until the end of the novel that the reader recognises the "true" nature of the events leading up to Selina's imprisonment. In small and private séances held at Mrs Brinks's Selina and Ruth – Ruth disguises herself as a spirit named Peter Quick – express their passions protected by the smokescreen of Spiritualism. By showing spectral manifestations to materialisations, Waters adds another perspective to the use of spiritual metaphor as an expression of lesbianism. Selina and Ruth's employment of Spiritualism demonstrates how the apparitional tradition is most useful when it is consciously recognised and deliberately deployed as a metaphor masking literal, material lesbian relationships.

Selina and Ruth are able to use the Spiritualist movement for their own advantage by manipulating the gaze. Roland C. Finucane, discussing the psychological involvement of the audience at a séance, states: "If there was fraud, the percipients were very willing victims. It could be suggested that these people so earnestly wished to communicate with [or see] spirits, that any approximation to their

expectations was accepted as reality".[127] Apparitional appearances are intrinsically linked to notions of observation and the gaze: "seeing is believing." In *Affinity*, Waters presents Selina and Ruth's manipulative skills as so effective that they are even able to undermine the all-seeing panoptic architecture of Millbank prison and transgress the well-guarded hearth of Margaret's middle-class Chelsea home.[128]

Margaret, like the women imprisoned at Millbank, experiences intense surveillance in her home. Palmer argues that the prison and the home are paralleled in *Affinity* both are inherently patriarchal spaces susceptible to "spectral connotations" and "haunted by their inmates' memories and frustrated desires"[129] The patriarchal structure of Margaret's home once allowed her to pursue her interests beyond its boundaries as her father nurtured and encouraged her intelligence. Yet after his death, Margaret becomes subject to intense familial surveillance. In becoming a Lady Visitor, she believes that she has found herself an interesting occupation away from the family home and her mother's ever-present gaze. What she finds, however, is that the surveillance she experiences at home is only intensified in the prison, and that by befriending the prisoners she is inviting transgression into her domestic space. Margaret's first journal entries convey the masculinized expectations she has established for herself. Trying to write as her father would have, Margaret begins her account outside the prison gate:

> He would start it, I think, at the gate of Millbank, the point that every visitor must pass when they arrive to make their tour of the gaols. Let me begin my record there, then … Before I can

[127]Finucane, Roland C. *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts.* (London: Junction), p. 189.
[128] Picture of the Panopticon structure in Appendix
[129] Palmer, p. 126.

> do that, however, I am obliged to pause a little to fuss with my skirts, which are plain, but wide, and have caught upon some piece of jutting iron or brick.[130]

In spite of her intentions, Margaret is physically constricted by the architecture of her dress. The distinctly distanced, almost scientific style of writing that she attempts to mimic is hindered by her gender because she has skirts that interfere with her narrative.

In spite of Margaret's attempt to construct her visits to the prison as a way of escaping her spatial confines, her gender still gets in the way. The trappings of Margaret's feminine apparel are not her only hindrance. Her narrative is also curtailed by her home and lack of private space. "The first truly private space," states Mark Wigley, "was the man's study, a small locked room off his bedroom which no one else ever enters, an intellectual space beyond that of sexuality"[131]. Margaret, however, is physically denied privacy—what Virginia Woolf called "a room of one's own"—to separate her 'self' or her sexuality from her narrative and achieve the masculine detachment she is trying to emulate. Unlike her father, who would have worked from his study at home, Margaret is compelled to record her experiences from the uncertain privacy of her bedroom, which is haunted by the kisses of her former "companion"[132]. She has, therefore, no space in which to write a detached narrative.

Margaret has a bedroom on the second uppermost level of the house just below the attics that sleep the maids, and distanced from the rest of her family, who

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[130] Affinity p.7-8.
[131] Wigley, Mark. "Untitled: The Housing of Gender" in Bloomer, Jennifer. *Sexuality and Space*. Princeton Architectural Press. 1992. , p. 347.
[132] Affinity, p.204.

occupy the floor below. The house, for Gaston Bachelard, "is imagined as a vertical being […] ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic"[133]. By choosing her bedroom in the upper part of the house, which is presumably a four-story structure, Margaret is attempting to align herself intellectually with what Bachelard calls the "rationality of the roof"[134].

Despite her vertical positioning, however, Margaret's bedroom is open, like a prison cell, to surveillance. Shortly after the death of her beloved father and the marriage of her closest female companion to her brother, Margaret attempted suicide by overdosing on morphine. Suicide was a criminal offence during the nineteenth century but because Margaret is a "lady," she does not experience public scrutiny and official conviction for her actions. Instead, what she does experience is private imprisonment and relentless familial surveillance; her bedroom is a sickroom and open to constant scrutiny.

A sickroom is typically "separated and secluded" from the rest of the house, to ensure the tranquillity required for recuperation as well as preventing greater contamination.[135] Separation and seclusion, however, do not mean that the Selina's spiritualism, Margaret's hysteria is used as a cover for her internal 'other' life. Unlike Selina's spiritualism, however, Margaret's hysteria does not help her cause; instead it hinders it by giving her less freedom and subjecting her to more surveillance.

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[133] Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon, 1994., p.17.
[134] Bachelard, p.18
[135] Bailin, Miriam. *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University press 2007), p. 17-8.

Margaret's Chelsea home acts as a viewing tower; her actions beyond its immediate confines are closely observed. For example, after one prison visit, Margaret decides to walk home, believing her mother to be out: "I walked, because I guessed that Mother would still be busy with Pris. When I went home, however, I found that she was not out as I had supposed, but had been back for an hour, and had been watching me"[136]. Margaret's mother closely watches her because she views her daughter as different and "too susceptible"[137]. Margaret's discordant position in her family causes her to associate more strongly with the women in Millbank, where she may also have been if she were not a "lady."

Although Waters parallels Margaret's home space with that of Millbank, the main difference between the two sites is that the boundaries are not as strictly guarded in the home as they are in the prison. The failure of Margaret's home to fulfil its most basic requirement, which is to provide shelter from outside elements, reveals the space's susceptibility to transgression. Bachelard claims that "faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues"[138]. The same personification applies when the house ceases to provide protection and resistance. Margaret begins to notice changes within her home shortly after she becomes a Lady Visitor and agrees to think of the women prisoners, specifically Selina, when she is "wakeful"[139]. Margaret, through her keen interest in Selina, unconsciously invites transgressive forces into her home. After three days of rain she writes:

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[136] Affinity, p. 51.
[137] Ibid., p. 263.
[138] Bachelard, p. 46.
[139] Afinity, p. 50.

> The rain has made the kitchen flood, and there are leaks in the attics; worst of all, our girl, Boyd, has given us her week's warning … We all supposed Boyd content enough, she has been with us for three years … She said the truth was, the house when she was alone in it has begun to frighten her. She said it has 'turned peculiar' since Pa died, and his empty study, that she must clean, gives her the horrors. She said she cannot sleep at night, for hearing creaks and … once she said, she heard a whispering voice, saying her name![140]

Margaret's home fails to provide its most primary service by allowing the rain to transgress its threshold. This structural failure activates feelings of fear and uncertainty within the household — particularly it seems, within those who inhabit the attics, the servants. Palmer states that Waters "portrays the servant-girl […] as signifying the hole in the social cell, the chink in the closely protected carapace, of the bourgeois family where forces of disorder can creep in and unravel family ties"[141]. A woman called Vigers quickly replaces the timid Boyd. Vigers's instalment, however, drastically changes the dynamics of the residency, and heralds the arrival of disorder, because she is actually Ruth Vigers, Selina's former maid and lover. Ruth orchestrates Boyd's apparent nervousness and subsequent resignation, playing on the middle-class assumption that servants are more susceptible to ghostly disturbances.

As Margaret's domestic space becomes increasingly permeable, and the boundaries she imagined protected her begin to dissolve, her behaviour, like Boyd's, becomes erratic. Returning from a disturbing visit at the prison, Margaret struggles to separate herself from the vaporous forces that threaten the very structure of her private life:

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[140] Ibid., p. 56.
[141] Palmer, p. 128.

