

“For the dead cannot shrieve me now”: Gender Violence, Precariousness and the Neo-Victorian Gothic in Katy Darby’s *The Whores’ Asylum* (2012)

“Porque los muertos ya no pueden absolverme”: violencia de género, precariedad y el estilo gótico neo-victoriano en *The Whores’ Asylum* (2012), de Katy Darby

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Received: 09/11/2020. Accepted: 24/06/2021.

How to cite this article: Romero Ruiz, María Isabel. ““For the dead cannot shrieve me now”: Gender Violence, Precariousness and the Neo-Victorian Gothic in Katy Darby’s *The Whores’ Asylum* (2012).” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 42, 2021, pp. 155–77.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.42.2021.155-177>

Abstract: Katy Darby’s neo-Victorian novel *The Whores’ Asylum* (2012) is set in Oxford in the 1880s. The Gothic plays an important role in the process of re-writing the Victorian period as a mirror of our contemporary societies where depravity and lack of humanity co-exist with modernity and civilisation. The protagonists—Stephen, Edward and Diana—are involved in the process of showing sympathy for the lives and deaths of the destitute and the dispossessed. Under the stance of Judith Butler’s theories of mourning and violence, my analysis has a two-fold aim: to discuss issues of the Victorian past such as venereal disease, prostitution and gender violence in the text, and to question to what extent the novel can be an attempt to hear the voices of the victims of sexual exploitation, giving them restoration and agency. However, my conclusion is that the text does not grant the victims of sexual exploitation real voice or agency.

Keywords: prostitution; gender violence; precariousness; neo-Victorian; *The Whore’s Asylum*.

Summary: Introduction. Neo-Victorian Gothic and the Trace. Gender Violence and Sexual Exploitation. Venereal Disease, Precariousness and Restitution. Conclusion.

Resumen: *The Whores’ Asylum* (2012) es una novela neo-victoriana de Katy Darby situada en Oxford en la década de 1880. La tradición de la novela gótica desempeña un papel importante en el proceso de re-escritura del período victoriano como un espejo de nuestras sociedades

contemporáneas donde la depravación y falta de humanidad coexisten con la modernidad y la civilización. Los protagonistas (Stephen, Edward y Diana) están involucrados en el proceso de mostrar empatía hacia las vidas y muertes de los desamparados y desposeídos. Bajo el prisma de las teorías de Judith Butler sobre el luto y la violencia, mi análisis tiene un doble objetivo: discutir cuestiones del pasado victoriano como las enfermedades venéreas, la prostitución y la violencia de género en el texto, y cuestionar hasta qué punto la novela puede ser un intento de escuchar las voces de las víctimas de explotación sexual, proporcionándoles compensación y agencialidad. No obstante, mi conclusión es que el texto no da una agencialidad o una voz real a las víctimas de explotación sexual.

Palabras clave: prostitución; violencia de género; precariedad; neo-victoriano; *The Whore's Asylum*.

Sumario: Introducción. El estilo gótico neo-victoriano y la huella. Violencia de género y explotación sexual. Enfermedad venérea, precariedad y restitución. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

The Whores' Asylum (2012) is Katy Darby's debut novel. It was first published by Penguin Fig Tree. However, it has been later published by Penguin as *The Unpierced Heart* since, according to the author, it is "a less racy title" (Darby, *Katy Darby*). Set in Victorian England in the 1880s, *The Whores' Asylum* deals with the story of its three protagonists, Stephen Chapman, a brilliant medical student; Edward Fraser, a Theology student; and Diana, the woman who runs a refuge for fallen women. Together they form a triangle of desire, friendship and secrets. As a historical novel, it can be classified as neo-Victorian fiction where many aspects connected with literary and cultural issues converge. Yet, at the same time, elements of Gothic and memoir writing can be discerned in the plot in an attempt to analyse delicate aspects of both past and contemporary societies such as venereal disease, gender violence and prostitution. In this context, the ethics of neo-Victorianism as a genre and of the novel as a narrative of the past and its consequences for the present will be questioned.

The purpose of this article is then twofold: on the one hand, to show how Darby makes use of the neo-Victorian Gothic to recover aspects of the Victorian archive. These provide the setting to discuss issues of morality, sexual exploitation and reform so important for the Victorian mind, but also of relevance in our current societies. On the other hand, it is my intention to prove that the novel's commitment to the memoir style represents an attempt at the restoration of justice for those neglected by past and present communities and whose suffering does not deserve any

political consideration. However, the author is not always successful in achieving this aim. In other words, trauma is present in neo-Victorian fiction through memory and memory-writing as in the case of *The Whore's Asylum*. The neo-Victorian genre unearths past traumas to re-write the past and to try to give voice to those silenced by social discourses, like prostitutes suffering from venereal disease or victims of sexual violence. Thus, my contention is that notions of the trace connected with haunting and spectrality become relevant for the analysis of a contemporary scenario that mirrors Victorian times. This refers mainly to the presence of everything Victorian, especially when it comes to historical fiction. Therefore, following Judith Butler's theories of gender, violence and mourning, issues of the Victorian neglected other and contemporary concerns about the deaths and suffering of the victims of sexual exploitation are discussed.

