

RE-WRITING THE VICTORIAN PAST IN MICHEL FABER'S *THE CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE*

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Abstract

Contrary to what the modernists predicted in the first half of the twentieth century, the Victorian Age has been kept alive in people's imagination and is now the subject of various kinds of rewriting and re-interpretation. The Crimson Petal and the White, Michel Faber's (2011) acclaimed novel, is considered to be representative for the neo-Victorian surge, as it creates a textual bridge between the Victorian past that we imagine and the twenty-first century present. This paper is meant to analyse particularly those elements used by the author to make the journey back into the nineteenth century relevant to the contemporary reader.

Key words: *Neo-Victorianism, postmodern, Victorian, feminism, masculinity, consumer culture, historicism*

A common issue of the cultural debate in the first half of the twentieth century was the modernists' dislike of the Victorian literalism, which involved a reaction of mockery at the Victorian past by the poet Ezra Pound, who commented in 1918: "For most of us, the odour of defunct Victoriana is so unpleasant and the personal benefits to be derived from a study of the period so small that we are content to leave the past where we find it" (qtd. in Mitchell, 2010, p.12). Despite all the manifestations against Victorianism, the Victorian novels and their filmic adaptations kept the Victorian Age alive in people's imagination. Hence, living in the twentieth and twenty-first century means to live under or against the influence of the Victorians.

Contemporary readers enjoy the escape of being entertained by the narrative of the Victorian novel. In the complications and the business of our lives we are drawn to these struggling humans who managed to make heartbreak, war, prison or the dreaded work of housekeeping somehow seem charming. In the last decades, many writers have in some way returned to the days of their Victorian predecessors and for these texts, written after the nineteenth century but evoking the Victorian past, different possible names have been proposed, such as: historiographic metafiction, historical fiction, Victoriana, Victoriographies, retro-Victorianism, anti-Victorianism, post-Victorianism, pseudo-Victorianism and , the more recent, neo-Victorianism.

Although it has not been clearly defined yet and it is still giving rise to controversy, the neo-Victorian surge has gained serious popularity among common readers and scholars alike. Since 2007, when the term was first coined, critics like Andrea Kirchknopf, Ann Heilmann, Mark Llewellyn, Dana Shiller, Kate Mitchell, Marie-Louise Kohlke and Cora Kaplan have been trying to set clear definitions to what neo-Victorian should mean. In her article '(Re)workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts', published in the first issue of *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* Andrea Kirchknopf (2008) points out the main characteristics of neo-Victorian fiction. According to her, neo-Victorianism is a postmodern phenomenon, and neo-Victorian novels don't just stick to the average length and structure of the Victorian novel, but also imitate the main genres of the nineteenth century, such as the realist, social, industrial and the sensation novels, "creatively intermingled with conventions of the (auto)biographical and (pseudo)historical novels"(2008, p. 54). This results in a mixture of hybrid genres, often using all ranges of parody and pastiche that are "so characteristic of postmodern novelistic discourse"(2008, p. 54). The plot of these new "large, loose, baggy monsters" as Henry James (qtd. in Michael, 2010, p. 2) called them, deals with the nineteenth century, or alternates between the nineteenth and the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

In his essay on literary evolution, Jurij Tynjanov (1971) makes the distinction between the notions of *evolution* and *modification* of a literary text. He argues that while *evolution* is the way in which a

sequence of texts changes under the influence of previously written texts, and the way in which successive texts parody or alter what was in a previous text, *modification* can be defined as the influence on texts from the outside, by other sorts of historical factors which may lead to textual change. On this line of thought, and considering the influence that the Victorians continued to have throughout the twentieth century, the rewriting of what the nineteenth-century past left in our imagination is as much a subject of controversy as its popularity is growing.

What sets neo-Victorian fiction apart from other texts written after 1901 but having a Victorian setting is the self-conscious engagement with the “act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2010, p.4). The purpose of using the cover provided by the Victorian setting is to discuss some of the contemporary anxieties rooted in the nineteenth century and explore non-Victorian themes like sexuality, conflicting masculinity, material culture, bad parenting, using postmodern narrative techniques and focusing on “underclasses and underworlds, on sex and socialism” (Cartmell, 2012, p.277) ¹.