> Outside, the day was dark, the street made vague by a thickening fog. The Porter's man was slow to find a cab for me; when I climbed in one at last I seemed to take a skein of mist in with me, that settled upon the surface of my skirts and made them heavy. Now the fog still rises. It rises so high, it has begun to seep beneath the curtains. When Ellis came this evening, [...], she found me upon the floor, beside the glass, making the sashes tight with wads of paper. She said, what was I doing there? […] I said I was afraid the fog would creep into my room, in the darkness, and stifle me.[142]

Margaret's attempt to stop the fog entering her bedroom is futile because the transgressive forces are emanating from within the house, not beyond it. Ruth cunningly satisfies Margaret's derealised longing for Selina through a series of material interventions into her private space. Unseasonable flowers appear in her bedroom[143]; Selina's severed blonde plait upon her pillow[144]; and, as Margaret's desire grows, a velvet collar turns up in the pages of her diary "with a lock of brass"[145]. Margaret attributes these transgressions to spectral forces controlled by Selina, and welcomes them as expressions of desire. The only thing that begins to bother her about them is that she does not witness and have some control over their arrival: "They never come when I am here and watching. I wish they would. They would not frighten me. I should be frightened, now, if they ceased! For while they come, I know they come to make the space between us thick"[146].

Encouraged by these ghostly transgressions, Margaret begins to make moves towards fully realising her desire for Selina, rather than remaining in a "misted over"

[142] Affinity, p. 189-190.
[143] Ibid., p. 220.
[144] Ibid., p. 258.
[145] Ibid., p. 294.
[146] Ibid., p. 286.

and derealised space. For Margaret, Selina's seeming reciprocation of her longing makes the space between them "thick" and subsequently more real. Even Margaret's self-observations show her to be moving away from her formerly derealised position,

> I am, also, growing subtle, insubstantial. I am *evolving*. They do not notice it. They look at me and see me flushed and smiling – Mother says that I am thickening at waist! They do not know that, when I sit with them, I keep myself amongst them through the sheer force of my will. […] When I am alone, as I am now, it is quite different. Then – now – I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale beneath it. They grow paler each day. My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost! I think I will haunt this room, when I start my new life.[147]

By making plans to run away with Selina and start a new life in Italy, Margaret is evolving and moving towards material, rather than metaphoric, expressions of her lesbianism. Yet despite the fact that she is attempting to substantiate her desire, the signs by which she recognises and reads it remain derealised. Margaret's sexual evolution is inextricably entangled in apparitional metaphor and, therefore, unable to cross over into the "real" world.

Until the last thirty pages of the novel, *Affinity* seems to unfold according to the expected pattern of a female gothic tale, since it describes Margaret's awakening to the harshness and injustice of her condition as a woman bound to her phallic mother's house, and follows a planned escape from her mother's rule. Such an escape would appear to depend upon Selina's breakout from Millbank, and the final consummation of Margaret's and Selina's spiritual and sexual affinity: Margaret's

[147] Affinity, p. 289.

infringement of the domestic order spills onto criminal transgression against society – after all, female homosexuality has never been a criminal offence because of its invisible existence[148]. Yet, the conclusion of the novel contains a truly dreadful revelation, and a consequent, catastrophic reversal of fortune for Margaret, who comes to realize that she has been an unwitting pawn in the hands of Selina and, even more shockingly perhaps, of her own maid, Ruth Vigers, Selina's real, long-term lover. This way then Waters skilfully combines female and male gothic plots: Margaret is deprived both of her money and identity by her other self, Selina.

> And at last I reached the door of my own chamber, that was ajar. She had not thought to close it, in her great haste. She has taken everything, except the books: these she removed from the boxes which held them, and piled carelessly upon the carpet; in their place she took items from my dressing-room – gowns and coats, and hats and boots and gloves and brooches – things, I suppose, to make a lady of her, things that she has handled in her time here, things she has cleaned and pressed and folded, and kept neat, kept ready. She has taken these – and, of course the clothes I bought Selina. And she has the money, and the tickets, and the passport marked *Margaret Prior* and *Marian Erle*.[149]

What the reader is left with is an ironic take on the 'affinity' of the title: in a last-minute sleight-of-hand Waters denies the reader a feel-good-story, and turns a buoyant tale of sisterhood into a truly frightening, honest appraisal of the precariousness of Margaret's ability to claim her own individual identity, both as a woman and a lesbian. Margaret's lack of control on her own identity can be clearly exemplified by the slipperiness of her name: She is Margaret to her mother, but

[148] Castle, p. 31.
[149] Affinity, p. 339-340.

Peggy to her father, Miss Prior to her servants, and Aurora to her ex-lover/sister in-law, Helen, and also to Selina.

At first it might seem ambiguous who is the real villain of the story, whether Selina for her conscious and cunning machination of Margaret, or Ruth, Margaret's – and in fact Selina's – maid: doubly invisible, not only as the impersonator of Peter Quick, Selina's spirit guide, but also because of her low social status. I share Kohlke's opinion who claims that at the end of the novel the reader is left pondering the possibility that Selina herself might be a victim, manipulated against her will by Ruth. Kohlke says "Selina proves [to be] both vicitimizer and victim, dominated and exploited by her lesbian lover Ruth, who adopts a stereotypical butch and masterful attitude towards her 'girl'"[150]. Craftily *Affinity* unfolds with the alternating first person narratives of Margaret's visits to Millbank Prison and Selina's pre-Millbank diary, however, it ends with Ruth's possessive words "Remember [...] whose girl you are"[151]. Ciocia comments on this ambiguous ending as follows:

> [This] disturbing conclusion of the novel confirms once more Waters's desire to integrate the deconstruction of gender/sexual stereotypes with an insightful social critique. After all, the double standards in what is even perceived as unacceptable behaviour in women of different class status pervade the whole novel: in the underworld of Millbank, where the phenomenon of female 'pals' is unofficially acknowledged, Margaret's economic and social superiority still guarantees her a semblance of respectability, even if she is taunted for her special friendship with Selina; in her own household instead, Margaret is frowned upon for what seems as a morbid interest and an improper association with her Millban protégés, whose

[150] Kohlke, p. 161-2.
[151] Affinity, p. 352.

> social provenance and moral disposition are at least dubious."[152]

Ciocia suggests that the stigma is of a purely social nature, that is, the fact that Margaret might have emotional and/or sexual liaisons with the women prisoners is so unthinkable that it is never mentioned in the novel.

By the end of the novel, Margaret is made to realise that she, along with many readers, has been duped; what she saw was not the whole story. Margaret finds that she has no place: "I am filled with horror, and with envy and with grief, because I know myself untouched, unlooked-for and alone"[153]. Ruth has stolen Margaret's identity and emigrated with Selina in her place because she, unlike Margaret, is able to materially realise her desires. Margaret, on the other hand, has invested all her longing and future happiness in an empty metaphor which, once negated, leaves her with nothing. On the brink of coming out, she has gone to criminal lengths to secure a future for herself. When Selina does not miraculously appear at her bedroom window, Margaret is forced to understand that all along her "affinity" has in fact belonged to someone else and that there have been no "spirit friends," only Ruth.

[152] Ciocia, http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/ciocia.html
[153] Affinity, p. 349.

By turning the spirits into flesh Waters gives life to Selina and Ruth's desires. Conversely, their fleshing out renders Margaret's love invisible. Macpherson claims that "in explicitly or implicitly seeking 'improper' relationships, [Waters's] fictional prisoners step outside their prisons and wrest control from those who seek to contain them"[154]. In the end, however, this saving vision is only partial. Margaret is never actually able to escape her confines. Selina and Ruth's duplicity has left her in an impossible situation. What she believed to be true never really existed at all: "*Selina has taken my life, that she might have a life with* Vigers *in it*"[155]. Rather than face a future of domestic imprisonment and familial recrimination, Margaret imagines ending her own life by jumping into the Thames: "How deep, how black, how thick the water seems tonight. How soft its surface seems to lie. How chill its depths must be"[156]. Waters gives Margaret a traditional Victorian ending. She is now a fallen woman and, as Nina Auerbach states, "generally the fallen woman must die at the end of her story"[157]. Margaret therefore, like her desire, is derealised by the end of the novel because she has publicly transgressed moral, as well as legal, boundaries.