1. NEO-VICTORIAN GOTHIC AND THE TRACE

As Kohlke puts it, “Neo-Victorian” can be defined “as term, as genre, as ‘new’ discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past” (“Speculations” 1). As she argues, the nineteenth century is a forerunner of all or most of our present-day traumas, the majority of which need commemorating or working-through. These include “social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation,” which we can find in the text (“The Neo-Victorian Sexation” 7).

Neo-Victorian fiction has become a genre of historical fiction in its own right as a response to the popular demand for the fictionalisation of the Victorian past (Bowler and Cox 6). Historical fiction can be understood as the most fundamental form of Postmodernism, which allows it to question the very nature of the past and its implications for the present. In historical fiction, there is the need on the part of writer and reader to inhabit history so that they both dive into an artificial construct (fiction) within what is in effect already an artificial construct (history). In this sense, by re-writing history, neo-Victorian writers can touch both upon familiar and unfamiliar, canny and uncanny aspects of the past so as to upset the readers' previous ideas about history. All this process creates discomfort in the reader, thus questioning the past and its role in the present (Heilmann and Llewellyn 139–41). Therefore, we can argue that

to re-write or re-interpret the past, there must be a need to learn about marginalised groups giving voice to them, and this is what neo-Victorian fiction tries to do. At the same time, in neo-Victorianism the distinctions between the Victorians and us are blurred, allowing reader and writer to establish connections with the present.

In the same vein, trauma culture has been one main concern in contemporary criticism since the 1990s. Trauma is the key feature of modernity and present-day subjectivity. Neo-Victorian narratives are, in that sense, fictional re-enactments of historical trauma from a contemporary perspective, hence their double temporal consciousness. Trauma has an immense power as a cultural force of memory, justice, or the demand for specific rights and reparation (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Bearing After-Witness” 1–6). This is the ethics behind *The Whore’s Asylum* with the narration of trauma associated with gender violence and sexual exploitation. Thus, the modern traumatised subject can recognise itself in the many versions of nineteenth-century others that we find in neo-Victorian fiction. In this way, the written text can be an act of bearing after-witness to historical trauma, making readers aware of their vulnerability to traumatising. According to Kohlke and Gutleben, neo-Victorian fiction can give voice to the speechless without having to be objective (“Bearing After-Witness” 12–13). Under this predicament, fallen women and prostitutes of the Victorian past can find a means to be heard through narratives like Darby’s novel, making it possible to establish parallelisms with their situation today. However, my contention is that neo-Victorian narratives are not always successful in doing this.

Similarly, the use of the neo-Victorian Gothic, which becomes evident in this work of fiction, allows for the re-establishing of boundaries based on the psychological and ideological connections between the Victorian past and the neo-Victorian trend. The neo-Victorian Gothic can be defined as a sub-genre associated with postmodern anxiety, excess and hybridity which bring about instability and decline; otherness and precarity become viral for subjectivities to be ethically resilient (Kohlke and Gutleben, “The (Mis)Shapes” 1). In other words, resilience can also be a feature of neo-Victorian fiction as traumatised subjectivities from the past can take action and assert their agency through the written text. In Kohlke and Gutleben’s words, “*neo-Victorianism is by nature quintessentially Gothic*: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, re-

living the period nightmares and traumas” (“The (Mis)Shapes” 4). We find the Gothic in tropes like spectrality and the trace, which are also present in neo-Victorian Gothic. Even the neo-Victorian city becomes Gothic as the stage where villains enact their sexual crimes. In this sense, the novel unburies lurid histories/stories of the past that haunt our presents and carry with them the trauma of gender violence, sexual exploitation and disease, as we shall see.

The importance of the trace becomes an outstanding feature of the genre and particularly of this novel, where the relevance of mysteries, secrets, traumas and most oppressive aspects comes to the fore in the form of memoir, letters or conceptual archives left for future generations as ghosts. Referring to haunting and spectrality, Arias and Pulham define the trace as a neo-Victorian trope which consists in the appearance of the Victorian age in contemporary literature “unlocking occluded secrets, silences and mysteries which return and reappear in a series of spectral/textual traces” (*Haunting and Spectrality* xx). They contend that the Victorian period can be seen as a spectral presence in neo-Victorian literature, which reproduces and mimics Victorian texts in their language, style, and plot, as well as in characters, tropes, and historical events. In the same way, Victorian culture represents a spectral presence in our everyday lives with all kinds of cultural products bringing the Victorian past to life. In Arias and Pulham’s words, “the Victorian age is spectralised and appears as a ghostly apparition in contemporary literature; in returning as a revenant, it opens up multiple possibilities for re-enactment, reimagining and reinterpretation” (*Haunting and Spectrality* xix). For instance, *The Whores’ Asylum* resurrects the Victorian dead by disclosing the gaps and silences of the stories of prostitutes and their role as women who did not comply with the age’s ideals of femininity and respectability. In their more recent articulation of the concept, Arias and Pulham argue that “the notion of the ‘trace’ lends itself to critical intervention into the Victorian period, functioning as an absent presence in contemporary fiction and culture” (“Material Traces” 214). However, they focus this time on cultural artefacts, that is, material traces so that objects become the mediators between past and present (220). An example of this is the presence of letters and memoirs in the story, which become intermediaries between characters through time.

