

# Reorienting Vulnerability: An Analysis of Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*

## Reorientando la vulnerabilidad: un análisis de *Hot Milk*, de Deborah Levy

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MARÍA MAGDALENA FLORES QUESADA

Institution address: Universidad de Málaga. Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Campus de Teatinos. 29071 Málaga. Spain.

E-mail: mmflores@uma.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-4156-1352

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to challenge the traditionally negative connotations of the notion of vulnerability. I propose to approach the concept in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's idea of potentiality to demonstrate that both potential and vulnerability can be regarded as transforming and empowering characteristics for the subject. I analyse the protagonist of Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* (2016) under this light to show how a subject can use vulnerability as the fulcrum of freedom and agency, particularly in the context of a problematic mother-daughter relationship. I suggest that understanding vulnerability as potentiality allows a reorientation of our conception of the victim or the vulnerable as subjects in potential power.

**Keywords:** vulnerability; potentiality; Deborah Levy; Giorgio Agamben; *Hot Milk*.

**Summary:** Introduction. Vulnerability as Potential. "You Must Free Yourself": Exploring the Potential of Vulnerability in *Hot Milk*. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** Este artículo cuestiona las connotaciones tradicionalmente negativas de la noción de vulnerabilidad. Se aborda el concepto en relación con la idea de potencialidad de Giorgio Agamben para demostrar que tanto la potencialidad como la vulnerabilidad pueden considerarse características transformadoras y empoderantes para el sujeto. En este contexto, se analiza a la protagonista de *Hot Milk*, de Deborah Levy (2016), para mostrar cómo un sujeto puede utilizar la vulnerabilidad como eje hacia la libertad y la voluntad, particularmente en el marco de una relación problemática entre madre e hija. Se concluye que entender la vulnerabilidad como potencialidad permite reorientar nuestra concepción de la víctima o del vulnerable como sujetos con un poder potencial.

**Palabras clave:** vulnerabilidad; potencialidad; Deborah Levy; Giorgio Agamben; *Hot Milk*.

**Sumario:** Introducción. La vulnerabilidad como potencial. “You Must Free Yourself”: explorando el potencial de la vulnerabilidad en *Hot Milk*. Conclusiones.

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## INTRODUCTION

A superficial approach to the notions of potentiality and vulnerability would probably conclude by underlining the disparity between the two concepts. In general terms, when we think of potentiality we associate it with the idea of possibility, value, and openness towards the future. Having potential in everyday language means having an asset, an internal ability that is yet to be exploited and that is open to yield positive results. On the contrary, the perception of vulnerability has been traditionally associated with negative connotations. Critics have usually related the idea of vulnerability to exposure to physical and psychological violence, as Ganteau and Onega explain (3). This tendency has also been reinforced by the ubiquitous presence of the word “vulnerable” in everyday language and media, where it is constantly used as a synonym of the victim, of the weak, endangered or marginalised. The critical approach in contemporary academia, however, has become inclined towards a more encompassing understanding of vulnerability, as the lever to empowerment (Le Blanc 192), resistance (Butler et al. 1), ethical openness to alterity (Ganteau and Onega 8) or empathy, community and compassion (Gilson, *Ethics* 8), to name but a few.

This more positive turn to the notion of vulnerability anticipates its closeness to potentiality. Thus, endorsing this more positive reorientation of the conceptualisation of vulnerability and relying on Giorgio Agamben’s idea of potential as envisaged in “On Potentiality,” I aim to show how the notions of vulnerability and potential do not differ as much as they could seem at first. I contend that the idea of potential, explored since Aristotle, offers a wide critical approach where the contemporary understanding to vulnerability can be accommodated.

Reading vulnerability in the light of potentiality can be useful in many fields of study, given the attention the former receives in academic circles. I will focus on literature to explore how vulnerability is also portrayed differently in contemporary British fiction. In particular, I will apply the idea of vulnerability as potential to the close reading of Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk* (2016). This very unconventional novel has had a modest impact in the media but has remained widely disregarded in

terms of literary analysis. As I hope to show, the novel clearly highlights the value of vulnerability as a tool towards agency, self-development and connection with others.

## 1. VULNERABILITY AS POTENTIAL

Agamben's study of potential is based on the Aristotelian understanding of the notion. As Balskus explains, by starting almost each of his sections with Aristotle, Agamben justifies the inspiration of his theory of potential (160). In doing so, the author also demonstrates the long history that the concept has had in philosophy, because, as he states, it is a notion that "has never ceased to function in the life and history of humanity" (177), which also justifies the need to reconsider it nowadays.