Michel Faber’s (2011) bestselling novel, *The Crimson Petal and The White*, was first published in 2002 and it is one of the most relevant examples of this literary practice characteristic of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. As a neo-Victorian novel, *The Crimson Petal and The White* is set in mid-Victorian London, a time when industrialization was at its peak. The nine hundred pages of the novel present the reader with the story of a highly educated nineteen-year-old prostitute named Sugar and William Rackham, a middle class, married industrialist. The novel also hosts a multitude of subplots, among them the tragic life story of Caroline, Sugar’s prostitute friend, the unfulfilled love story between Mrs. Fox, a pragmatic widow and charity worker, and the pious Henry Rackham, Agnes’s sad childhood story and Sophie’s situation as a neglected, unwanted female child.

In their study, Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann (2010) point to the beginning of Faber’s novel to suggest that this challenges the reader’s expectations, “understanding of perspective, chronology and the idea of what the neo-Victorian novel is about”(p.14) from its very first lines. Readers of traditional Victorian texts expect a comfortable journey into the life world of the novel, with the first pages dedicated to learning the surroundings and meeting the main character(s). In a typically postmodern manner, Faber creates the contemporary counterpart of the ‘Victorian’ third person omniscient narrator and increases his omniscience in order to take the reader as far away as possible from this comfort zone into the supposedly ‘real’ and unfamiliar nineteenth-century London:

“Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know it well, but these stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.” (Faber, 2011, p.3)

This opening relies on the reader’s familiarity with the Victorian novels and emphasises the artificiality of the text and the alienation the reader should feel in being introduced to a time and place s/he doesn’t really know and only imagines. He or she is invited to get involved in the narrative, as if to experience the life world of the novel first hand, not only through the perspective of an omniscient narrator. In this case, the narrator takes a metaphorical step back and offers the much needed guidance and advice. The text doesn’t seem to be there to tell the reader something about its author or the characters, it is instead like an author or a character, in many ways alive.

The refrain of “watch your step”(Faber, 2011, p.3), which can be interpreted not only as guidance but also as a warning or even a threat, becomes central to the text. Faber’s narrator can be interpreted as the text speaking with its own voice, a disembodied entity who wants to serve as a guide for the un-experienced reader, one of the prostitutes from the novel who knows the dangers of London’s

¹ See Deborah Cartmell, *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, pp. 74-86, for a detailed analysis of the relationship between neo-Victorian novels, their screen adaptations and the screen adaptations of ‘traditional’ Victorian novels.

underworlds and is willing to offer protection, or a complicated combination between all three. No matter the interpretation given to this authorial voice, pleasure is being promised in exchange for time, interest and attention, and thus, its relationship with the reader is a commercial one. Faber seems to be well aware of the fact that, just as the classical Victorian novels, a book may be incontestably good; but if it doesn't please the audience it will not enter historical circulation. In other words, the text is meant to express desire.

Having acknowledged that the text is an artificial construct and that the reader is also a customer whose expectations must be anticipated, the narrator uses marketing devices to lure him/her in: "You have come this far, why not go just a little farther? Patience is a virtue, and it will be amply rewarded" (Faber, 2011, p.5). At the beginning of the novel, the authorial voice serves as a link between the contemporary world and that of the nineteenth century and its access to present-day science and technology is used in the frequent interventions to answer whatever questions the reader might have. This places the reader in a privileged position as he/she knows details about the characters that they could never know or understand.

The most relevant example is Agnes's mental disease. In Victorian times the medical establishment considered different causes for female madness, such as hysteria or questionable morality. Modern medical knowledge makes it highly unlikely for a contemporary reader to accept such diagnosis. Thus, the narrator intrudes to announce that Agnes has a brain tumour: "In Agnes's head, inside her skull, an inch or two behind her left eye, nestles a tumour the size of a quail's egg. She has no inkling it's there. [...] No one will ever find it." (Faber, 2011, p.146). It is known today that the presence of this tumour could explain much of Agnes's behaviour and not just the complex emotional, social and religious elements that Faber also presents in the novel. A better understanding of human psychology enables the reader to empathise with Agnes's traumatized childhood. Her first experience of menstruation occurred short after her mother died due to heavy blood loss. Therefore, growing up an orphan, with no one to educate her on reproduction, with a fear of demons and of bleeding, bind together in her state of forced innocence.

