

*BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: NEO-VICTORIAN ADAPTATIONS OF WILKIE  
COLLINS'S THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

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*Abstract: Sensationalism as a literary genre made its first significant impact in 1859 with the serialisation in weekly installments of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. Based on themes like insanity, identity, crime, female transgression and imposture, Collins's novel has been kept alive in people's imagination and is now the subject of various kinds of rewriting and re-interpretation. Among the many emerging adaptations, Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), John Harwood's *The Asylum* (2013) and James Wilson's *The Dark Clue* (2001) are considered to be representative for the neo-Victorian surge, as they create 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 three authors in their neo-Victorian adaptations in order to make the journey back into the nineteenth century relevant to the contemporary reader.*

*Keywords: adaptation, neo-Victorian, identity, trauma, sensation novel*

The Victorians' attitude towards women demonstrated that, regardless of social class, marriage offered them the same legal status as children or slaves throughout most of the nineteenth century. Caroline Norton, an educated woman who was thrown out in the streets and deprived of her children and her inheritance by an abusive husband, campaigned, successfully, for the introduction of the Divorce Bill in 1855. Although this Bill was meant to secure a woman's right to resume possession of her own property or that of her future earnings if obliged to leave her husband, to sue and be sued and to enter contracts in her own right, it wasn't until the Married Women's Property Act in 1882 that married women were granted the full right to separate ownership of property from their husbands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See A.N. Wilson *The Victorians*. London: Arrow Books, 2003, pp.345-426

During a period of economic hardship and social controversies, Wilkie Collins publishes his most celebrated novel, *The Woman in White* in which he discusses the legal rights of married women in the Victorian society.

The novel opens with the image of Anne Catherick, the illegitimate child of a servant and a gentleman and one of the traumatised women in the novel. From a combination of journal entries, personal letters and legal documents the reader gradually learns the stories of Laura, wrongfully placed in an asylum by her abusive husband; Sir Percival Glyde, the villain who is in the habit of locking women in madhouses for personal benefits; Walter Hartright, the hero who solves the mystery and saves the day; Marian, the intelligent and poor half-sister who helps Walter and Laura, and Count Fosco, the “Napoleon of Crime”.<sup>2</sup> According to critics, Collins’s novel has everything: “spine-tingling set-pieces, lunatic asylums, mysterious doubles, a titled woman beset by aristocratic villains [...], a series of unreliable narrators, all of whom read the identity of the „woman in white“ differently” (Purchase 190), all of which contribute to the mysterious and sensational atmosphere that Wilkie Collins wanted to create.

Despite the modernists’ dislike of the Victorian literalism in the first half of the twentieth century, the Victorian novels and their numerous adaptations kept the Victorian Age alive in people’s imagination. 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, the more recent of which is neo-Victorianism.

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 adapting and appropriating the main literary genres of the nineteenth century and 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, by using postmodern narrative techniques and focusing on “underclasses and underworlds, on sex and socialism” (Cartmell, 2012, p.277)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, John Sutherland (ed.). 1860. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, cover page.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, *The Woman in White* has become an important inspiration for neo-Victorian authors, screenwriters, musicians and stage producers. Some of the reasons behind the high number of adaptations of Collins's most famous novel are the continuing popularity of the sensation fiction and the fact that the novel's major themes – madness, the loss of identity, the effects of traumatic experiences, the legal and social status of married women still appeal to modern audiences.

James Wilson, Sarah Waters and John Harwood embrace intertextuality and don't strive to separate themselves from their Victorian precursors. Instead, the three authors use the fact that their audiences already know what a Victorian text is like and that they have already interpreted it. In each of the three neo-Victorian novels the authors adapt Collins's text in order to make it relevant for a new audience. Considering the fact that society has changed since the 1860s, the issues presented by Collins might not produce the same effect on modern audiences as they did in the Victoria Era. Thus, neo-Victorian adapters face the serious challenge of creating original texts that are able to enhance their source material and address concerns of contemporary interest.