As stated above, Victorian ghosts make their appearance in the present, disturbing our own complaisance in connection with progress and humanity. Similarly, traces are left to unburden the soul and ask for

forgiveness for the sins of yesterday as one of the protagonists, Edward Fraser, expresses in a letter to his son dated 9 December 1914: “For the dead cannot shrive me now; your forgiveness my dear boy, is all I crave. So come home safely, lift this burden of past errors and agonies from my old shoulders, and embrace once more your fond and fallible father” (2). In the same fashion, the female protagonist’s confession, that is Anna Sadler’s memoir, comes into Fraser’s hands to reveal the secrets and misadventures of Diana Pelham, as she is known at a later stage in her life. In his words: “The following document was pressed upon me by its author as one of the last acts of her life, some eighteen years ago. It appears that she had spent the final months of her confinement composing these pages, part confession, part personal memoir, and part letter to her unborn child” (237). From this statement we can allege that the narrative supports the idea that traces bring ghosts from our pasts that haunt our presents. The trauma of a mother, who has been a rescue worker and a fallen woman herself close to her death during childbirth, becomes a testimony of suffering. The reader bears after-witness to trauma together with the narrator himself. Memoir writing is engaged with the notion of a confessional literature of pain and suffering. Memoir archives imply that “as quasi archival texts” they offer themselves “for decoding and analysis. Crucially, their reception and interpretation are systematically delayed in time” and “their outright function as transmittable property, passed on between generations” (Kohlke and Gutleben, “Bearing After-Witness” 26). Letters and memoirs are simultaneously material traces from the past that allow writers and readers to critically engage with the present.

Neo-Victorianism pushes writers and readers as well as critics to focus on the issue of historical recollection. As Kate Mitchell contends, the current role of memory discourse in contemporary critical analysis has provided new ways of examining neo-Victorian fiction as memory texts which encompass “the sheer diversity of modes, motivations and effects of their engagement with the past, particularly to one which moves beyond dismissing affect” (2–4). I agree with Mitchell when she states that “[p]ositioning neo-Victorian novels as acts of memory provides a means to critically evaluate their investment in historical recollection as an act in the present” (4). In this way a variety of stories can be produced as historical fictions that give alternative readings of the past and build connections with contemporaneity.

The presence of memoirs through the text makes it a palimpsest with the superposition of interrelated traumas. And, in this manner, through the testimony of the main protagonists of the story, the reader can disentangle the drama and misery of those for whom “love is a disease; no doubt of it, and one which has proved mortal to many men down the ages—but life too is a disease, taken in the long view” (154). Indeed, venereal disease stands in the novel for both love and its consequences when it comes to moral sin, establishing the traditional relationship between sexual promiscuity and physical punishment so characteristic of the Victorian period. In this sense, venereal disease becomes a trace from the past. It becomes a symbol of all the rottenness and evil from past and current civilisations. In one way or another it is present in the lives and deaths of all the characters that are associated throughout their existences with one of the most dreaded social evils of the Victorian period: prostitution. Prostitution continues to be one of our main contemporary concerns. In particular, Kohlke states that

[t]he twenty/twenty-first century proliferation of sex clubs and prostitution, increases in global sex tourism, sex trade, and sexual slavery, the exponentially rise in sexually transmitted diseases, violent internet and child porn, and paedophilia more generally could be read as an uncanny doubling and intensification of prevalent Victorian social problems, indicating a return of the repressed rather than ‘progress.’ (“The Neo-Victorian Sexation” 2)

Sex crimes are potentially disturbing even today. Most stories contained in the plot are set in an area of Oxford popular for its depravity, maze-like streets and ill-lit taverns known as Jericho, “being notorious as the haunt of drunkards, thieves, beggars, pedlars and the lowest sort of brazen female as ever lifted her petticoats” (33). Today, with backstreets of nineteenth-century terraced housing and many restaurants, Jericho has become a hugely popular location for student and London commuter accommodation (“Jericho Online”). This is the Gothic scenario where the narrative takes place, a poor area where the standards of living were low, and the working-classes co-existed in their fight for survival.