The opening of the novel also announces that the world the reader is about to get kinetically involved in is poor, violent and decadent, a place "where even cats are thin and hallow-eyed for want of meat" (Faber, 2011, p.4). As the narrative progresses, the narrator intervenes less, leaving the reader on the right track to finding his or her own answers for the possible questions arising from the text.

Another important narrative technique used by Faber in his neo-Victorian novel is *intertextuality*. Faber doesn't strive to separate himself from his Victorian precursors and he doesn't take an adversary stance toward previous literary models. Instead, he uses the fact that his readers already know what a Victorian text is like and that they have already interpreted it, in appropriating the Victorians in order to serve his purpose which is to entertain and educate. The novel's title is drawn from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1847 poem, "The Princess: A Medley": "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white". The title and the extract from J.H. Gray's 1880 poem "The Girls that are Wanted" are supposed to announce the doubled relationship between Agnes, William Rackham's wife and Sugar, his paid exclusive mistress, which is rewriting the relationship between Charlotte Brontë's (2007) *Jane Eyre* and Bertha. In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Crimson Petal and The White*, a Victorian middle-class master falls in love with a woman in his service, but he also has a mad wife hidden upstairs. Being re-imagined in neo-Victorian terms, the doubled relationship between Sugar and Agnes becomes more complicated than that between Jane and Bertha.

In their book, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) were the first to argue that Bertha is Jane's dark double. According to their research, Rochester's first wife is acting out Jane's repressed anger and revenge against the Victorian patriarchal system that forces women to be either angels or monsters: "Bertha [...] is Jane's truest and darkest double. She is the angry aspect of the orphaned child, the ferocious secret self that Jane has been trying to repress" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 360).

Agnes is, at first glance, the embodiment of the Victorian female perfection: slim, blonde, with big, blue eyes, fragile and extremely naive. Her exaggerated chastity and religious fanaticism turn her first sexual experience with her husband into a trauma that she never recovers from and contributes to

denying the existence of her daughter. This way Agnes becomes a monster and a madwoman, outside the Victorian cults of motherhood and domesticity. Sugar, on the other hand, can match William Rackham on an intellectual level, but she will never be accepted by men for respectable purposes because she is a prostitute and 'damaged goods'.

As Faber enjoys greater freedom of expression, he re-interprets Jane into a more sexualized version and makes Sugar, the prostitute with a heart of gold, a monstrous angel while Agnes, his madwoman, is an ideal of Victorian purity but an angelic monster at the same time. Thus, Faber blurs the lines between the two female doubles to make it easier for all women to understand and identify with the characters as victims of patriarchy. As both women are depicted as mad; Sugar in part for her sexuality, masculine intellect and the 'unladylike' taste for business and Agnes for her lack of maternal instinct, failure to fulfil her duties as manager of the household and for voicing her rage against her husband, the text seems to suggest that any woman who refuses to act her part in a patriarchal society will be cast out, deemed insane or monstrous. Now that the readers have been given physiological reasons for Agnes's insanity, the general diagnosis of "uterine disease" given by doctor Curlew and his abusive behaviour towards his patient turn Agnes into a greater victim.

The doctor William Rackham employs not necessarily for the sake of his wife, but for the sake of his reputation, is convinced that Agnes's illness can only be treated, or better yet contained, in an asylum. Although during her fits she speaks truths that her husband doesn't want to hear: "'You don't believe in anything, do you? she says in a low, ugly voice he's never heard from her before.[...] You believe in nothing, nothing except William Rackham.' [...] 'What a fraud you are, what a fool.' " (Faber, 2011, p.290), William is not willing yet to bear the social stigma of having his wife committed in an institution. Only when he becomes convinced that Agnes is beyond control and, as she refuses to play the part of the Victorian lady of the house, she will bring more damage to his reputation locked inside his house than in a mental institution, he drugs her senseless and condemns her to be sent away.