Wilson's 2001 novel, *The Dark Clue*, is imagined as a sequel of *The Woman in White* maintaining Walter Hartright and Marian Halcombe as protagonists. Their detective work in Collins's novel is a success and its immediate outcome is Laura's freedom, her regained identity and inheritance. In Wilson's novel, Walter and Marian offer their services to a noble woman and their mission is to research the life of J.M.W Turner in order to write the famous painter's biography. Their declared objective is to find out the truth about the mysterious painter's life and clear his reputation.

Although Victorian sensation novels focus on female characters, James Wilson complicates the feminist approach with the characteristically postmodern theme 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 idealised 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 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.

His first conversation with Marian exposes Walter's "dark corner"(37) of his being, his real state of mind. It becomes evident that his marriage with Laura leaves him frustrated, emasculated and unhappy. Although he has "everything that, in the eyes of the world, should make a man happy" (38), his life is empty and with no purpose. Wilson'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, Walter becomes a victim with no chance at genuine happiness.

In *The Woman in White* Walter and Marian are intellectual equals and, although Marian is poor, they were a far better match according to contemporary standards. Instead, Walter chooses conformity and marries the beautiful Laura, an "angel in the house" with a large inheritance. In Wilson's adaptation, Walter is a complex character and has a complicated relationship with Marian which culminates in rape. In their pursuit for Turner's true identity, Walter and Marian are forced to confront their repressed personal traumas. The detective work and the dark aspects of Turner's life create the perfect environment for Walter's repressed feelings and frustrations to emerge. Uncovering Turner's secrets and discovering a world of corruption, prostitution and pornography, a world absent from the Victorian traditional novels, the neo-Victorian representation of Walter Hartright becomes vulnerable and loses control over himself.

In the detailed account of her feelings after the rape, Marion wrote in her diary that she felt "a throb of pleasure", making the question of consent problematic. From the beginning of *The Dark Clue* Marion shows care and deep affection towards her sister's husband and Walter feels "butterflies in his stomach"(38) when she is about to speak to him. In her writing, Marian describes herself as both victim and betrayer and Walter is also a victim and a criminal.

Laura Fairlie never addresses the traumas of the past and whatever effects the imprisonment in a lunatic asylum, the abuses from her first husband and the loss of identity might have had, they are to be silenced and forgotten. Laura is never given the chance to narrate her own version of the story and to express her suffering over the traumatic experiences.

In a similar manner, *The Dark Clue* concludes with the suggestion that the sexual trauma will be repressed rather than confronted. Marian records in her diary the agreement she makes with Walter regarding what has passed between them: "You may talk to me of what

happened between us if you will, but neither you nor I will ever mention it to Laura or to any other living soul, and it will never happen again” (386). In his adaptation of Collins’s novel, James Wilson makes explicit many of the sexual tensions which are only hinted at in the original text.

Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) tells the stories of Sue and Maud as victims of a rigid patriarchal society. In the spirit of a traditional sensation novel, Waters’s multi-layered narrative is written as a series of twists and turns presented gradually in the testimonies of its protagonists. Being re-imagined in neo-Victorian terms, most of the novel’s characters belong to marginalised groups and its main concerns are gender roles, sexuality and identity.

Women in Sara Waters’s novel are, one way or the other, subordinate to men and victims of the Victorian patriarchal system. Their existence depends on other male characters who can’t seem to meet their expectations. Maud is initially silenced by her manipulative uncle who treats her as an object in his possession, and then by Gentleman who fails to offer her the freedom he had promised when they eloped. On Lant Street, she finds herself trapped between an abusive fake husband and an overprotective Mrs Sucksby, who loves her so much that she cannot set her free. Sue is silenced by her gender and her class: she is an illiterate thief and a powerless woman. When she is locked up in a lunatic asylum, nobody bothers to listen to what she has to say as long as Gentleman offered his version of the story. Towards the end of the novel Maud and Sue manage to develop their own voices and tell their own versions of the past.