Selina and Ruth's fate appears, on the one hand, to be the second traditional option given to fallen Victorian women in literature, in that they are exiled. By removing the characters outside of England, and the narrative, Waters recalls the Victorian literary tradition of sending disorderly women away – usually to the

[154] Macpherson, p. 205.
[155] Affinity, p. 340., original emphasis
[156] Ibid., 350-1.
[157] Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth.* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1982), p. 161.

colonies. But, on the other hand, Selina and Ruth's ending can be read as distinctly post-Victorian because they do not leave individually as fallen women. Instead they are eloping. This vision of a place in the Ruth seems to exert a masochistic control over freedom, Selina continues to be governed by to "Remember … whose girl you are"[158].

In *Affinity*, depictions of seemingly spectral transgressions undermine the containability of women within sites such as the prison and the home. Both the prison and the home in this text are ruled by the ever-present gaze, which gives the illusion of total knowledge. However, through materially manipulating the gaze – by creating the impression of a ghostly presence – Selina and Ruth are able to undermine the notion that "seeing is believing". Waters moves towards making a space for female same-sex desire in this novel as Selina and Ruth's deliberate management of Spiritualism allows them to find a place, albeit in exile, where they can be together. By allowing her lesbian characters to cross over from the spaces in which they have been historically enclosed, and dwell in regions where their presence was previously displaced or ignored, Waters questions repressive understandings of the nineteenth century and explores the perspectives of "other Victorians."

[158] Affinity, p. 352.

Poor Things

Describing himself as a 'maker of imagined objects,' Alasdair Gray has been a prolific producer of novels, short stories, plays, poems, pamphlets and literary criticism.[159] Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* is of a great importance for several reasons, not only it is regarded as the "most historical" of the author's works – for its Victorian setting – but more importantly because of its involvement with issues of history/historiography, veracity and authority of written accounts in general.

The most obvious historical aspect of the novel lies in its nineteenth-century setting and in its attempt to represent the late Victorian period and society. The novel presents a proliferation of rival narratives accumulating into a cacophony of voices echoing different versions of the central story. The subjective personal 'histories' are once again put in contrast to 'objective' 'History'.

After two blurbs giving two different versions of the content of the book and two opposed 'reviews' on the cover, the author's deliberate attempts to confuse the reader continue. The title page tells the reader that he is going to read the "Episodes from the early life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health officer, edited by Alasdair Gray". The printed 'facsimile' of McCandless's memoir is prefaced with an Introduction by the 'editor' Gray, where he discusses and defends the historical accuracy of the document. Nevertheless, this introduction is followed by "A Letter from Victoria McCandless M.D. to her eldest surviving descendant in 1974 correcting what she claims are errors in *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish*

[159] http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland/writers/alasdair_gray/

Public Health Officer by her late husband, Archibald McCandless M.D. b. 1857- d. 1911.", which was allegedly found together with the memoir. "Notes Critical and Historical" by Gray (fictional), in which the different versions are again discussed and annotated in a mock-scholarly fashion and completed with nineteenth-century illustrations in the final part of the book.

The effect of these various competing discourses on the reader naturally is that he is unable to decide between the different versions of the narrative and at the point when he reaches the end of the novel he stays completely disoriented not knowing what to believe. However, as Marie Odile Pittin writes:

> [t]he point is not to tell the 'truth' from the 'fantasy' but to enjoy the weird, totally phantasmagoric result of [the narratives] being pitted against each other in a story that clamours in various ways for the supremely elusive, ironical notion of 'reality', a problem which indeed is *not* to be solved"[160].

In other words, it is not the fixed historical "reality" that plays the most important role here, it is actually the different emplotments of the (hi)story and their cumulative effect that matter.

The implied question of the reliability of history and the blurred boundaries between history and fiction is also addressed more straightforwardly by the text itself. The beginning of the introduction already underlines this central theme of the novel:

> The doctor who wrote this account of his early experiences died in 1911, and readers who know nothing about the daringly experimental history of Scottish medicine will perhaps mistake it for grotesque fiction. Those who examine the proofs given at

[160] Pittin, Marie Odilie. "Alasdair Gray: The strategy of Ambiguity" in Böhnke, p. 190.

> the end of this introduction will not doubt that in the final week of February 1881, at 18 Park Circus, Glasgow, a surgical genius used human remains to create a twenty-five-year-old woman. The local historian Michael Donnelly disagrees with me.[161]

The "history of Scottish medicine" is set in opposition to "grotesque fiction" in the very first sentence of the novel, also the authority of the historical proofs is invoked. Ironically, it is the 'editor' Gray[162] who makes the historical claims whereas the "local historian" disagrees. This interesting swapping of roles is made even more evident towards the end of the introduction where Gray writes:

> I Fear Michael Donnelly and I disagree about this book. He thinks it a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven, a book like Scott's *Old Morality* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. I think it like Boswell's *Life of Samule JohnsonI;* a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, sout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a friend with memory for dialogue […] I also told Donnelly that I had written enough fiction to know history when I read it. He said he had written enough history to recognize fiction. To this there was only one reply – I had to become a historian. I did so. I am one.[163]

By then the swap is complete, the writer becomes a historian – and the historian 'writes history'. There follows a list of historical events "prov[ing] the McCandless story a complete tissue of facts"[164], which are supposedly collected by Gray "after six months of research"[165] in numerous libraries and archives. Still, the 'real' historian is not convinced: "Michael Donnelly has told me he would find the

[161] Poor Things, p. IX
[162] It is important not to confuse the 'editor' Gray who is fictional with the author Gray who is real-life, as they are not the same person.
[163] Poor Things p. xiii-xiv.
[164] Ibid., p. xiv.
[165] Ibid., p. xiv.

above evidence more convinced if I had obtained official copies of marriage and death certificates and photocopies of the newspaper reports, but if my readers trust me I do not care what an 'expert' thinks"[166]. It is the confidence of the reader that matters, not the factual evidence (the original book by McCandles gets lost "somewhere between editor, publisher, typesetter and photographer"[167]). Böhnke believes this very significant as it is reminiscent of modern theories such as those of Hayden White, who perceives the historian as someone who is selecting from available facts and documents, those which allow him to tell a coherent and convincing story.[168]

It is clear that Gray's appeal for trust of his readers is ironic, especially in the light of the fact that the history that follows is far from convincing or coherent. What contributes to the bizarreness of this doubtful story is the cacophony of different and differing voices telling their personal versions of the account. What Bakhtin noticed in Dostoyevsky's novels is also valid for *Poor Things*. Each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. This idea of "polyphony" is related to the concepts of "unfinalizability" and self-and-others, since it is the "unfinalizability" of individuals that creates true polyphony.

Bakhtin briefly outlined the polyphonic concept of truth. He criticized the assumption that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. He challenged philosophers for whom plurality of minds is accidental and superfluous. For Bakhtin, truth is not a statement, a sentence or a phrase. Instead, truth is a number

[166] Poor Things, xv-xvi
[167] Ibid., xvi.
[168] Böhnke, p. 192.

of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by "a single mouth." The polyphonic truth requires many simultaneous voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply "averaged" or "synthesized." It is the fact of mutual addressivity, of engagement, and of commitment to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth"[169]

The reader first gets the version of Archibald McCandless, whose first-person narrative in the 'authentic' memoir takes up the largest part of the novel, but it is of course not exclusively his narrative, as more than the half of the approximately two-hundred pages is taken up by the narratives of other characters in different forms: i.e. epistolary, reported conversation. Prevailingly, these narratives contradict each other, like the letter of Duncan Wedderburn, with its conspiracy theories of the "Anarchist" Baxter and his creature, the "White Daemon", Bella Baxter as opposed to the letter by Bella herself; or the theories and "wisdom" of Harry Astley as opposed to the views of Dr. Hooker. When the reader starts to believe that within the memoir it is McCandless's voice that manages to keep its authority, he is very soon let down again with Bella's (or Victoria, as she calls herself) letter to posterity. In her letter she gives her version of the central story, substituting the more fantastic elements with rational explanations; she zealously denies her pregnancy, suicide attempt or the operation by Baxter (Baxter recreated Bella by implanting her unborn child's brain into her head),

[169] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin

instead she gives credible alternative reasons for her scars on her head and belly. However, when the reader wants to believe rather to Bella's story, because he finds it obviously more rational, he is warned by the editor's comment in the Introduction waning the reader that it will challenge his opinion. "[I]f read before the main text [it] will prejudice readers against that. If read afterward we easily see it is a letter of a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life"[170]. Amusing as it is, the editor intentionally subverts the rationality and therefore objectivity of Victoria McCandless's letter and in the "Notes Critical and Historical" goes to lengths (another forty pages or so) to prove McCandless version to be the genuine one.