Gilbert and Gubar (2000) argue that the most important relationship in *Jane Eyre* is that between Jane and Bertha rather than the relationship each of them has with Rochester. Although many critics consider this statement rather debatable, the relationships between the female characters of the Rackham house, Sugar, Agnes and Agnes's daughter Sophie, are much more important than their relationships with William Rackham, no matter how much they depend on him socially.

Agnes's relationship with Sugar is an imaginary one. She never really knows Sugar is a prostitute, much less that she is William's mistress and, later, Sophie's governess. She only catches glimpses of Sugar while she spies on William Rackham's household, and imagines she was finally sent a supernatural guardian angel. Sugar becomes this way vital in confirming her fantasies of being delivered to the Convent of Health, where she believes she will be safe and cared for in the absence of men. Sugar interacts with Agnes on very few occasions and always by accident. The actual encounter between the two is when Sugar rescues Agnes from an attempted robbery proves to Sugar that the woman who had everything that she could dream of is nothing but a weak, powerless victim of men.

Sugar, on the other hand, gets to know Agnes, although indirectly, from reading her hidden diaries. At first, Sugar doesn't necessarily want to help Agnes, but has to in order to protect her identity. For her own purposes and out of curiosity, Sugar wants to find the nature of Agnes's madness and to discover the key to her marriage to William and denial of her own child. This is as close as someone in Sugar's position can get to the apparent ideal of Victorian womanhood. To her disappointment, the diaries reveal Agnes's self-centeredness and inclination towards trivialities. Sugar also realizes how helpless Agnes is as she "has been groomed to do nothing especially well except appear in public looking beautiful" (Faber, 2011, p.158) and, thus, signify William's status. Her conclusions about Agnes coupled with William's cruel behaviour towards the end of the novel lead to Sugar's determination to do whatever it takes to keep Agnes safe, even if that meant risking her own safety. Sugar's final revenge leaves William emasculated and physically disabled and serves a similar purpose to Bertha's destruction of Thornfield Hall. Although at some point Sugar appeared to be interested in taking Agnes's place as wife for William and mother for Sophie, at the end of the novel she chooses to escape from the imprisoning Rackham house and takes William's wife and daughter with her, removing, thus, the markers of his masculinity. The resemblance in characters and themes between

The Crimson Petal and The White and *Jane Eyre* encourages the reader towards a feminist reading of Faber's novel.

Another major source of inspiration for Faber's novel – and according to Professor Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's (2006) rules, for all neo-Victorian novels- is Charles Dickens's fiction. Faber's London resembles in many ways the slums described by Dickens: dark, violent, poor and full of pick-pockets. In a slightly different manner, Faber deals with the "the theme of the poor, the lonely and the outcast" (Ciugureanu, 2008, p.57) which made Dickens so popular and much like Dickens, explores the social and moral aspects of society through his orphaned, traumatized protagonists. Characters like Mrs. Castaway, Sugar's mother and madam and that of Captain Leek, Caroline's toll collector are inspired from Dickens's characters: "Colonel Leek is [...] a pot-bellied stove of a man [...] stoking up on gossip, and puffing out smoke through a stunted pipe" (Faber, 2011, p. 18).

Also, bad parenting is one of the most important subplots in his novel. Agnes, Sugar, William, Henry and Mrs. Fox are all orphaned of at least one parent and suffering the repercussions of that. Agnes lost both natural parents and is brought up by a step father who considers her a duty and offers no affection in return. Sugar never gets the chance to meet her father and lacks the protection and social standing that a father might provide. William and Henry also grow up without a loving mother and are sentimentally crippled as their mother abandoned them for the affections of another man. Finally, the pragmatic, independent Mrs. Fox has to manage with a cold-blooded father as her mother passed away. All the characters that are parents end up traumatizing their children because of their inability to deal with their own childhood traumas or/and as a result of the social pressure they feel in raising their offspring.