The issue of identity within *Fingersmith* becomes one of the main themes in the novel. Like Laura and Anne in *The Woman in White*, Maud and Sue’s lives are more connected than they think: as babies they had been swapped by their mothers and their identities interchanged. When Sue finds out the real story of her birth she states: “My name, in those days, was Susan Trinder. Now those days all come to an end.”(540). Both Sue and Maud struggle to accept and live with the newly revealed truth about their identities. They can no longer relate to their past histories, but they become empowered to rewrite their past and achieve their own individual identities. This way they are able to create a world outside the expectations of the Victorian society, a world in which they can reside.

The love between Sue and Maud is an important subplot. Sarah Waters stresses on the lesbian sexual politics, a topic impossible to find in any of the traditional Victorian novels. At first it is hard for the two protagonists to break from convention and accept their sexual identity,

but by the end of the novel they manage to develop their independent voices and tell their stories from a lesbian perspective. Cora Kaplan states that the women in Sarah Waters's fiction are not simply oppressed by men and male dominated society, but by women as well, "an undertow of same-sex betrayal and sadism, psychological and sometimes physical". (23)

In Waters's interpretation, the madhouse becomes a symbol of disintegration of the female identity: the inhabitants go mad, simply because they are imprisoned in it. In Collins's novel there is no description of Laura's time spent in the asylum, although it is mentioned that it had great effect on Laura's personality. The neo-Victorians revisit this theme and make it central as Sue's ordeal is described in great detail.

Both Laura in *The Woman in White* and Sue claim that they are someone else during their time spent in the asylum. They hold on to their identities despite the hostile audience they are up against. In all three novels the nurses use the words written in their clothing or on their personal items to convince them of their true identities. They are powerless victims at the mercy of the men who incarcerated them and they all need help from the outside world in order to escape.

The characters in neo-Victorian fiction often operate in the moral grey zone: they are neither good nor bad. Their transgressions and crimes are not the result of their innate villainy but the consequence of their circumstances, imposed by gender, class or society. Just as Sir Percival Glyde was merely an accomplice while Count Fosco master-minded the entire plot in Collins's narrative, so is Gentleman Mrs. Sucksby pawn in *Fingersmith*. Thus, the true villain turns out to be someone else than the one who was suspected in the first place.

*The Asylum* concentrates on the experiences of Georgina Ferrars, an ordinary, unmarried woman placed in a madhouse under mysterious circumstances. In this re-interpretation of *The Woman in White*, in spite of all the family secrets, there seems to be no good reason for someone to want her silenced or contained in an asylum. With no support from the outside world, it is entirely up to her to regain her identity and earn her freedom by solving the mystery and confronting the ghosts from her past. John Harwood's narrative concentrates on family trauma and the search for identity.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Georgina Ferrars finds herself in a private asylum, Tregannon House, where she is told that she has voluntarily admitted herself under the assumed name Lucy Ashton. As she remembers nothing about that night and her memories of the past six weeks are not accurate, she is forced to remain in the asylum as a voluntary patient.

Georgina's identity is shattered, and her only way to reconstruct her past and regain her freedom is through the act of writing in her journal.

Unlike Laura and Sue before her, Georgina is granted more freedom inside the institution and benefits from a more humane treatment. Nevertheless, she doesn't feel safe and struggles to recover from her amnesia in order to reclaim her identity: "I did not feel mad, but how was I to know what madness felt like?".(23) While writing her autobiography, her family trauma becomes evident: her mother is in fact a cousin of her biological mother, Rosina. This secret shows itself in Georgina's behaviour as a child, when she fancies an imaginary childhood friend called Rosina: "the name simply floated into my head one day, and I liked the music of it", (26). Rosina, the imaginary sister Georgina visualises in her own mirror reflexion, becomes her double and her every day companion.