The first similarity that we can find between vulnerability and potentiality is the complexity Agamben finds in understanding the definition of potential independently of other concepts. In fact, in an attempt to provide a definition, he connects potentiality to the study of other concepts such as "faculty" or "power" (178). The same difficulty can be found when defining vulnerability. The notion has been studied from myriad perspectives. It has been applied to fields such as economy, engineering, sociology, psychology, ecology, among many others, and in each of them, vulnerability has had a particular interpretation. This already shows potentiality in vulnerability, due to its permeability to be applied to many different scenarios and remain valuable, but at the same time, it problematises its neutral definition.

In order to try to solve the problem, Agamben proposes to divide potentiality into smaller units: two different categories. The philosopher distinguishes between "the generic potentiality" and "existing potentiality" (179). To Agamben, the former is the one we are all born with. Generic potentiality is easily observed in children, who have their whole lives to experience learning and become a potential other through acquired knowledge. To him, as well as to Aristotle, this generic potentiality lacks interest, as it is common to everyone. On the contrary, existing potentiality is connected to a person's actual specific "knowledge" or "ability" (Agamben 179) to do a particular task, because s/he has already been trained in that matter or because one possesses an innate capacity to perform that task. Agamben offers the examples of the architect who has the existing potentiality to build, and the poet, who has this potentiality to write poems (179). This existing potentiality is of

more interest to the author because, while generic potentiality is obligatorily connected to alteration given that the individual must suffer a change through learning, existing potentiality is not. The subject can also choose to reject her/his potential. That is, in its potentiality, the person can choose not to perform the task s/he has the capacity to do, s/he “can also *not* bring [her/] his knowledge into actuality” (179). That creates a condition of potential as well, both to and not to become this “other” subject: not just any architect or any poet, but the architect who *actually* builds or the poet who *actually* writes poems.

Agamben’s distinction can be easily mirrored in the notion of vulnerability, as we can also understand it on two different levels. In a general sense, we can claim that vulnerability is a shared characteristic, common to everyone, an inherent quality of humanity. This is a transversal idea in the theories of Martha Nussbaum, Erinn Gilson, Corine Pelluchon or Nathalie Maillard, to name but a few. Although psychological vulnerability has also been explored, especially in relation to trauma studies,<sup>1</sup> understanding humanity as intrinsically vulnerable has traditionally been rooted in the physical vulnerability of human bodies especially in terms of their “animality” (MacIntyre 4), their inclination to impairment and disability (Turner 202), or their finitude and precariousness (Butler, *Frames* 30).

In a more concrete level, it could be argued that whereas a common vulnerability exists, not all subjects experience it in the same degree. According to Butler, there is a more specific kind of vulnerability that manifests itself in the exploitation of rights of a particular person, groups of people or entire communities. These people suffer specific modes of social or political oppression (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 22). As in the case of Agamben’s division, my interest is more inclined to these specific modes of vulnerability Butler refers to.

Identifying a group of people as more vulnerable than the rest can result in economic or political action to ensure its special care or protection, but, at the same time, that labelling can contribute to the victimisation of those collectives and the narrowing view of vulnerability as only a negative condition. However, as the aim of this article is to offer a positive approach to vulnerability, I propose to explore whether

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<sup>1</sup>See Onega and Ganteau’s *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction* (2011) and *Contemporary Trauma Narratives* (2014), and Ganteau and Onega’s *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction* (2017).

those who are considered as specifically vulnerable have a potential capacity and to reflect on what makes them so. Drawing from Agamben's critical methodology in which he tries to solve philosophical problems through questions, we could wonder: what can and cannot the vulnerable do? Is their lack of ability—or possibility—to perform a particular task what makes them vulnerable? Do they lack the ability to do something or are they denied the possibility to perform that activity? Once again, the problem may lie in our own understanding of certain words.

Agamben's whole study in "On Potentiality" can be summarised as an attempt to define the verb "can" and what we mean when we say "I can or I cannot" (177). He relates the verb to the experience of power, of being capable of doing something. He explains that there is a turning point in every subject's life, a crucial moment when the individual is aware of his/her own (in)capacity:

For everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this 'I can,' which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is, nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this 'I can' does not mean anything—yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality. (178)

In other words, Agamben envisages a situation that is "beyond all faculties," that exceeds one's capacity and, yet, he underlines the necessity to move forwards and assert this "I can," challenging the limitations of one's apparently limited possibilities. This moment correlates with Agamben's complex explanation, drawing from Aristotle's *De Anima*, concluding that "potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence" (179). Accordingly, potentiality manifests itself at the extreme and opens new chances for the subject to *actually* be able to undertake the desired action.