One of the main characteristics of neo-Victorian fiction is that it allows the marginalized to tell their story, it humanizes the poor and decadent in order to make it harder for the reader to just dismiss them. Faber grants every character of his novel, even the minor ones, with a life story and the opportunity to tell it. In addition, he openly criticises the way in which popular Victorian novels present the under classes. For instance, when William Rackham's brother, Henry, decides to establish direct contact with the people Mrs. Fox is helping, "a grizzled man of indeterminate age, who has been watching Henry's progress for some time, rises up from a smoky subterranean stairwell like Lazarus from the grave" (Faber, 2011, p.317), and asks him whether he is a parson among the poor or maybe one of those fellows who "writes books about poor men that poor men can't read" (Faber, 2011, p.318).

Similarly, when Sugar becomes William's exclusive mistress and moves from the slums of St. Giles into a better neighbourhood, she becomes able to blend in higher societies and observe their behaviour. This is how she realizes that "the downtrodden may yearn to be heard, but if a voice from a more privileged sphere speaks on their behalf, they'll roll their eyes and jeer at the voice's accent" (Faber, 2011, p.411). Thus, it is made clear that in spite of several Victorian novelists' efforts, especially Dickens's, to portray the lower classes as realistically as possible, the marginalized and the outcasts never got the chance to tell their own stories. The derisive studies written by William Rackham's college friends serve as a comic relief and also illustrate the statistics of the time. The first one is named "The Efficacy of Prayer" and claims to be a research that shows how God is not a reliable source of help in people's everyday life and didn't appeal too much to the public as "nobody bought [it] except the miserable old nincompoops we quoted in it" (Faber, 2011, p.756). The second, named "The War with the Great Social Evil-who's winning" mocks at the efforts to combat prostitution. Both are relevant examples for the existing gap between the act of writing about the poor and the poor themselves.

The novel *The Crimson Petal and The White* indulges in several metatextual references to authors like Shakespeare, Balzac, Mary Wollstonecraft, Victor Hugo, Wilkie Collins, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Charles Dickens, who is mentioned both as a writer and as a person. For example, the three prostitutes who offer William Rackham temporary company the night he meets Sugar for the first time pride themselves with knowing not Dickens's work, but the author himself: "I know a thing or two about literature. I've 'ad all the great names. I've 'ad Charles Dickens." (Faber, 2011, p.98) Also, when William's father arrives at the Christmas family celebration, he is mockingly described as "Charles Dickens bellowing from a rostrum" (Faber, 2011, p.621).

Although the novel focuses on its female characters, Faber complicates the feminist approach with the theme of masculinity. Women in Michel Faber's novel are, one way or the other, subordinate to men and victims of the Victorian patriarchal system. Their existence depends on their fathers, husband or male clients who can't seem to meet their expectations. Since the women's liberation movement demanded the reconsideration of literary texts, and especially those written by female authors in the nineteenth century, considering the newly emerged feminist perspectives. But the feminist doctrine fails to express the complexity of the relationship the personal and the professional worlds as they actually were and the rich diversity of the lives that men and women led in and outside the home.

Besides the neo-Victorian, feminist rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's (2007) novel, Faber considers the theories related to marriage, discrimination, sexuality, consumerist and religious views on women, the female body and women's writing. He creates female characters outside the Victorian representation of either "madonnas" or "magdalens", angels or monsters. Instead, Agnes is the embodiment of the Victorian ideal: chaste, of good origins, with a proper feminine education, and angelic looks and, at the same time, selfish, shallow and trivial. She is an angelic monster, neither good nor bad, simply human. The same goes for Sugar, the monstrous angel, sexually aggressive, smart and independent, a monster by Victorian norms, but the only one who risks her own well-being to save others. A characteristically postmodern theme to be discussed in the novel is that of masculinity.