The arsenal of (pseudo)-historical evidence including quotations from diverse scholarly studies and reference works, including nineteenth century illustrations and extracts from the literature of the period are not strong enough to stay unchallenged by the very reader since they are often clearly ironic and do not seriously pretend to be scholarly historical notes, especially because of the sort of passages from the text which are annotated. The following note which refers to a passage from Bella's letter where she is trying to explain Dr. Hooker that "[…] god is movement, because it keeps stirring things to make new ones"[171], using a Scottish recipe as an example: "Movement turns […] flour butter sugar an egg and a tablespoonful of milk into Abernethy biscuits"[172]. In the "Notes Critical and Historical" to chapter 15 Gray adds: "According to *The Scots Kitchen* (by Marian McNeill, Blackie and Son,

[170] Poor Things, p. XIII.
[171] Poor Things, p. 134.
[172] Ibid., p. 134.

Bishopbriggs, 1929) this recipe omits two essential ingredients: half a tablespoon of baking powder and a moderate amount of heat."[173]

Likewise the captions to the illustrations have to be approached with some caution, most of the pictures are authentic and well-known in the nineteenth century. On page 297, the reader finds a picture entitled "Auctioning Loot in Mandalay after Burmese Expedition", this picture is also to be found in the *Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* with the caption "Auctioning Loot from the place at Mandalay", 1885. In Gray's version, however, it is marked as one of the "Events in General Blessington's career as shown and reported in the Graphic Illustrated Weekly News" and accompanied by a 'quote' "'Thunderbolt' Blessington believes that the common soldier who preserves the peace of the Empire deserves more than mere wages"[174], the real picture is thus linked with a fictional character, a typical postmodern practice which serves to blur the boundary between history and fiction.

By doing this Gray indulges in his strategy of mocking academia, together with the blurbs and spoof reviews on the covers of his work. Moreover, the dispute with the real historian, Donnelly, mentioned in the Introduction to the book continues in the notes to chapters 3 and 9.

> CHAPTER 3, page 22. *A narrow garden between high walls.*
>
> Michael Donnelly, indefatigable in his efforts to prove this history a work of fiction, points out that the garden here described does not mention a coach-house on the far side of it. He has visited Baxter's old house (18 Park Circus) and asserts that the space between back entrance and coach-house is too

[173] Ibid., p. 287.
[174] Ibid., p. 298 under the picture

> small and sunken to have ever been more than a drying-yard. This, of course, only proves that the coach-house was built at a later date.[175]
>
> CHAPTER 9, page 60. *When the gloaming comes so will he, stepping quietly from the lane through that door in the faraway wall.*
>
> Michael Donnelly has shown me the original plans of Park Circus, designed by Charles Wilson in the 1850's, plans which show a coach-house dividing the backyard of 18 Park Circus from the lane. But the fact that an architect designed such a feature would not prevent it being built till much later. The builders of the gothic cathedrals took centuries to complete their architects' designs. The National Museum in Edinburgh, though designed to commemorate the Scots soldiers who died fighting Napoleon, is still little more than a façade.[176]

It becomes obvious that for the 'historian' Gray proving McCandles's story as a fact is of more significance than historical evidence itself. On the other hand, however, Gray's approach suggests that there is a possibility of interpreting factual evidence in contrasting ways, according to the goal of investigation, just like Donnelly does in his fight to prove McCandless's story a work of fiction. While being playful and enjoyable, the "notes" are serving an important role: they are making a serious point about the writing of history.

In *Poor Things* the author confronts the reader with several different "emplotments" – hugely influenced by the personalities of the characters from whose perspective the story is told. Gray manages to raise questions about history/historiography by emphasizing the role played by the individual in shaping of history, thus stressing the ultimate subjectivity and relativity of history.

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[175] Poor Things, p. 280
[176] Ibid., p. 285.

Parallel to the issues of history, or its authority, objectivity and subjectivity, the novel also engages with the topics of gender, class and the empire. Even before the reader gets to the first page of *Poor Things* he is confronted by the "Blurb for a High-class Hardback", printed on the cover, summing up the book:

> Since the British government has worked to restore Britain to its Victorian state, so Alasdair Gray has at least shrugged off his post-modernist label and written an up-to-date nineteenth-century novel. Set in and around Glasgow and the Mediterranean of the early 1880, it describes the love-lives of two doctors and a mature woman created by one of them […][177]

Together with the "Blurb for a Popular Paperback", which promotes the book as a typical would-be Victorian romance, and two spoof reviews of which one is praising Gray for "us[isng] science-fiction to resurrect England's Empire at its most spacious and gracious" and "satiriz[ing] those wealthy Victorian eccentrics". The second one calls "*Poor Things* yet another exercise in Victorian pastiche, a fictional genre which deserves to be neglected for a century or two"[178]. These spoof reviews point out in a characteristically entertaining way of Gray the central themes of the novel, that is its involvement with the (late) Victorian period and culture.

Due to their relevance to the scrutiny of the Victorian context it is important to see Gray's treatment of issues like gender politics, class politics and the politics of Empire. When asked why he seemed to be especially interested in the nineteenth century, Gray answer was very pragmatic: "I have sometimes paid unusually close attention to the 19th century because its close proximity to the 20th makes it unusually

[177] On the cover of the hardback version of the book links the novel more closely
[178] Poor Things inside the cover

accessible."[179] This temporal closeness to the Victorian period makes matters named above strangely relevant to the twentieth century too, which might be the reason why authors like Fowles and Byatt engage in similar discourse.

Hans Urlich Seeber in *Victorian Literature and Culture: Introduction* remarks that "the topics and discourses chosen for close study do not merely reflect the 'objective' reality of Victorian culture; they are at the same time preoccupations and even obsessions of the observers themselves"[180] and he continues by mentioning, among others, "the woman question, love and sexuality, […] colonialism and the Empire, marginalized and suppressed sections of society, social and historical problems and relocations, […] history and the uses of history"[181].

One of Gray's most constant obsessions certainly is the woman question and the issue of sexuality; together with the questions of complicated relationships it is an important theme in both *Lanark* and *1982 Janine*. Gray has been criticized for his openness towards (his own) sexuality[182] and how it is related in his fiction, especially in the Victorian historical background. Seeber points out:

> [t]he influence of contemporary thinking and discourses on Victorian studies has been particularly pervasive in research focusing on the woman question and on sexuality. Especially in the latter field, the spirit of curiosity has been excessive, and well-nigh Herculean efforts have been made to lay open – or rather, to use an appropriate metaphor, penetrate – the dark recesses of the Victorian sexual life. […] Was Victorian England a 'culture of scandal' in which people were

[179] Gray quoted in Böhnke, p. 199.
[180] Seeber, Hans, Ulrich. *Victorian Literature and Culture: Introduction*. (Leipzig. 1998.), p. 324
[181] Ibid., p. 324-5.
[182] Böhnke gives account of a recent interview in the *Sunday Times* (21 May 2000) where Gray confides that "for most of [his] life […] [his] sexuality was mainly a matter of masturbation."