As in potentiality, that revelatory moment is also necessary in the experience of vulnerability. Feeling vulnerable often means being unable to complete an important task. As some studies have demonstrated, recognising one's vulnerability has very positive effects for the

vulnerable subject.<sup>2</sup> Only in that way can the vulnerable subject feel that vulnerability is not a disempowering feature, but, instead, a characteristic of her/his personality that s/he can use to move forwards, as an element worthy of value towards agency. The negative connotations of vulnerability cannot be fully erased nonetheless, because the moment of revelation arises from a feeling of exposure to others, inability, or shame. However, the recognition of one's vulnerability allows its later transformation into a positive and enabling characteristic, turning weakness into capacity. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge this moment in every subject who wishes to either recognise her/his potential or to transform vulnerability.

This revelatory moment in the individual allows Agamben to establish a binary relationship between potentiality and capacity but more interestingly, between their limits, or in his words:

[T]o be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being. (182)

Thus, potentiality manifests when individuals are aware of their own incapacity, their own limitations and weaknesses; a vulnerable moment that is transformed into a powerful one through its recognition.

This is again aligned with contemporary studies on vulnerability. For example, Judith Butler has explored throughout her work how in the most vulnerable modes of existence we can find unique examples of capacity and strength. According to Erinn Gilson, the exclusively negative understanding of vulnerability hinders our ability to acknowledge those instances of agency in the vulnerable, because the

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<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown conducted a large number of interviews asking numerous people about situations where they had felt vulnerable in their daily life. The research resulted in a pioneering work in the field of sociology and the publication of *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (2012). Another more recent study carried out by a group of psychologists from the University of Mannheim also demonstrates how the perception of vulnerability shifts from one individual to another, changing the way self and other are regarded. In particular, how vulnerability tends to be accepted and even regarded positively when it is observed in others, but negatively when it is recognised as part of one's own personality. See Bruk et al.'s "Beautiful Mess Effect" (192–205).

general tendency is to protect and minimise vulnerability (“Vulnerability” 309). However, what is at stake here is precisely the opposite: how to recognise, manifest and transform vulnerability in a way that is useful for the vulnerable subject. In that sense, vulnerability is already potential.

I argue that what makes that transformation possible is its potential capacity. As Gilson explains, vulnerability is potential in itself: “vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes possible other conditions . . . . As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn” (“Vulnerability” 310). That openness is also what makes vulnerability a permeable feature, or in other words, a potential category. The vulnerable subject is exposed to harm, shame, failure or marginalisation, but also to human kindness, love, learning and personal growth. Thus, vulnerability is also potentiality and, like the latter, it is manifested in the key moment where the individual recognises it and embraces it as part of her/himself.

In the same way that Agamben analyses poetry to reflect on the possibilities of potential, in what follows I propose to use contemporary fiction to delve into the limits of vulnerability as potential. I believe that contemporary works of British fiction like the one chosen in this article provide us with a fruitful scenario in which we can peruse how vulnerability becomes potential and how it affects the subject and those who are around her/him.

## **2. “YOU MUST FREE YOURSELF”: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF VULNERABILITY IN *HOT MILK***

As Deborah Levy explained in an interview with Jenni Diski for *The London Review of Books*, her latest books went through unexpected literary paths. She found problems getting *Swimming Home* (2012) published because several of her previous publishing houses found the novel “too literary” (20) and complex to be sold. As it turned out, the novel was finally accepted by And Other Stories, a not-for-profit publishing house, and received a very positive critical reception; it was even shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize that year. Her next book, four years later, was *Hot Milk* (2016).<sup>3</sup> This time, she published it with Penguin Random House without any problems and was again shortlisted

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, *Hot Milk* will be abbreviated as *HM* in bracketed references.

for the Man Booker Prize the year of its publication. Her latest novel, published in 2019, *The Man Who Saw Everything*, is published by Hamish Hamilton and has been longlisted for the Booker Prize. Both the three nominations as well as the change of publishing houses point at a reconsideration of Levy's latest fiction as one of significant value.