2. GENDER VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Prostitution was known as the Great Social Evil in Victorian England and venereal disease was the most conspicuous consequence of this moral sin. The prostitute was both an “object of fascination and disgust” that “was ingrained in public consciousness as a highly visible symbol of the social dislocation attendant upon the new industrial era” (Walkowitz 32). The “common prostitute” was a working-class woman who had had her first sexual encounter on a non-commercial basis with a man from her own class at about the age of sixteen; she came from a disrupted family background and was in the trade from her late teens to her middle to late-twenties. Many of them were single and had been servants in middle-class households or had had dead-end jobs, entering prostitution for economic reasons (Walkowitz 15–19). Most of them were illiterate, like Sukey, who is 21 and makes clear that “[i]f we don’t work we don’t eat, or, more important for many, drink” (202). Many prostitutes today are dependent on drugs, but in the case of the victims of sex trafficking this is the result of the control exerted over them by mafias.¹ Social commentators of the time like William Logan, Professor J. Miller, Dr. William Tait, and Dr. William Acton viewed intemperance in the working-classes as one of the reasons for women’s prostitution. Both they and their male clients drank in excess and, as a result, violence and crime were associated with the activity (Finnegan 143–45). The presence of the prostitute in the public sphere represented a threat to patriarchy and middle-class values of respectability associated with the notions of purity and dependency attributed to the female sex. Victorian prostitutes were the victims of gender violence, and in particular, of male cruelty, as the text states:

[E]very girl who has spent any significant period on the street can tell perfectly well when a man is only waiting for an excuse to hurt her. They claim that this sixth sense develops early in their business; for without it,

¹ Today, many English and East European prostitutes who are victims of trafficking are drug addicts. They are an easy target for violence, exploitation, and crime. According to one of these sex workers in Manchester, “[t]he key is to stop the drug use and it will stop the girls having to work for drugs.” Another important step could be to decriminalise prostitution and give the women access to housing, sexual, physical, and mental health and other support services (Hymas and Bindel).

no woman who is exposed to all the dangers and hardships of a prostitute’s life can hope to survive long. (267)

Sadly enough, issues of sexual violence and exploitation against women prostitutes have become part of our everyday lives. Current United Kingdom laws regulating sex workers make prostitutes’ lives more vulnerable to violent attacks as they make it illegal for them to feel more secure by sharing premises; similarly, it is very difficult for them to report abuse. It seems that these regulations are not about to change, thus perpetuating this precarious situation as a consequence (Owen). The situation of women victims of sex trafficking is even worse. These women are not in politicians’ agendas or Parliamentary debates as they are individuals whose lives sometimes even seem not to be worth the human condition. According to Butler’s ideas regarding sovereignty and vulnerability, some officials have power over people’s bodies, over life and death, and justify the use of law as a mere instrument at the service of governments and their perpetuation (51–56). We are vulnerable because of political and social conditions, and our bodies imply vulnerability, besides mortality and agency. This is because “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (Butler 26).

In this context, the neo-Victorian liberationist agenda in relation to women’s sexuality and agency is incongruent with this representation of female victimhood which persists in literary and visual productions engaged with the restoration of traumas from the past. In this sense, Gothic feminism comes to the fore as neo-Victorian women writers like Darby take a clearly Gothic stance to the histories of gender and sexuality, thus leading to “feminist interrogation and critique” (Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Female” 221). However, this feminism does not always seem to be able to make amends for a past of violence against women and for their situation of self-abjection that reproduces itself anew in our “civilised” presents. Women suffer a process of “othering” and prostitutes become victims at the hands of their male counterparts, producing fragmented female subjects who cannot exert power to vindicate their own identities. At the same time, Gothic feminism highlights the possibility of women’s resilience through passive aggression, the performance of masochism through helplessness and passivity, or subversive strategies to gain power (Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian

Female” 222–25). Some of the female characters like Diana or Sukey show passive aggression and subversion. This is explained in Chapman’s words: “I thought of the disease swarming in her body, relishing the irony that Kester, who had ruined so many, should be ruined so in his turn—for the pathogen stays in the blood like malaria, and once infected, there is no true cure” (175).

Victorian prostitutes were located in particular areas in towns and cities similar to contemporary red-light districts in Europe, being independent from pimps during the greater part of the nineteenth century. Group solidarity was common among them, although they had their quarrels over territory. Their meeting places were brothels, lodging-houses, music halls—later in the century—, and pubs (Walkowitz 24–29). Thus, in the novel, pubs like the Tolling Bell or The Ox’s Head are places of encounter for prostitutes in Oxford, and areas such as the Plain, Cowley, Iffley and St Clements are frequented by women who ply their trade among the citizens and students of the city. Also, these women are familiar with Mrs. Shimmin, who is the “proprietress of an informal sort of hotel on Wellington Street which provided temporary accommodation—usually measurable by the hour—to the street-girls of Jericho and their clients when the weather was too cold, or the customer too dainty, to conduct the transaction *al fresco*” (177).