> preoccupied with sexual behavior but were not allowed to speculate about it openly therefore forced to camouflage the facts by using a special symbolic language? Or must we assume, rather, that such a hypothesis issues from the brain of a modern observer projecting contemporary experiences and notions into the past? Or is the truth somewhere in between?[183]

In *Poor Things*, the character of Bella Baxter/Victoria McCandless is focused upon most of the time, not only when she is the narrator, but also in the accounts of the other protagonists. Bella's gender, and above all her sexuality, is in fact essential to the progress of the story.[184] In one of the spoof reviews, she is announced to be "an oversexed blend of Eleanor Max, Annie Besant and Alice in Wonderland" and in the "Blurb for a Popular Paperback" she is described as "rich, beautiful, tempestuous Bella Baxter"[185].

Bella Baxter can be read as a symbol in numerous ways, as Victoria she becomes an ironic double for the female monarch, Queen Victoria, and a reminder of Victor Frankenstein whose story hers recalls. As Bell, the nickname she gives herself, she constitutes part of the "Bell, Book and Candle" linked to the novel's exorcism of Victorian sentiment. As "Bella Caledonia", the caption to her portrait[186], she is "Beautiful Scotland" and pushes the narrative toward political allegory, while Baxter's compounding of "Bella-Victoria" stands for "Beautiful Victory" – however it is not quite clear whose victory it is.

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[183] Seeber, p. 324-25.
[184] Even though there is only one portrait of Bella in the novel, it abounds with illustrations of women genitalia from several angles and positions, copied from Gray's Anatomy.
[185] Poor Things
[186] See appendix

Dr. Emma Lister in her lecture at Scottish Universities International Summer School 2010 suggested that Gray's novel is an exploration in the questions of knowledge; she differentiates between historic knowledge, artistic knowledge, fictional knowledge and scientific knowledge. Even though the question of knowledge or understanding is interesting for every aspect of the novel, I believe it is the most important for defining who Bella Baxter is.

Bella/Victoria, being a man-created creature, who despite of her adult body, is maturing mentally from a child into an adult – as Lister suggests – is a symbolic representation of Scotland in her infancy. Nevertheless, there are numerous dimensions of symbolism of the novel, I believe, Bella can be perceived as the outcome of artistic and scientific knowledge, a mysterious creation made to satisfy Godwin Baxter's longing for a "fascinating stranger – a woman [he] [has] not yet met so could only imagine – a friend who would need and admire [him] as much as [he] needed and admired her"[187]. Just like Flopsy and Mopsy, originally "two ordinary, happy little rabbits before [he] put them to sleep one day and they woke up like [that][188]:

> pure black from nose to waist, pure white from waist to tail. […] the other rabbit was a freak of an exactly opposite sort: white to a waistline *as clean and distinct as if cut by the surgeon's knife*, after which it was black to the tail. […] One had male genitals with female nipples, one had female genitals with almost imperceptible nipples. […] The little beasts were works of art, not nature[189],

Bella is also a work of art.

[187] Poor Things, p. 38.
[188] Poor Things, p. 23.
[189] Ibid., p. 22-3.

Bella can thus be perceived both as a 'Product' of a creative process – or by approaching it from the other end – she can be read as 'Productivity'. In other words, Bella is the 'physical' creation of Godwin Bysshe Baxter. Gray's choice of Baxter's name is, of course, clearly intentional. As pointed out by several critics and Lister herself, the novel plays numerous games on the word God, but also alludes to Mary Shelly's father, the eighteen-century radical philosopher William Godwin. Baxter middle name links him to another unbridled idealist, Mary's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelly – and like Shelly Baxter is also a vegetarian. The surname Baxter comes from the name of a Scottish family Mary Shelly stayed with some time before completing her novel.[190]

The battle between 'fantastic' and 'scientific' is omnipresent in the novel as it also shows in the passage describing Baxter's mysterious/magical re-creation of Bella. Should the reader not be aware of the impossibility of the surgery, Baxter's matter of fact account of the operation could make one think it really happened. Baxter says: "I cleared her lungs of water, her womb of the foetus, and by a subtle use of electrical stimulus [I …] brought [her] back to self-conscious life. […] Of course I saved [the baby] – the thinking part of it. […] Why should I seek elsewhere for a compatible brain when her body already housed one?"[191] This way Bella becomes a 'product' of Baxter's scientific conduct.

However, Bella is simultaneously created in a less physical sense too, that is, her existence is reproduced verbally in McCandless's memoir. Bella Baxter's

[190] Emma Lister at SUISS 2010, lecture on Gray
[191] Poor Things, pp. 33, 42.

character can only be reconstructed indirectly as the letters in McCandless work are only copies of Bella's original letter. In some cases, it is not even that, as they are rather written recordings of what Baxter reads as Bella's letters.

> "Read the next six pages for yourself," he said suddenly, and passed [the letter] over. […] "What so the scrawls mean, Baxter? Here – take them back. Only you can decipher them." Baxter sighed and in a steady, uninflected voice told me, "They say, no no no no no no no no no, help blind baby, poor little girl help help both, trampled no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no, no where my daughter, no help for blind babies poor little girls I am glad I bit Mr. Astley.[192]

Also, Bella's words in dialogues are not direct, as they are narrated by McCandless, or read out aloud by Baxter. I believe, the question whether it is God(win) or McCandless who is the primary authority in Bella's creation, is very difficult to answer.

When I suggested that Bella can be read as 'Productivity' it is exactly for the same reasons as for which she can be read as a 'Product'. She is created physically and verbally, however she is the moving force behind the creative process. In other words, if Bella was not a source of 'productivity' the story would not exist in the first place.

Next to the question of identity as the two notions are closely linked, Gray touches on the subject of Victorian sexuality. It is not only Bella/Victoria's sexuality that is described into details but more importantly it is the general ideas of the

[192] Ibid. p. 151.

contemporary society which is mirrored in the novel. *Poor Things* presents what many theorists suggest, that in the Victorian period there was a significant difference between the "official", popularly acknowledged sexual conventions and the "secret' conduct of the Victorians.

Probably it is too daring to argue that it was Gray's artistic project, but in my reading chapter twenty-two is the moment of an 'epiphany' – for both the fictional characters as well as for the readers. In this very chapter the reader finds out the reasons behind Victoria's suicide, just like Victoria learns about her past. Victoria, the wife of General Blessington decides to take her life because she cannot take her sexual and social frustration any longer. Her "insane [sexual] appetite" was perceived as a "disease" named 'Erotomania' and she was advised to have a cliterectomy done after her honeymoon.[193] The reasoning for it comes from General Blessington himself who says: "the Mahometans do it to their women soon after birth. It makes em the most docile wives in the world"[194] Bella, who has by then gone through every imaginable sexual experience seems to be missing the General's point. When she asks what Erotomania means, Baxter explains: "It means the General thinks you loved him too much"[195]. Dr. Prickett who in the given situation is supposed to be taken for a medical authority explains:

> "It means […] that you wished to sleep in his bedroom – share his bed – lie with him […] every night of the week. Gentlemen!" – he turned from Bella and appealed to the rest of us – "gentlemen, the General is a kind of man would cut off his right arm rather than disappoint a woman! On the day before

[193] Poor Things pp. 216-7.
[194] Poor Things, p. 217.
[195] Ibid., p. 217.