According to Wagner, *Hot Milk* "shares themes and obsessions with its predecessor" and, in fact, we can observe a tendency from the publication of *Swimming Home* onwards. That book was her return to writing novels after twelve years since she had published *Billy & Girl* (1999) and it seems that Levy's prose moves to a more metaphorical, fragmented and yet personal narrative. The reason for this might be possible to infer from what she has called "living autobiographies," three non-fiction books where she looks back on key moments of her life: *Things I don't Want to Know* (2014), *The Cost of Living* (2018), and *Real State* (2021). In all of them, but especially in the first two, we can observe how Levy's divorce and the illness and subsequent loss of her mother strongly marked her 2000s. As she explained in an interview for *The New York Times*, when her mother was dying of cancer her literary tastes completely changed as she needed "language that was as big as everything [she] was feeling" ("Deborah Levy Would Like"). Levy has now mastered that language and has used it in her most recent novels, creating characters and situations that very often remind the reader of the author's personal experiences.<sup>4</sup>

A recurrent theme is the complexity of family bonds in contemporary societies, how they can compromise one's freedom, the way we see ourselves, and how we behave and relate to others. This is present in *Hot Milk*, which mostly focuses on a dysfunctional family constituted by Sofia and her mother, Rose.<sup>5</sup> The daughter and protagonist is in her mid-twenties, but far from enjoying the years of her youth, Sofia devotes most of her life to take care of her complaining and aching mother. Rose suffers from a strange illness that sometimes affects her

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in *The Cost of Living*, Levy explains how due to her illness her mother was always thirsty but could not drink any water. She clearly portrays the daughter's efforts at trying to calm the mother's thirst in any way it occurred to her. She also provides valuable reflections on the meaning of freedom within the mother-daughter dynamics. Both ideas are clearly reflected in *Hot Milk*.

<sup>5</sup> Trauma and mother-daughter psychological attachment are central issues in the novel that are not analysed in depth here, as it falls outside the scope of this article. I have written on this novel elsewhere (see references list).

capacity to walk and constrains her to use a wheelchair. Tired of not finding a clear diagnosis in Britain, they decide to mortgage their house in London and look for a possible alternative treatment in the south of Spain, during a hot summer in Almería.

What starts as their last attempt to cure Rose's illness becomes a healing process for Sofia as well. In fact, the whole novel can be read as two portrayals of different potentialities and vulnerabilities and how they can either evolve or remain the same depending on whether Agamben's "experience of potentiality" (178) occurs or not. Explained differently, each character embodies one of the two possible understandings of vulnerability (a negative and a positive one), similar to what Ganteau and Onega contend in relation to the correlated notion of dispossession: understood as either purely disempowering and discriminatory or, instead, as a capacity to be affected by the other's vulnerability (8). In those terms, Rose represents what I will call "static" vulnerability and potentiality, as she remains a passive subject at all moments in the novel. Sofia, on the other hand, goes through a different process, she is able to acknowledge her limitations and move from there towards a path of self-awareness, agency, and freedom.

The novel is mainly constructed from Sofia's point of view. Written in the first person, Sofia's narrative becomes highly observant, unravelling the story from a very personal perspective. A novel that could firstly fall under the generic category of a female *Bildungsroman*—as it explores a key period in which Sofia gains agency, maturity and her sexual desire awakes—becomes difficult to categorise when the events get entangled with Sofia's anthropological observations and reflections. This results in an experimental narrative that is close to the fictional memoir or a personal diary, as the feeling achieved is that of reading the testimony of a traumatic event (her mother's supposed illness). Each "entry" or section (one may be wary of calling them "chapters") is introduced by a title connected to Sofia's inner world ("boldness," "lame," "matricide," etc.) or the name of the person who is going to be Sofia's object of observation in that section ("Dr. Gómez," "Ingrid the warrior," etc.). This results in a more or less linear narrative that is nonetheless elliptical, highly symbolic, and confusing at times.

Consequently, the text not only shows but also performs the main characters' vulnerability (Ganteau 17). This vulnerability (of both characters and text) is aggravated through the interruption of Sofia's sections with short, uncanny passages from a mysterious narrator who

observes Sofia in her daily activities intensifying the reader's possible discomfort, as those asides can be understood both as "the product of malevolent surveillance or obsessive desire" (Gibson). These "voyeuristic vignettes" (Gray 75) provide, at the same time, a higher level of vulnerability that Sofia does not explicitly show in her sections: "She [Sofia] started to weep. It is anguish. Angst. . . . Let her think no one can see her suffering or how she drags her feet with sadness" (183). As Gray points out, these formal choices deliberately demand an aesthetic consideration while creating a "crossroads of literary narrative and explicitly experimental form" (85).