Sexuality and desire are culturally and historically constructed and mediated by social processes which are always on the make. Thus, sexual subjectivities project their own passions on the desired “other” which becomes in turn an eroticised object, a fetish at the hands of those in power. As a consequence, and very importantly, “a theory of sexuality built around fetishism spotlights the process of erotic signification that allows us to explore the contingent notion of the erotic as well as the social and economic structures shaping it” (Curtis 108). In my opinion, this explains the presence of aspects such as child prostitution and sexual exploitation in the text, and simultaneously reflects contemporary anxieties about issues like child abuse, pornography, or human trafficking for the purposes of prostitution.² Human beings become non-

² This is the case with the children that arrive as asylum seekers in Europe, especially when they are unaccompanied minors. Some of them are sexually abused and extorted: “Traffickers saddle girls and young women with up to €50,000 (£43,000) in ‘debt’ for the cost of their journeys across the Mediterranean before forcing them into prostitution and hard labour to pay it off. Boys are forced into similar schemes, subjected to child labour and criminal activity including theft and drug dealing by gangs” (Dearden).

subjects and are denied their own humanity because of the way in which sexuality and desire are built by systems of power and ideologies of sovereignty.

In *The Whores' Asylum*, there is a character, Mary Ann, who is a child prostitute. She is an orphan that apparently “had been beaten, abused and whored out by her stepfather since the age of twelve,” and she is described as very simple and backward, which were thought to be the defining features of many of these women in the Victorian period (172). Social concerns such as child prostitution and white slavery became a matter of contention previous to the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 with the raising of the age of consent for children to sixteen. William Thomas Stead's sensationalist articles published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the summer of 1885 provoked social uproar and brought to the fore the existence of a slave trade in young girls. He based his arguments on the innocence of the girls and the depravity of the male villains (Bartley 171–73). This can be seen in the novel in one of the characters, Lord Kester: “Blackmail, then, was not crime enough for him, but he must add the corruption of children to the catalogue of his sins” (259). Child prostitution was another major Victorian concern as many working-class families sold their daughters' virginity, and after their deflowering most of them became prostitutes.

Victorian notions of morality and respectability hid behind them a whole catalogue of abominable pleasures and desires. Sexual practices were varied and included the myth of the harem or the defloration of virgins. The harem allowed men's sexuality to grow with the belief in free love, but at the same time this only happened at the expense of women's sexual freedom (Sigel 41–43). Other popular practices considered as aberrations or pornographic at the time were cross-dressing, cunnilingus, sadomasochism, and flagellation. Birching became a very common sexual practice in the upper classes, but it was also performed in flagellation brothels. One of Darby's narrative strategies is concerned with showing these nineteenth-century abominable practices to reflect on the sexual profligacy of today. We are inheritors of the depraved Victorian past and we still need to restore the human condition to those who belong to the category of the dispossessed.

In this context, the Victorian past also thrived in orgies and the performance of lesbian encounters for a male audience that encouraged the objectification and fetishisation of female bodies and denied agency and subjectivity to women. In this way, they constructed male desire on

the alienation and exploitation of their social counterparts and inferiors. This is echoed in the novel: “it is a well-known peculiarity of many men who use prostitutes that there is nothing they like so much as two pretty girls making free with one another, kissing and touching and so forth” (268). In this sense, describing the abominable and forbidden pleasures and desires of the Victorian past, we can assert our current rationalised position towards sexuality and social progress. However, the neo-Victorian genre tries to show us how the proliferation of all forms of sexual exploitation in the twenty-first century is an indication of our own moral backwardness and repression (Kohlke, “The Neo-Victorian Sexation” 346). That is, ghosts from the past find their reflection in our corrupted presents.

In the narrative, the Wilmot Club of Oxford, under the leadership of Lucius Kester, is an example of this type of gender violence. This club receives its name from the famous rake John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester, and entertains young prostitutes to cater for this decadent circle. In Victorian England, clubs like this proliferated all over the country, like the Cannibal Club, which was under the leadership of Henry Spencer Ashbee. This fraternity of English gentlemen joined to discuss sexual matters and pornography, and Ashbee himself compiled erotic literature under the pseudonym of Pisanus Fraxi (Marcus 34–77). Gatherings like these had a dubious nature, and anonymity was essential to preserve the gentlemen’s identities. Drugs were also quite common in these encounters. In the novel, these activities are described by one of the characters in the following words: “Every man of them was cloaked in black, and masked in the most hideous and fantastical fashion: I saw devils and beasts, dark gods and mythical monsters, but no male human face could I see” (264). It seems that all the participants in the orgy wear masks and according to another character these are “[g]rotesque, impressive, and, for the members of the Club, who would naturally wish to conceal their identities, a practical necessity” (186).