> his wedding he asked me for an exact description – from the scientific, hygienic standpoint – of a married man's duties. I told him that every doctor knows – that sexual intercourse enfeebles brain and body if over-indulged, but in rational doses does nothing but good. I told him he should allow his lady wife to lie with him half an hour a night during the honeymoon period, and once or twice a week afterwards, though all amorous dalliance should cease as soon as pregnancy was detected. Alas, lady Blessington was so deranged even in her eight month she wished to lie with Sir Aubrey all night long. She sobbed and wailed when not allowed to do so."[196]

It seems Bella, is shocked, all she is able to say is "The poor thing needed cuddling", which is immediately opposed by the General. He says:

> [The] touch of a female body arouses DIABOLICAL LUSTS in potent sensual males – lusts we can hardly restrain. Cuddlin! The word is discustin and unmanly. It soils your lips, Victoria. […] No normal healthy woman – no good or sane woman wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as a duty.[197]

The quoted passages clearly indicate what the contemporary attitudes on (marital) sex were, nevertheless, the reader also learns in course of the novel that wealthy Englishmen – such as the perverted Mr. Spankybot, who later turns out to be no one else than Victoria's husband General Aubrey de la Pole Blessington himself – go to Paris brothels to indulge in their kinky fads, as "[k]nocking was illegal in Britain […] many men preferred [to wed] strangers because they could not wed those they knew best. Most of [the] customers were married men, and some of them had mistresses too"[198]. Of course 'knocking' is to be read as prostitution and 'wedding' stands for sexual intercourse in Bella's vocabulary.

[196] Ibid., p. 217.
[197] Poor Things, pp. 217-8
[198] Ibid., p. 177.

Venereal diseases, just like in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* is a topic discussed in the novel, the difference, however, is that in *Poor Things* the reader gets a first-hand information from Bella, the prostitute. What she suggests is that it is the clients who are responsible for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, not the girls and she finds it absolutely unfair that the "staff" has to undergo a humiliating check-up, while the clients do not have to be medically examined. In an unprecedentedly enlightened way she proposes that the girls should be trained "to examine each client before the wedding starts"[199]. On the whole, one can suggest that Bella/Victoria is maybe closer in her attitudes and actions to the (post)feminist late twentieth-century than to her own *fin de siècle*. Thus, the Victorian setting allows Gray to lay open the dark recesses of Victorian sexual life, while simultaneously he can project contemporary experiences and notions into the past.

The treatment of class politics – that is the marginalized and suppressed sections of society, social and political problems and relocations are also touched upon in *Poor Things.* Dietmar Böhnke suggests that Gray draws a parallel criticism of the Victorian society and the "neo-Victorian Thatcherism"[200]. On her tour around the world, Bella experiences a crisis when she sees a begging girl with a blind baby in Alexandria and she is not allowed to help her. In her letter to Baxter and McCandless she Harry Astley told her. He said:

> [her] pity was natural and good if confined to the unfortunate of [her] own class, but if acted on promiscuously it would prolong the misery of many who would be better dead. [She continues] I had just seen a working model of nearly every

[199] Ibid., p. 183.
[200] Böhnke, p. 203.

> civilized nation. The people on the veranda were the owners and rulers – their inherited intelligence and wealth set them above everyone else. The crowd of beggars represented the jealous and incompetent majority, who were kept in their place by the whips of those on the ground between: the letter represented policemen and functionaries who keep society as it is. And while [Astley and Dr. Hookes] spoke I clenched my teeth and fists to stop them biting and scratching these clever men who want no care for the helpless sick small, who use religions and politics to stay comfortably superior to all that pain: who make religions and politics, excuses to spread misery with fire and sword and how could I stop all this? I did not know what to do.[201]

What Bella writes is extremely important to her, which implies the topic's importance for the author. The passage describing her Egyptian experience is clearly divided from the rest of the text and Bella herself writes: "And now I have the strength to tell you [what happened in Alexandria], God, but it is so important that I will divide it from the rest of my letter with another line."[202] One cannot miss the message that Bella's views are just as much about the late twentieth-century Britain as it is about Bella's Victorian world. Gray's use of the Victorian setting is a convenient background for contemporary concerns; he is investigating the past to illuminate the present.

In relation to this general interest in questions of class and political power, the topic of colonialism emerges. Most importantly, there is a direct link to a more general aspect explained in Astley's "bitter wisdom" noted down by Bella in her passage on "History"—that

[201] Poor Things, p. 176.
[202] Poor Things, p. 173.

> [b]ig nations are created by successful plundering raids, and since most history is written by friends of the conquerors history usually suggests that the plundered were improved by their loss and should be grateful for it. Plundering happens inside countries too. King Henry the Eighth plundered the English monasteries, the only institution in those days which provided hospitals, schools and shelters for the poor. English historians agree King Henry was greedy, hasty and violent, but did a lot of good. They belong to a class which was enriched by the church lands.[203]

While reinforcing the postmodern view of history as ultimately influenced by ideological, political and class interests, Böhnke believes that the quoted extract explicitly links the topic to the Empire when it says that "history is written by friends of the conquerors" and "suggests that the plundered were improved by their loss and should be grateful for it" clearly indicates that Gray neither approves of the instrumentalisation of history nor of the enterprise of imperialism.[204]

Bella's entry on "Empire" proves Böhnke right, as Bella reports Astley's bitter wisdom:

> No thickly peopled place has lacked an empire – Persia, Greece, Italy, Mongolia, Arabia, Denmark, Spain and France had turns. The least warlike and biggest and long-lasting empire was Chinese. We destroyed it twenty-five years ago because its government would not let us sell opium there. The British empire has grown rapidly, but in other two or three centuries the half-naked descendants of Disraeli and Gladstone may be diving off a broken pier of London Bridge, retrieving coins flung into the Thames by Tibetan tourists who find the sight amusing.[205]

[203] Ibid., pp. 157-7.
[204] Böhnke, p. 205.
[205] Poor Things, pp. 160-1

Apart from Astley, who has a rather unconventional view of empire for the height of British imperial enthusiasm, there is Dr. Hooker, the zealous American missionary and proto-imperialist, who thinks that "the smaller Chinese skull made it hard for the Chinese to learn English"[206] who influences Bella's learning process. Dr. Hooker's credo becomes clear when he explains "how much better the world is than in the bad old days"[207]:

> Because the Anglo-Saxon race to which she and I and Mr. Astley belong have begun to control the world, and we are the cleverest and kindliest and most adventurous and most truly Christian and hardest working and most free and democratic people who have ever existed. We should not feel proud of our superior virtues. God arranged it by giving us bigger brains than anyone else, so we find it easier to control our evil animal instincts. This means that compared with the Chinese, Hindoos, Negroes and Amerinians – yes, even compared with the Latins and Semites – we are like teachers in a playground of children who do not want to know that the school exists.[208]

The contrast between the character of Dr. Hooker and Astley and their frequent debates of political and ideological questions throughout the novel is another instance of Gray's use of competing discourses. Böhnke ascribes to this device a special function, which according to him is to "reveal underlying reality that must be reconstructed by the reader, who somehow accompanies Bella on [...] her voyage of discovery of the Victorian world.[209] This implies that the complex issue of British imperialism is better viewed from a variety of partly opposed perspectives than by

[206] Ibid., p. 131.
[207] Ibid., p. 139.
[208] Poor Things, p. 139.
[209] Böhnke, p. 206.

trying to find one master narrative that pretends to give a totalising and definitive account.

Probably the most important character for the issue of empire is Bella/Victoria's former husband, General Sir Aubry de la Pole Blessington. He is something like the epitome of the British Empire, a famous military leader in different corners of the world and revered "national hero"[210], who is presented as a cruel and perverted person and ends up in committing suicide. It is clear that Gray's feelings for his character mirror his attitudes towards imperialism. Blessington is probably the most unlikable character in the whole novel, a villain character who is the embodiment of imperialism. Moreover, he is the personification of Bella/Victoria's past that Baxter tries to hide, but it comes back to haunt her – in the worst possible moment – when she is about to marry McCandles. There seems to be an analogy between Bella and the United Kingdom in a way that British Empire, or the imperialist ideology is a suppressed part of the history, that is coming back to haunt it in the late twentieth-century.[211]

On her tour around Europe, Bella gradually senses that there are black holes in her past and she demand to be told about it by Baxter. However, as McCandless says: "[w]e were all too full of plans for Bella's future to investigate or call up the past together – we hoped it would leave us in peace."[212] But as the reader finds out, the history does come – calling unexpectedly in the person of General Blessington.