Readers are used to the complex female characters and the flat male characters from the popular Victorian novel. The male characters in Victorian novels are confined in their patriarchal roles and they are not capable to express any great emotion. However, the idealized roles of the "angel in the house" and the powerful master in the house were often simply that- an ideal rather than a reality. John Tosh (1999) argues in his study that, in the nineteenth century, the ideas about manliness and masculinity were created- and even dictated- by the personal development literature of the time, the same way the same kind of contemporary literature tries to shape personal identities into better versions of the self in order to fit modern societal demands. Discussing men's involvement in the public and private spheres of Victorian life he states that: "Never before or since the Victorians has domesticity been held to be so central to masculinity. For most of the nineteenth century home was widely held to be a man's place, not only in the sense of being his possession or fiefdom, but also as the place where his deepest needs were met." (Tosh, 1999, p. 195)

None of Faber's male characters has an accomplished family life and they all suffer from various forms of lack and poverty. Alluding to the contemporary crisis in masculinity, Faber creates male characters who are victims of the gender role they have to perform, shallow and pathetic villains that the reader cannot hate or consider bad. Faber suggests that the Victorian age saw the beginning of the crisis in masculinity, as theorists in the nineteenth century failed to offer a coherent pattern for masculine behaviour.

William Rackham, the novel's male protagonist, oscillates between two extremes: his desire to ascend the social ladder and build his identity as a respectable middle-class Victorian patriarch and the aspiration to become a writer and a socialist. At home, he is deeply unhappy with his marriage and ignores his responsibilities as a father and a husband. However, he is forced to reconstruct himself as a captain of industry because his father will cut him off if he continues to refuse to manage the family's perfume business. He is first drawn to the weird-looking prostitute named Sugar because she allows him to dominate her at the moment when he feels he has lost control over his life. Sugar is saved from her mother's brothel and bought to be William's exclusive mistress and in return, she helps him feel better about himself and assert himself professionally. As his business takes off, the only thing missing is a happy domestic life that can reinforce his masculine self-respect: "Keeping order in the household was a key attribute of patriarchal power, and the man who failed to do so was the butt of merciless lampooning" (Tosh, 1999, p.25). After Agnes's disappearance he seeks to recreate and forge a family photograph in an attempt to fix the family life he never had.

Outside his house, Sugar was perfect for him and he genuinely seemed happy while with her. The house he bought for her was the perfect refuge, a place where he could feel and behave anyway he wanted, as there were no social norms that regulated the relationship between a man and a prostitute. Once Sugar moved into his house to be Sophie's governess, their relationship changed dramatically

and when Sugar announced her pregnancy with his bastard child, he felt that he had no choice but to dispose of her. This dramatic change of heart on Rackham's part is clearly the result of societal pressure. Now, as a widower, he has a second chance at domesticity and Sugar, immoral and pregnant, is of no use to him anymore. William's fate is sealed when he decides to dismiss Sugar. At the end of the novel, Sugar finally gets her long-awaited revenge by removing all the markers of William's carefully constructed masculinity as a patriarch.

In a similar manner, Henry, William Rackham's brother, tries to define his identity pursuing a monastic ideal. He constantly bears in mind what he is supposed to do, feel and even think, as he learnt from his religious readings. When his time spent with his friend, Mrs. Fox, gives rise to love and desire, he misinterprets his thoughts as signs of weakness and sinfulness, and tries to suppress them. Henry could not see beyond his scope to serve God and he naively rejects any possibility of marrying Mrs. Fox. He goes against his feelings and the natural act of taking what he so much desired and, thus, ends up dying in a metaphorical fire during a sexual fantasy with Emmeline Fox.

Faber's construction of masculinities is meant to educate against incoherent norms and recommendations found in conduct books that are impossible to implement. The novel reinforces the idea that domesticity is more than a duty or a set of obligations; it is a state of mind. Striving to meet cultural expectations by ignoring their inner contradictions, leaves William and Henry victims with no chance at happiness.²

As a neo-Victorian novel, set to trace contemporary issues that have their origins in the nineteenth century, *The Crimson Petal* also deals with themes like consumer culture and commodification. In her essay "Women and the Department Store", Erika Rappaport² (2007) provides a detailed study of women's shopping habits in the Victorian age and their impact on British economy and the notion of female emancipation. She argues that towards the end of the century, during a time of powerful contradictions, women moved from the confinement of the private sphere into the public through their shopping habits.