In Victorian times it was a common belief that young men of the upper classes spent their youths committing excesses of all kinds. In the story, Kester, known as Lord Lucky among the Oxford prostitutes, is one of them whose “chief pleasure lay in causing the wretched creatures pain,” he has “a naturally vicious temper” and is “as depraved and heartless a young man as one could wish not to meet” (193). Men like these are allowed to abuse women as their fate and lives have no value for the cultures and societies in which they live. The idea that female

victims have no capacity for aggression and violence against these male abusers is present in a number of situations in the story, therefore denying them the possibility of resilience or retaliation. This shows in part the skepticism of the neo-Victorian female Gothic about the possibility of women’s self-empowerment and agency through subversion against patriarchal violence (Kohlke, “Neo-Victorian Female” 225). As one male character states in relation to the situation of poor women, “[t]he greatest cause of all this suffering is ignorance, followed by neglect; but the next commonest, and the hardest for me to bear, is cruelty: the cruelty of men in particular” (203). Cruelty and violence are part of today’s sex-workers’ lives, who feel vulnerable and unprotected by United Kingdom law: “I understand I am a sex worker for a living, but I deserve the same human rights as everybody else” (Owen).

In this context, Butler’s theories about mourning and violence become indispensable for the interpretation of neo-Victorian texts like this. Her meditations on human vulnerability to others and acknowledgement of shared interdependency runs counter with the violent and totalitarian defence of sovereignty and the suppression of dissent. Women show their interdependence in the story and protect the most vulnerable against male violence and patriarchal power: “Diana quartered the younger girls in the upstairs dormitory, for she considered them more impressionable, and more vulnerable, and that was the room in which she herself used to sleep, the better to keep an eye on them” (180). Butler addresses the concept of the human, a status granted to some and denied to others, and wonders who counts as such and what makes for a life to be grievable. In every society there are individuals who are relegated to the status of non-subjects because of sexual, racial, ethnic or religious discrimination; as a result, the lives and deaths of those who are not worth public mourning become erased from history for the preservation of regimes of governmentality (Butler 19–49). This notion is echoed in *The Whores’ Asylum* when Chapman talks about the fate of prostitutes:

One Jezebel more or less in the streets excites little notice or concern among the general run of humanity, except perhaps for her sisters in the trade, who will squabble over her ‘patch.’ As far as most people are concerned, women of the night come and go as they please; and when the night takes one—well, it was always destined to close over her head in the end, so why not sooner rather than later? Unless there is some sensational

or grotesque circumstance attached to her death or disappearance, no-one laments her absence nor prays for her return. Every day, in every city of what we are pleased to call the civilised world, these feebly flickering souls are snuffed out with as little ceremony as you or I might snuff a candle-flame; and the darkness in which their compatriots move grows a little deeper. (189)

This passage is very telling as to what extent our past and present cultures ignore the suffering of particular groups of individuals whose destinies are not relevant to systems of thought or ideologies of power. And this is also part of the neo-Victorian project, to raise awareness about the incongruence of progress and civilisation in relation to the erasure of subjectivity for those whose humanity is denied due to a process of “othering.” At the same time, it is interesting to notice how the prostitute is represented by the notion of the “Jezebel.” Traditionally, this figure was associated with the black female body as a productive and reproductive body in the slave market, but also with a body that represented deviance and primitiveness in contrast with the white female body (Hobson 12–14). Blackness was associated with exotic sexuality, so the novel identifies Oxford prostitutes with unbridled desire and savagery.

The ethics of neo-Victorianism lies behind Darby’s narrative discourse. Her decisions about how to represent the Victorians in her contemporary fiction and her choice of issues to be re-examined and re-articulated are pivotal. What becomes essential is the association she establishes “between the period written about and the period in which the writing takes place” (Llewellyn 30). What is important here is that her aesthetic decision is concerned with dealing with the topic of prostitution and sexual violence to give an account of the precarious lives women had.

3. VENEREAL DISEASE, PRECARIOUSNESS AND RESTITUTION

Although we usually associate syphilis with a sexually transmitted disease of the past, it is still present in contemporary developed societies, in other words, we can view it as a trace from the past. This has been the case with the spike in the number of syphilitic new-borns in the United States recently, and with the growing number of women who suffer from

the disease.³ Syphilis is also linked to the promiscuity and lack of morals of emerging countries where the illness is perceived as flourishing as a result of the disarray of “uncivilised” peoples. They are vulnerable populations who are often victims of precarious living conditions. However, venereal disease is not given much visibility today, as it is associated with an illness of the past, despite our preoccupation with prevention and early diagnosis and our ethically-oriented culture. Nonetheless, and according to Pietrzak-Franger, “[i]n the nineteenth century, syphilis existed in a strange tension between the visibility provided by its metaphorical use and the materiality of, often hidden, decaying bodies” (25). It was a gender connoted disease: the female prostitute was the pollutant and the male client was the victim, as “the body of the prostitute came to be synonymous with venereal disease. Prostitutes were not mere agents of transmission but somehow inherently diseased, if not the disease itself” (Spongberg 45).