[210] Poor Things p. 207.
[211] Böhnke p. 207.
[212] Poor Things p. 207

Summary

Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* set in the (late) Victorian period is not only a fantastic and highly amusing work of fiction but the novel is also a particularly interesting subject of study in relation to history/historiographical metafiction, questions of authenticity and authority as well as questions of knowledge in general. Among numerous examples of contemporary British historical fiction written especially in the 1980's and 90's, set, or at least partly set in the Victorian age and, by its artistic program, involved in the Victorian period, *Poor Things* can be defined as a neo-Victorian novel.

The novel brings apparent the links between history and the contemporary interest in the nineteenth-century, for which the main reason is that it was the Victorian age which established history as an academic discipline in its own right. As Christina Crosby writes in *The Ends of History: Victorians and "the woman question"*: "In Victorian England, history is much more than the events of the past or the account of those events. History is a regime of truth to which knowledge in general is subject […]"[213]. However, if one looks at the theories regarding history described into detail in the second chapter of this work, one realizes it is exactly this "regime of truth" which is so vigorously opposed and denied by many contemporary theories.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the chapter, history is not the only concern of Gray's novel. Equally important role play gender politics, class politics and the

[213] Crosby, Christina. *The Ends of History: Victorians and "the woman question",* (New York and London: Routledge. 1991.), p. 10.

politics of the empire. The reflection of *Poor Things* on the above mentioned topics, both in our own age and the nineteenth century, link the novel more closely to other neo-Victorian novels, such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or A. S. Byatt's *Possession.*

This chapter aimed at supporting the theories on history and historiography by a close analysis of the text.

Conclusion

In 1980s Britain then-Prime-Minister Margaret Thatcher called repeatedly for a return to "Victorian Values". During the same period, not likely coincidentally, there was a major return in literature and film to the nineteenth century, as subject for consideration, analysis and fictionalisation. The previous century had become the focus or, even, the ideological battleground of modern and even postmodern nostalgia, desire and whimsy. Julian Wolfreys in his introduction to his course "Victoriographies: Inventing the Nineteenth Century" taught at University of Florida notes on the event of 1994's re-desig of the English ten-pound note, he claims that:

> [it was] designed in order to show on its obverse side a picture of Charles Dickens and cartoon from *The Pickwick Papers* of the Dingley Dell-All Muggleton cricket match. In this one image, with its village green, its Norman church spire in the background, the evocation of a time of good humour and fair play, all the discourses of a forced pseudo-Victorianism were brought into play, as if to remind us that we are much more Victorian than we think, and that a certain version of the Nineteenth century is only ever as far away as your wallet.[214]

Wolfreys continues with stating that the Victorian subject became invested at as a powerful nexus of symbolic and iconic configuration, a "depository to be plundered, reinvented and, especially, rewritten"[215]. A "curious coda"—as he calls it—to this reinvention of the Victorian was the appearance of a series of posters on the London Underground, all sharing the title, *Victorian London*: using late-Victorian' poster typefaces and black and white vignettes in quite hideous detail, these posters aimed to

[214] Wolfreys, Julian, "Victoriocraphies: Inventing the Nineteenth Century" at http://www.english.ufl.edu/courses/undergrad/2001spring_up-d.html on 24.5. 2010
[215] Ibid.

demonstrate how Victorian values meant the infliction of disease as a result of homelessness, poverty and care in the community.

What happened in the 1980s and 90s, throughout various fields, disciplines, discourses, was the production of a Victorian mode of aesthetic, critical and cultural production, a cultural writing formed out of interpretations and translations of the high ground of nineteenth-century culture; in short, *victoriographies*.

The purpose of this dissertation was, to consider the various forms the resuscitation of the 'Victoriana project' has taken, to analyse critically the various forms and functions that rewriting the past has taken, in order to ask precisely what is at stake in the rewriting of such a cultural and historical moment at that point in our own culture that we call, more or less unproblematically, postmodern.

This work is structured to give a comprehensive analysis of what we can label as a neo-Victorian novel as well as it closely analyses two novels, that is, Sarah Waters's *Affinity* and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things.* I decided to devote my attention to these two novels and not to the notoriously known, proto-neo-Victorian novels like Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as those novels have been well-documented and broadly analyzed already. As the close reading of *Affinity* and *Poor Things* shows, both novels carry all the characteristic earmarks of the neo-Victorian novel, which are described in detail in the introductory chapter of this work.

The chapter on *Affinity* focused mostly on the question of identity – a public and a private face of Margaret Prior. The chapter draws upon the topics of gender in

relation to history and general competency of a woman in fields conventionally dominated by males but most importantly it spells out the taboo of homosexuality. Spiritualism and ghosting, typical themes of the conventional Victorian gothic stories, are the means of constructing the core topic of sexual transgression.

The chapter devoted to the analysis of Gray's *Poor Things* brings to the surface even more postmodern concerns like truth or veracity of historical documents, the understanding and making of history, the authority of the texts. Through its historical setting *Poor Things* presents a criticism of the (late) nineteenth-century but simultaneously it expresses the same ideas on our postmodern times. The novel opens the serious topics – important not only for the Victorians, but very much so for the twentieth-century – such as gender, sexuality, education or colonialism well embedded in a magical-realistic environment of nineteenth-century Glasgow (and Europe).

Appendix

Non-chronological list of neo-Victorian novels:

J. G. Farrel: *The Siege of Krishnapur*

A. N. Wilson: *Who Was Oswald Fish?*

Peter Ackroyd: *The Great Fire of London*

The Last testament of Oscar Wilde

Dan Leno and the Liemhouse Golem

Howard Jackobson: *Peeping Tom*

David Lodge: *Nice Work*

Charles Palliser: *The Quincunx*

Margaret Forster: *Lady's Maid*

Michele Roberts: *In the Red Kitchen*

A.S. Byatt: *Possession*

Angels and Insects

The Children's Book

Penelope Lively: *City of the Mind*

Alasdair Gray: *Poor Things*

Matthew Kneale: *Sweet Thames*

English Passengers

Graham Swift: *Ever After*

Waterland

Emma Tennant: *Tess*

Tom Holand: *Supping With Panthers*

Lynne Truss: *Tennyson's Gift*

Beryl Bainbridge: *Master Georgie*

James Buxton: *Pity*

Mick Jackson: *The Underground Man*

Liz Jensen: *Ark Baby*

Kathrine McMahon: *Confinement*

Sarah Waters: *Affinity*

Tipping the Velvet

Fingersmith

Patricia Duncker: *James Miranda Barry*

Julie Mayerson: *Laura Blundy*

D.M. Thomas: *Charlotte: The final journey of Jane Eyre*

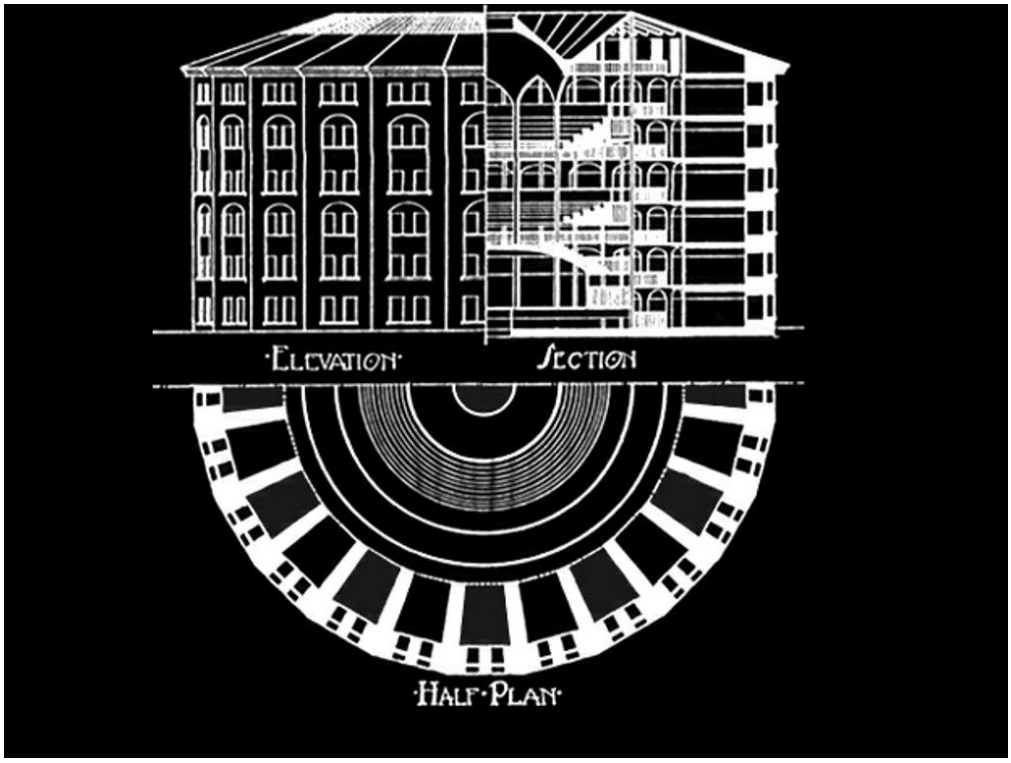
Tonny Pollard: *The Secrets of the Lazarus Club*