An example of this combination can be seen in how Sofia decides to introduce the reader into the story: by explaining that her laptop fell to the floor and the screen is now completely broken, even if the computer still works. This passage, as most of the events in the novel, has a symbolic reading. For Sofia, her laptop is her connection with her personal world: "[m]y laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else" (*HM* 1). The screen saver is particularly symbolic; it is an image of the Milky Way,<sup>6</sup> which she immediately associates to her memories of how her mother taught her its name in Greek, to Aristotle, and to the city where her father was born. Her estranged father, Christos, abandoned them in London twelve years before moving to Greece and marrying another woman four years older than Sofia. They have not spoken since he left. In this way, from the opening of the novel, Levy introduces how Sofia's own cosmos is as broken as the one in her computer, as she thinks: "what I am saying is that if it is broken, so am I. . . . All this universe is now shattered" (1).

The reparation of both her computer and her own life depends on her mother. As we soon discover, Sofia's identity has been constructed and shaped around her mother's needs. Her life is a constant uncertainty: "[w]ill I still be here in a month? I don't know. It depends on my sick mother" (*HM* 1). Sofia lacks any autonomy; she has no sense of independence or freedom because every part of her life is controlled by Rose's desires. This can be clearly observed when Sofia is stung by a jellyfish and she has to fill in a form with her personal details to get medical assistance in a beach hut. She has no problem filling in her

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<sup>6</sup> This resonates again with *The Cost of Living*, where Levy explains how she struggled to grieve for her mother's death in a chapter entitled "The Milky Way." See Levy, "The Milky Way," pp. 141–42.

name, her age, or her country of origin—even though these are also problematic issues in the novel—, but when it comes to “occupation” she does not know what to write. She has abandoned her half-written PhD thesis on anthropology and works as a barista in a coffee house in London. She ends up writing “waitress” in the form but, overall, she realises that her occupation is another one: “I don’t so much have an occupation as a preoccupation, which is my mother, Rose” (*HM* 6).

As in Agamben’s example of the architect and the poet (179), Sofia has the existing potentiality of a professional who has been trained to perform a particular task. She is an anthropologist who does not practise as such, but she uses her anthropological abilities to observe everyone and all that happens around her. However, for Sofia, who has a restless mind, this is often not enough, and she feels that she is stuck in life in favour of her mother:

The dream is over for me. It began when I left my lame mother alone to pick the pears from the tree in our East London garden that autumn I packed my bags for university. I won a first-class degree. It continued while I studied for my master’s. It ended when she became ill and I abandoned my Ph.D. The unfinished thesis I wrote for my doctorate still lurks in a digital file behind my shattered screen saver like an unclaimed suicide. Yes, some things are getting bigger (the lack of direction in my life), but not the right things. (*HM* 8)

Sofia and Rose’s relationship is one of extremes, where contradictory feelings abound, as it is clear in a sentence Sofia repeats throughout the novel: “my love for my mother is like an axe, it cuts very deep” (*HM* 99). Her complete dedication to her mother is not built on real affection or love: Sofia was raised without her father’s help, and she feels economically indebted to her mother in the middle of the European financial crisis in which the novel is set. As Levy has explained in several interviews, at that time the language in the media hinged on debt, contagion, and a call to suffer through austerity (Elkin 00:42:19–00:42:50), which is reflected in the novel: “debt is an epidemic raging through Europe, an outbreak that is infectious and needs a vaccine” (*HM* 139). This also translates in constant references in the novel to the lack of money in the family and in the countries involved, particularly Spain, where mountains are full of half-built buildings, and Greece, which is undergoing its grave debt crisis: “Greece is a smaller country than Spain,

but it can't pay its bills" (5). For Greece, like for Sofia, "[t]he dream is over" (5). In her capacity to observe what happens around her, Sofia constantly has the economic crisis present as an anxious pressure in her life. She experiences the social and economic vulnerability that tinged Europe in those years. She takes this to the point of establishing her relationship with her mother as a financial transaction: "She is my creditor and I pay her with my legs" (*HM* 25), or "I felt guilty when things went right for me, as if the things going right were responsible for the things that went wrong for my mother" (117). Social vulnerability and guilt combine in the novel to portray how economic debts can be paid whereas psychological damage or lost time cannot be undone.

Out of guilt, Sofia accomplishes tasks for her mother that aggravate her position as a psychologically vulnerable character. For example, if she goes out, she always tries to make her day sound less exciting than her mother's so that Rose can feel superior: "It was my special skill to make my day smaller so as to make her day bigger" (*HM* 27). Or, for instance, Rose suffers from persistent dehydration, and as a consequence, is always asking for water. Sofia constantly takes water to her, but no matter whether it is cold, warm, boiled, still or sparkling; it is always the wrong kind of water for her mother; "I am not sure what water means any more" (2), Sofia thinks, showing that her mother's constant rejections affect the way she understands the world. Accordingly, Sofia's own sense of self is strongly marked by her mother's attitude and opinions, as Sofia admits: "my mother's words are my mirror" (66). As Bajada asserts, in mother-daughter narratives the mirror serves as a trope of repetition that weakens the distinction between self and other and portrays the daughter's anxiety for not finding an independent "I" ("Mothers" 17).