In the nineteenth century, syphilis was associated with “prostitution, adultery, perversity and violence,” and it was most dreaded because it transgressed moral rules and the middle-class norms of “sexual and social conduct” (Showalter, “Syphilis, Sexuality” 90). Because of this, its representation was associated with degradation and physical decay, carrying death as its final result. Darby describes the symptoms of the illness in the following two passages:

It began with high fever and a blotchy, violent rash, followed by a few days of sweating and vomiting, but usually went into remission on or about the third day, only to return, redoubled, a week later in the second, more sinister phase of the illness. (165)

Some it takes quickly and some it eats slow . . . First the blisters, then the terrible itching and the scabs, then the flesh turns brown and soft, like a rotten apple, and the bones hollow out like a dying tree. And at last the madness comes, does it not? (228)

³ Nearly 1000 babies were born in the United States in 2017 with syphilis; pregnant women can transmit the illness to their babies either through the placenta or in childbirth. This is because many pregnant women with syphilis did not have any prenatal treatment. Socio-economic factors can be connected with the situation as many women do not trust or have access to health care or are drug addicts (Rehm).

For Victorians, venereal disease had a visual representation in the prostitutes' bodies as carriers of death and sin and in the profligate men who contaminated innocent women and children (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 190–93). In particular, for respectable married women syphilis was the wages of ignorance, which also appeared in their children. Later in the nineteenth century, it became known that congenital syphilis was hereditary, and its effects were even more devastating as the illness manifested itself in its second stage when the nervous system was being attacked. The death rate of children with syphilis was extraordinarily high at the time, and it was only in 1913 when Salvarsan, the spirochete, and the Wassermann blood test were discovered that the illness could be cured (Showalter, "Syphilis, Sexuality" 94–95).

Most of the characters in the story who have committed some kind of sexual or moral transgression suffer from venereal disease sooner or later. However, the disease was associated with the concept of "the other," having been brought to England by peoples from the distant colonies of the Empire; in consonance with these ideas, in the novel syphilis is "a highly unpleasant tropical ailment carried by the sailors from the Dutch Indies, and spread around whilst on shore leave" (165). Connections between syphilis and aspects such as race, gender and class were established by Victorians so that the blame was put on outsiders. Thus, one character in the novel states: "you and she keep breath in them [prostitutes] who would otherwise die of it—and they live to walk the street again, infecting honest men!" (228). It can be noticed that in the nineteenth century men were seen as innocent while women were the carriers of venereal disease. Syphilis was the Biblical plague of the time as a punishment for "the wages of sin." The material traces of syphilis can be acquiesced in people's bodies. And this connection between past and present in relation to moral crimes associated with prostitution forms part of the neo-Victorian project. This is a point of departure for the restoration of those groups and individuals who have been neglected by history. Here cultural memory contributes to the reparation of these subjects' traumatic pasts.

In this sense, the act of remembering can be painful for the victims as an act of memory associated with pain is carried out opening old wounds. In this frame of thought, LaCapra's concept of hauntology becomes extremely relevant. In his view, many victims of trauma believe that there is something which haunts them as individuals for the rest of their lives (700). Yet memory writing can also be curative. At the same

time past traumas are part not only of individual but also of collective memory. In this respect the aim of trauma narratives is to call into action and to attract the attention of social and political agents so that healing can take place through restoration. For that, it is important that recognition of the damage caused to the victims on the part of the perpetrators takes place, being political commitment on the part of authorities fundamental for the regulation of the situation of the victims.

Nevertheless, the plot tries to allow for reconciliation and resilience, despite the dramatic facts the reader witnesses. Diana Pelham, a fallen woman herself with a traumatic past, establishes a refuge for Oxford prostitutes in Victor Street in the Jericho area. “Our Lady,” as she is known among the destitute women, believes that fallen angels also deserve redemption and restoration in society, and for that she is respected among the destitute. In this way, healing can be obtained through female solidarity. Thus, Mrs. Shimmin, the woman who runs the lodging-house for prostitutes, states: “I don’t mind telling you I’ve a lot of respect for Our Lady. She had the guts to do something nobody else bothered to; and I don’t mean handing out a bob here and a Bible there, I mean really looking after those girls. Looking out for the ones nobody gives a damn about” (195). Indeed, this is a call for action.