Julian Barnes: *Flaubert's Parrot*

Susanna Clarke: *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*

Peter Carey: *Jack Maggs*

Panopticon – similar to the structure of Millbank Prison in *Affinity*



Alasdair Gray's illustrations

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Resume

V roku 1966 keď Jean Rhys napísala svoj román *Šíre Sargasové more* nikto by si nebol pomyslel že týmto autorka odštaruje úplne nový literárny smer ktorého podstata tkvela v prehodnotení a prepísaní viktoriánskych mýtov. Sally Shuttleworth tento smer nazvala "retro-viktoriánskym" románom. Aj keď román Johna Fowlesa *Francúzova milenka*, vydaný v roku 1969, zaujal verejnosť so svojou otvorenou kritikou a paródiou viktoriánskych spoločenských a literárnych konvencií, zlatým vekom retro, alebo novo-viktoriánskeho románu nastala v 80. a 90. rokoch minulého storočia, keď sa mnoho súčasných autorov nadchlo viktoriánskou témou a tradíciou.

Retro, alebo novo-viktoriánsky román naväzuje na viktoriánsku tradíciu vo svojich témach, motívoch a postavách, ktoré sú alebo pravé, ako napríklad v knihe Petra Ackroyda *Fiktívny denník Oscara Wildea*, alebo sú vymyslené, ako je tomu v rade románov *Flashman* od Georgea McDonalda Frasera . Novo-viktoriánsky román imituje texty z viktroriánskeho obdobia a vo väčšine prípadov napodobňuje viktoriánsku naráciu v štruktúre, forme a/alebo téme.

Pri podrobnom skúmaní novo-viktoriánskeho románu je zrejmé, že návrat k viktoriánskemu štýlu sa nevzťahuje len na literatúru, ale sa stal aj súčasťou každodenného života britskej spoločnosti od 60. rokov minulého storočia. Vláda Margaret Tatcherovej úmyselne vyzývala spoločnosť k návratu k viktoriánskym hodnotám ako sú hospodárnosť, rodina a podnikanie – k hodnotám tradične

spojovaným s konzervatívnou vládou. V 90-tych rokoch podobnú rétoriku prebral aj Tony Blair, predseda labouristickej strany. Odborníci sa zhodujú, že tento apel bol odvôvodnený tým, že viktoriánska spoločnosť bola považovaná za monolitickú, v ktorej sa sociálne konflikty riešili na základe univerzálne uznávaných morálnych zásadách. Morálne povedomie „viktoriáncov“ je teda niečo, k čomu sa s nostalgickou retrospektívou stavia naša postmoderná spoločnosť.

Okrem polititizovania “novo-viktoriánskosti” sa tento trend filtruje aj cez konzumnú spoločnosť. Sadoff a Kucich sú presvečení, že súčasná britská spoločnosť využíva viktoriánsku minulosť k estetizovaniu prázdnej postmodernej prítomnosti. Toto dokazuje aj fakt, že sa v posledných dekádach čoraz častejšie objavujú časopisy ako *Victoria* alebo *Victoriana,* ktoré sa zameriavajú na bytovú architektúru ladenú v štýle 19. storočia. Tento sociálny fenomén podporuje teóriu, že koniec 20. a začiatok 21. storočia je paradoxne historickým pokračovaním a súčasne aj dekonštrukciou viktoriánstva.

Cieľom tejto diplomovej práce je nájsť vysvetlenie pre tento novodobý obdiv viktoriánskeho obdobia a trend návratu k jeho literárnym konvenciám. Práca analyzuje zobrazenie minulosti v literárnych dielach, taktiež analyzuje témy dôležité pre postmodernú teoriu a súvis minulosti a prítomnosti.

Táto práca ponúka rozbor pojmu novo-viktoriánsky román a potom sa detailne venuje románu Sarah Watersovej *Affinity* a románu Alasdaira Graya *Poor Things.* Moje rozhodnutie venovať sa práve týmto dvom románom a nie notoricky známym knihám ako *Francúzova milenka* (John Fowles) alebo *Posedlost* (A. S. Byatt) či *Krahina vod* (Graham Swift) vyplynulo z dôvodu, že tieto romány boli už

analyzované mnohokrát, kým témy v knihách Graya a Watersovej sú zatiaľ relatívne nepreskúmané.

Ako tomu nasvečuje podrobný rozbor, *Affinity* a *Poor Things* vykazujú všetky znaky charakteristické pre novo-viktoriánsky román. Týmto znakom je venovaná úvodná kapitola diplomovej práce.

Po úvodnej kapitole nasleduje kapitola, ktorá dodáva nevyhnutné teoretické pozadie k pochopeniu podstaty novo-viktoriánskych diel, t.j. ich vzťahu k minulosti a náväzne na to k prítomnosti. V tejto kapitole opisujem minulé a súčasné názory literárnych kritikov a teoretikov na dejiny/históriu, na jej autoritu, vierohodnosť, chápanie, konštrukciu alebo dekonštrukciu, ako aj jej význam v literárnych dielach. Podkapitola "Historiographic metafiction" obsahuje zhrnutie teórie Lindy Hutcheonovej, ktorá pravdepodobne najviac ovplyvnila kritiku novo-viktoriánskych románov.

V kapitole "Neo-Victorian applied" je teória podložená príkladmi. Charakteristické znaky zhrnuté v úvodnej kapitole sú názorne demonštrované na niekoľkých románoch ktoré sa práve preto, že spĺňajú tieto kriteria môžu nazývať novo-viktoriánskymi románmi.

Kapitola s názvom *Affinity* sa zameriava hlavne na otázku identity – dôraz sa kladie na rozdiel medzi dvoma tvárami identity. Jednou je tvár verejná, ktorá je ovplyvňovaná nátlakom spoločnosti, druhou tvárou je identity je tá súkromná, ktorú Margaret Priorová, hrdinka románu objavuje. Táto kapitola sa dotýka aj tém ako "gender" a jeho vzťah k histórii, tak ako aj všeobecnej otázke postavenia ženy v

spoločnosti konvenčne riadenou mužmi. *Affinity* vyslovuje a skúma tabu homosexuality pomocou spiritualizmu a okultizmu, ktoré sú typickými témami gotického románu.

Kapitola *Poor Things* sa zaoberá analýzou postmoderných otázok, ktoré sa týkajúc pravdy a pravdivosti historických materiálov, chápaniu a písaniu dejín, autority písaného textu. Práve tým, že dej Grayovho románu je vsadený do neskorého 19. storočia, jeho kritika viktoriánskej spoločnosti je vlastne projekciou kritiky spoločnosti súčasnej. Je zjavné, že dôležité otázky pre viktoriáncov sú vlastne ešte dôležitejšie v postmodernej spoločosti: gender, sexualita, výchova a vzdelanie či empirializmus a kolonializmus sú v *Poor Things* udomácnené vo viktoriánskom prostredí, ale čitateľ dobre vie, že to čo Gray kritizuje na Glasgowe 19. storočia, vlastne kritizuje na dnešku.