Regardless of this psychological vulnerability, the novel displays a very clear image of physical vulnerability. Sofia's observations on bodies signal the vulnerability that society imposes upon us. For example, she observes the way the ladies or gentlemen signs on public toilets "tell us who we are" (*HM* 42) failing to leave room for in-between experiences of embodiment, which resonates with Butler's theory of gender performativity and the vulnerability it may provoke (*Undoing Gender* 55). In a more specific way, Sofia's embodiment is an example of a highly exacerbated specific type of vulnerability, as her body seems most of the time a simple extension of her mother's. This idea is very much repeated in the novel: "her head is my head" (*HM* 11), "her arm is my

arm” (17), “my legs are her legs” (14), or “I am her legs” (99, 125). This physical vulnerability aggravates to the point that Sofia, who is used to act as her mother’s walking stick, finds herself limping even when Rose is not around: “[i]t’s as if my body remembers the way I walk with my mother” (26). Her mother’s immobility and somatic pain extend to Sofia’s body, making the mother-daughter boundaries “fluid” and “indistinguishable” (Bajada, *Mapping* 70).

At this point in the novel, Sofia is dispossessed in its negative, narrowest understanding (Ganteau and Onega 8); she is displaced by her socio-economic position, and emotionally and physically submitted to her mother’s powers. Levy portrays this by exploring the boundaries of self-determination within the frames of the mother-daughter connection. Sofia’s quest for freedom is reflected in how she is able to empathise with symbolic characters and images that represent confinement throughout the novel. First, when Sofia and Rose go to Rose’s new doctor for the first time, Sofia cannot avoid looking at a stuffed monkey that Dr. Gómez keeps in a glass box in his office. Through Sofia’s focalisation, the monkey acquires living human qualities, the monkey is “crouching” and looks at its “human brothers and sisters” (*HM* 16). The doctor can see that Sofia would like to free the animal “so he can scamper around the room and read” (22). The monkey cannot go back to life, but Sofia does free another animal later in the novel. Levy parallels again Sofia’s lack of freedom with the story of a dog that a neighbour, Pablo, keeps chained to an iron bar in a roof terrace all day. The dog is a German shepherd that “whines, howls, barks and tries to kill itself” everyday (7). Sofia considers the possibility of freeing it, yet she knows that the dog is not used to living on its own and she is not sure whether it will have the capacity to survive. These doubts prevent her from freeing it because she wonders: “What is worse? To be chained all day with a bowl of water, or to be free and die of thirst?” (37). That question is echoed in Sofia’s own circumstances. She quite literally describes her situation at one point in the novel as being “chained to her sacrifice [her mother’s efforts bringing her up alone], mortified by it” (143). She feels constantly miserable on account of her mother’s attitude towards her, but, at the same time, feels unable to abandon Rose because of her financial support. This internal fight is also represented by an object Sofia and her mother have at home: a copy of a hydria decorated with the image of seven female Greek slaves queuing by a fountain to collect water in a foreign city. The analogy between the slaves and Sofia is clear: apart

from her Greek ancestry, she also lives in a city that is not her own, she repeatedly carries water to her mother, to whom she owes money and, therefore, her freedom. Sofia expresses her feelings toward her mother in these terms: “I have to pay for my freedom by listening to my mother’s words” (62). Sofia lacks something to achieve freedom; going back to Agamben, “to be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is . . . to be capable of one’s own impotentiality, to be in relation to one’s own privation” (183). In other words, Sofia needs to acknowledge her own vulnerability and potential to become agentic and free.

Before this revelatory moment in Sofia’s life takes place, her vulnerability and potential do not pass unnoticed to Dr. Gómez, who also treats Sofia as his patient in his alternative methods to cure Rose. He sees Sofia’s dormant potential and encourages her to find a reason to live, one different from taking care of her mother: “you must free yourself” (*HM* 22), and adds: “it is a matter of having purpose, less apathy” (58). Then he challenges Sofia to steal a fish from the market, to make her feel bolder. Sofia follows his advice, and again, this passage acquires a symbolic meaning because, after committing the small crime, she starts being aware of everything she does not do because she keeps holding herself back from emotions and from having personal encounters with others.