Homes for fallen women, known as Magdalene Asylums, were established all over the country for the rescue and reform of prostitutes. Most of them were funded by middle-class voluntary subscription and were run by a Matron, being their aim to indoctrinate women in religious and moral values and to provide them with the training to work in a decent working-class occupation. Fallen women entered asylums on a voluntary basis and stayed there for a period of about two years after a probationary period of two months; most of them were sent there from the lock hospitals that had been created with the passing of the three Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 (Finnegan 164–211; Mahood 75–102). However, these women were victims of a certain death as the novel asserts:

I was conducting a general examination of one of the birds who had recently come to roost . . . The woman I was assessing, a coarse, hardened creature of about thirty called Louisa, who was well-used to the brawls of public houses and common lodging-rooms, did not turn a hair . . . Her skin was greyish-red and her eyes bloodshot with drink. Though she did

not yet know it, and I did not relish the prospect of telling her, she had scant few months of life remaining in her. (196)

The man who conducts this examination in the narrative is Stephen Chapman, a doctor who is specialising at Oxford University in obstetrics and venereology and practices his profession in the Radcliffe Infirmary. He is carrying out an investigation which, he says, “will give me the possibility of saving immeasurably more lives; it would relieve pain and banish ignorance in that part of society where suffering and lack of knowledge are ruinously endemic” (19). In other words, the lives of those people who are not considered human in Butlerian terms might be saved. He works in collaboration with Diana at the refuge in Victor Street “for those fallen women of Oxford who wish to give up their former life of sin and find for themselves some more worthy and useful role in society,” while simultaneously trying to find a cure for venereal complaints (26). Philanthropy was one of the very few occupations in the public sphere where women were allowed to intervene, and the girls were very grateful to Diana. Refuges were established to give women an opportunity for redemption and as such are presented in the novel:

Was not Christ forgiving of the Magdalene? Even you must know that only the most desperate and downtrodden creatures turn to street-walking as a profession: they do not choose to trade in their virtue but—they *must*! There is no shelter for these women; no recourse, no asylum. They live on the streets or rent slum lodgings, and yes, many are unlettered and unskilled, but that is hardly through any fault of their own! (29)

Fallen women deserve protection and restitution as much as any other women. The message in these lines is that they are not responsible for their precarious lives, but victims of the political and social systems. There are some instances of success in the plot, like Sukey, who, suffering herself from venereal disease and having been a hard prostitute, gives up drink and undergoes a remarkable transformation. After that, she devotes her time and energy to the restoration of her Magdalene sisters, making the possibility of redemption for humanity real: “her transformation was quite remarkable; and though she retained her customary irony and levity, this was now directed towards raising the girls’ spirits, and had far more generosity in it than weary malice” (183). However, like Victorian discourses, neo-Victorian discourses deny

prostitutes the possibility of speaking on their own behalf but through the prism of middle-class ideology and characters. This is something that campaigners for the rights of prostitutes claim today: these women are not always allowed to be legitimate spokespersons or self-determining agents (Nally 256). Also, Darby continues representing prostitutes as vilified because of their immoral behaviour. Nonetheless, the story tries to convey for a contemporary audience the possibility of retaliation in the agency of women who can take revenge on men’s violence, despite their representation as victims in neo-Victorian literature. At the same time, this ethical project is at stake since, as other discourses of representation, it devalues or reproduces “the marginalisation of the groups of people they try to represent” (Nally 257).

CONCLUSION

As way of conclusion, it has been demonstrated throughout the text how Darby’s first novel reproduces and appropriates many of the features of the neo-Victorian genre. She does so, not only for its Victorian setting and contentious issues, but also for the questioning of aspects of modernity which reflect the anxieties of a historical time that was characterised by its contradictions. And contradictory are not only Darby’s representations of women as both agents and victims of their immoral behaviour, but also their capacity for healing and restoration. Gothic elements and traces like memoir writing, letters or venereal disease as a bodily material trace similarly contribute to conceptualisations of social problems connected with gender violence that provoke memory frictions and trauma. Following the neo-Victorian project of giving voice to those marginalised by past and present societies, the plot echoes Butler’s theories of mourning and violence when women prostitutes are the sites of discrimination, violence and sexual exploitation, and their humanity is denied. Their suffering and deaths go unnoticed and do not deserve either public mourning or compensation. In my opinion and in contrast with the Victorian past where prostitutes were represented as the public image of vice and venereal disease, today’s prostitutes have little representation in public or political discourses. Their identities are erased as what is decayed and defiled in our current societies. In the same way, our own desires and their projection on the disempowered make us powerless and our current sexual liberation becomes a fallacy. In other words, we civilised

individuals remain in a position where knowledge and progress are not obtainable, being lost in a morally corrupted stance. However, the text also intends to shed some light on the possibilities of regeneration and reparation for future generations of men and women involved in the rescue and restitution of prostitutes identified as “the other.” In the same fashion, compensation and resilience help to overcome past and present traumas through memory so that victims do not go into oblivion. And this is the ethics behind Darby’s novel: she wants to make the reader reflect upon that short distance between Victorian and today’s prostitution together with its association with disease and precarity. However, these women’s voices cannot really be heard as they do not have a direct role in their own representation in literary and other social and political discourses.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project “Bodies in Transit 2,” ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund.

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