In the emerging consumerist culture, where consumption becomes as important as the production of goods, people, and especially women become commodities. The prostitutes in *The Crimson Petal* and *The White* sell their bodies for a limited period of time to men who seek sexual pleasure and, in their turn, spend the profits thus obtained on whatever goods available on the market may provide the same temporary pleasure. Faber expresses his disapproval of this practice by describing the marketing devices used by the shop-keepers to sell their merchandise as indecent and aggressive as those of prostitutes: "An embarrassment of produce becomes available to Caroline [...]; it's offered up to her in an indecent manner by the shop-keepers who [...] now busy themselves selecting the most tempting wares to display". (Faber, 2011, p.22) Caroline's only satisfaction is to spend all her income on fancy food and drink or things that are no longer available only to the rich and privileged. Consumer culture makes it possible for Sugar and others like her to buy expensive clothes and walk in the park or attend public shows side-by-side with people of all classes.

Caroline's tragic life story is one of the multiple subplots in the novel. She is shown while performing a self-induced abortion and the reader is granted with a voyeuristic, paparazzi-like perspective from the beginning. These first images are very brutal but, together with various other intrusions into the characters' privacy, they serve as a guarantee for the narrator's honesty in presenting 'real' Victorians. Thus, the reader becomes witness to everything happening in the novel, not just the thoughts and situations normally described in Victorian texts.

Caroline is Sugar's best friend but unlike Sugar, she once led the life of an honest, married woman. When her husband died, she was left with no choice but to take her son and move to London to find a job. Her professional story can be that of any small manufacturer in an industrialized, globalized world. She started by making a good living from making clothes, but when she began working for a clothing factory, her work got harder and the money insufficient. Poverty left her powerless when her son got sick as she couldn't afford proper medical care to save his life. Although she accepts to be

² Erika Rappaport focuses on the birth of the department store and its multiple consequences.

sexually abused by his doctor, Caroline's son dies, leaving her lost and undignified. Considering her situation, she sees no other choice but to earn a living from selling her body rather than going back to slaving in a factory.

Although at some point Caroline is shown performing a disgusting task, her physical description focuses on her feminine beauty: "her hair so thick and dark that even the crudest men have been known to stroke it in admiration" (Faber, 2011, pp.7-8). On the other hand, Sugar's physical beauty is rather unconventional: "stick-thin, flat-chested and bony like a consumptive young man, with hands almost too big for women's gloves", her "hair gold-orange", her skin dry and "luminously pale" and "naked eyes" (Faber, 2011, p.26). Caroline considers her friend competition on the market so she assesses Sugar's looks as a business competitor: Sugar's "lips, the older woman notes, are pale and dry and flaky, but weren't they always?...Why men should tolerate such defects in Sugar was, and still is, mysterious to Caroline; indeed there's not a single physical attribute of which she could honestly say that Sugar's is better than hers" (Faber, 2011, p.27).

By this, Faber suggests that Caroline's standard of beauty is based on, and shaped by, her experience in men. In a world where industrialization created the "benign monster called manufacture" (Faber, 2011, p.22) and mass production of goods is "a never-ending stream of objects [emerging] from an orifice hidden behind the veils of smoke" (Faber, 2011, p.22), women's sexuality is commodified. In the prostitutes' appraisal of one another, Sugar observes that Caroline's classic beauty is used to sell commonplace commodities: "Any print shop is stocked to the rafters with 'Carolines' and her face is everywhere, from soap-wrappers to the stone carvings on public buildings –isn't that the proof that Caroline is close to the ideal?" (Faber, 2011, p.39).

The novel ends abruptly without satisfying the readers' need for closure and, once more, subverting their expectations:

"An abrupt parting, I know, but, that's the way it always is, isn't it? You imagine you can make it last forever, then suddenly it's over. I'm glad you chose me, even so; I hope I satisfied all your desires, or at least showed you a good time. How very long we've been together, and how very much we've lived through, and still I don't even know your name!" (Faber, 2011, p.835).

In writing his novel, Faber proves extensive knowledge of the nineteenth-century novel and the researched history of the Victorian Age. He creates characters and settings that imitate those that made the Victorians so famous, but adapts them so that they are relevant to modern-day realities. With the use of postmodern narrative strategies, critical tradition and focussing on marginalized groups, Faber manages to link the Victorian past with the twenty-first-century present and discusses social, economical and political problems that the two eras have in common.

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