From that moment onwards, she uses her anthropological skills to analyse her own identity and realises that she has “consented to being undermined” (*HM* 101). We can say that Sofia’s “experience of potentiality” (Agamben 178) takes place at this point, and she finally becomes aware of her own lack, her own vulnerability and impotentiality, so that she starts feeling her real potential. The symbols that Levy had placed as parallelisms of Sofia’s lack of freedom are now challenged. For instance, right after stealing the fish, she hears Pablo’s dog barking again, but this time she finally decides to free it. She bursts into Pablo’s property and urges him to free the dog. Even though Pablo is a big man, she manages to frighten him and to make him untie the dog himself. In the middle of the event, Sofia sees her reflection in a real mirror—not her mother’s words—and observes how different and powerful she looks (*HM* 79–80) and for the first time she seems to regain her physical senses: “I could hear everything. The rumbling earthquake of a ship and the spider crabs moving between weeds” (81). Quite

significantly, shortly after, Sofia smashes the faux hydria against the floor, shattering all the Greek slaves into pieces. "It was the start of a bolder life" (83) and it is indeed the beginning of a new phase in Sofia's life.

The second half of the novel is marked by Sofia's attempts to regain control over her own life and identity in multiple ways; we can say that now her vulnerability gives way to other potential conditions (Gilson, "Vulnerability" 310). She tries to reconstruct her shattered universe by exploring the limits of her newly discovered potential agency. For instance, she awakens her sexuality in a gender-free way, having a sexual affair with a Spanish student, Juan, and falling in love with a German woman called Ingrid. These relationships also help her to reconsider the porosity of human bonds and sexuality and what is understood as socially normal or not. She opens herself to others because she understands that she has used her mother as an excuse to avoid making decisions and having personal connections with others (*HM* 111). This is shown for instance in how Sofia decides to stop judging Julieta, Dr. Gómez's daughter, by her appearance and actually meet her, or how she tries to reconcile with the open wounds of her past and the recurrent images of her father's neglect. Then Sofia travels to Athens to see her estranged father and meet his wife, Alexandra, and her baby half-sister, Evangeline. As Ganteau and Onega contend, vulnerability can work as an ethical category that allows for an opening towards otherness. Sofia's attempts to approach the other at that point of the novel suggest that vulnerability has achieved to ethically move her towards alterity. In Athens, Sofia walks around the ruins of the city while she sees the remains of a family that no longer exists. She observes how her father has replaced his old family without remorse and how Sofia is "the only obstacle in his way" to completely forget about it (147). Nevertheless, Sofia is now aware of the feeling of vulnerability her father provokes in her, and how he tries to minimise her potential. At this point, instead of silencing or ignoring her vulnerability, Sofia can embrace it and use it as a positive and defining feature of her character, as a form of resistance (Butler et al. 1). For instance, while they are in Athens, her father introduces her to a friend saying that she is "a waitress, for the time being" (*HM* 146). In contrast to the beginning of the novel when Sofia wrote "waitress" on the form (6), now Sofia considers: "I am other things, too. I have a first-class degree and a master's. I am pulsating with shifting sexualities. I am sex on tanned legs in suede platform sandals. I am urban and educated and

currently godless” (146). Sofia is now aware of many forms of potential available to her, of what makes her different, vulnerable and, therefore, special. Instead of letting others use her weaknesses and desires against her or to decide or speak for her, her vulnerability becomes her biggest form of empowerment and freedom. She is “exposed and agentic at the same time” (Butler, “Rethinking” 24).

However, despite her development, she always ends up going back to her maternal bond, and the harmful relationship it entails for her. This also comes to an end when Sofia has another revelatory moment, embracing her own maternal vulnerability. One day, while she is swimming in the sea, she starts crying and thinks: “[m]y mother had finally succeeded in breaking me” (*HM* 203) and then she sees in the distance her mother walking along the shore on her own. Rose does not know that Sofia has seen her, and Rose never mentions this event at home. In this way, Sofia discovers that her mother has used her supposed illness as a weapon to control her (209). The novel turns out to be about hypochondria, or as Levy refers to it: “a thriller of symptoms” (qtd. in Smith). Using Agamben’s terminology again, Rose, as a hypochondriac, does not lack the faculty to walk—she has always had that capacity—, but she has decided not to do so. Rose embodies what Agamben calls the “potential for darkness,” which he describes as:

[T]he greatness—and also the abyss—of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, *potential for darkness*. To be capable of good and evil is not simply to be capable of doing this or that good or bad action (every particular good or bad action is, in this sense, banal). Radical evil is not this or that bad deed but the potentiality for darkness. (181)

This deliberate decision not to act is the clearest manifestation of Rose’s static vulnerability; a rejection to use and transform one’s own powers or experience potentiality in Agamben’s terms. Whereas Rose’s hypochondria has probably not passed unnoticed to the reader, it can be observed how Sofia—voluntarily or not—had decided to ignore Rose’s signals of her real state: how she can walk without help to get hairpins (*HM* 14) or how she is annoyed by a fly in her feet, even if she claims to have them completely numb (93). Now, angry about Rose’s real condition, Sofia commits a last bold act, which becomes a materialisation of Agamben’s dichotomy of what a subject can or cannot do. She leaves Rose in her wheelchair in the middle of a road when a lorry is

approaching them (210), forcing her to choose whether she can or cannot walk. Quite literally, according to Sofia, “she can but she can’t [walk]” (212). This radical act is also what shows Sofia’s final acquired agency because at the beginning of the novel she would not have dared to confront her mother in that way.

Finally, Rose decides to walk and goes back home to Sofia, this time she avoids lies, commands, or insults. Both now show themselves as they really are. This is subtly portrayed in the novel in a reversal of their dynamics when it is Sofia who asks Rose for a glass of water (*HM* 216). Leaving Rose in the middle of the road is, in the end, the way that Sofia has of pushing Rose out of her static vulnerable position. It is what enables Rose to confess her real source of pain and her feelings towards her daughter. In the last chapter of the novel, vulnerabilities are exposed and embraced, Sofia finally calls Rose “mum” instead of “Rose,” and Rose finally confesses her love for her daughter. Their tense relationship comes to an end, they approach each other ethically, assuming each other’s vulnerabilities and potential, and they finally achieve freedom: Rose from her ghostly symptoms and Sofia from the guilt that chained her to her mother.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite their initial superficial differences, potentiality and vulnerability are concepts that do not radically differ. As we have seen, Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical approach to potentiality offers a valuable lens through which vulnerability can also be studied. A more positive approach to the latter concept proves to accommodate well to the idea of potentiality, showing how within vulnerability other states abound: endurance, ethical connection, agency, sexuality, etc. In that light, the two concepts prove to be complementary and applicable to literary analysis.

Both potentiality and vulnerability are complex concepts, difficult to define independently of other ideas such as the notions of power or faculty. To understand them, we need to reflect on the meaning of the terms themselves and to discern how other similar concepts may contribute to their understanding. In that sense, we have seen how it is useful to subcategorise both notions, for example in the form of specific and general potential or vulnerability. At the same time, this distinction

unfurls new paths of research towards shared or concrete forms of exploitation of vulnerability.

We have also seen how the potential or the vulnerable subject must undergo what Agamben calls “experience of potentiality” (178), a revelatory episode in one’s life that makes the individual aware of the limits of her/his capacities. As we have observed, that revealing event mobilises a static vulnerability and transforms it. This process connects the subject with her/his vulnerability in a positive way, opening the individual towards a path of self-awareness, agency and freedom.

This reorientation of the conceptualisation of vulnerability can be observed more clearly when analysed in contemporary works of British fiction. Here, Deborah Levy’s latest works offer a rich field to explore the potential of vulnerability. Specifically, in *Hot Milk* the experimental form of the novel—elliptical and highly reflective—combines with a plot marked by Sofia’s process of maturity and her complex relationships in the unwelcoming desert of Almería amid a European financial crisis. All this presents a powerful image of vulnerability that is both general in Europe and specific in Sofia’s attachment to her mother’s supposed illness. The analysis of the novel clearly contrasts the consequences of experiencing the potentiality of vulnerability with remaining static. Sofia, who undergoes an internal process and uses her vulnerability as a powerful tool, is able to regain her agency, freedom, and ethical connection with others. On the contrary, Rose decides not to act, becomes immobilised (literally and metaphorically speaking) and does not undergo any change until she is ultimately forced to do so. The novel also promotes a vision of vulnerability as a shared characteristic of today’s societies that we need to consider in any human relationship. It suggests that perhaps we should recognise, foster, and mobilise each other’s vulnerability for its maximum potential.

In the light of this analysis, we could conclude that the capacity, or even, the incapacity of the vulnerable to perform a task must be understood not as a compulsory static condition, but instead, as rich in itself, not necessarily linked to negativity or weakness, but to empowerment and agency. As it has been shown, being in a vulnerable position does not necessarily make the subject a victim, but on the contrary, that position creates an opportunity for transformation; it is an opportunity for self-growth. Those in vulnerable moments are also in potential power, or in other words, they might be reconstructing their own shattered cosmos.

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