The theme of identity is reinforced when another double, Lucia Ardent, turns up at her house. Lucia is the illegitimate child of Rosina's sister, Clarissa, and Felix Mordant who is also Georgina's father. Them being half-sisters, although not known by the protagonists, explains the incredible physical resemblance between them which allowed the two women to swap identities. The family secrets that are hidden from and by the protagonists of the novel turn into family traumas. Not knowing what their true identities are, Georgina falls in love with Lucia "like Narcissus, falling in love with my own reflection?" .(174)

The present-day concern for gender and sexuality which is present in *Fingersmith*, can also be traced in the relationship between Georgina and Lucia. In the process of retracing the silenced voices of women and lesbians in the nineteenth century, Harwood, much like Sarah Waters, challenges the notions of marriage and sexuality. After moving in with her uncle, Georgina spent a lot of time locked in his house, reading novels. Mainstream literature fails to answer her questions: "Most novels ended in wedded bliss, but novelists never mentioned the bull-calf. I had always imagined something rough and clumsy and painful" ( 167).

The theme of marriage in *The Asylum* is questioned from the beginning of the novel. Georgina enjoys a happy childhood raised in an isolated country house by her masculine aunt and her adoptive mother. Later in her testimony, she records a conversation she has with Lucia about the institution of marriage in which they expose their unwillingness to conform to the Victorian norms. They are happy with each other and can't imagine themselves integrated in a society that accepts them only as wives and mothers. In their opinion, marriage deprives women of their freedom and this is unacceptable. Similar to *The Dark Clue*, *Fingersmith* and

*The Woman in White*, marriage is far from the idealised notion advertised in Victorian novels. Instead, it leads to a stern, colourless life dedicated to duty and sacrifice, a source of conflicts that end in trauma.

When Georgina discovers that her amnesia is in fact the result of doctor Straker's experimentation with an electroshock treatment rather than of repression, her deception alludes to the subverted expectations the readers of neo-Victorian novels experience: "Why choose a perfectly sane young woman when he had a whole asylum full of lunatics at his disposal? There was nothing at all unusual or interesting about me". (207)

As a response to contemporary women's interest in the origins and evolution of their emancipation, Harwood explores the theme of feminism in his text. The author maintains the historical accuracy and depicts the abuses of men in various instances "My father owns even the clothes on my back, and if he chose, he could throw me into the streets to starve"(130), but also forms of resistance from women like Georgina's mother and aunt, who "refused to wear a bustle, or endure any form of tight lacing."(25)

Motherhood is a frequent theme in sensation fiction and it is a sub-plot in both Wilkie Collins's novel as well as its three neo-Victorian adaptations. All the protagonists are orphaned of at least one parent and suffering the repercussions of that. Neither of the female main characters gets the chance to meet her father and lacks the protection and social standing that a father might provide. Most of them grow up without a loving mother and are sentimentally crippled as a result of their inability to work out their family trauma. In *Fingersmith* and *The Asylum* lesbianism subverts the importance of motherhood and encourages the idea of non-hetero-normative families.

The setting in both the Victorian source text and its neo-Victorian adaptations alternates between London and the countryside. In neo-Victorian novels, London, in all its dreadful complexity, becomes a character in itself with a certain level of agency in the final outcome of the narrative. At least one of the characters in each novel is prevented from enjoying the pleasures of the urban landscape. Laura Fairlie is kept inside the house for safety reasons, J.M.W. Turner rarely leaves his house, Maud Lilly is made Mrs Sucksby's captive, Georgina Ferrars is the prisoner of her own life. Also, Laura's uncle is an invalid who spends his life surrounded by his material possessions and away from people while Maud's and Georgina's uncles are preoccupied with their books which they treat with love and care and ignore completely their nieces' well-being.

Some of the other important similarities between the Wilkie Collins's sensation novel and its neo-Victorian re-interpretations are: the journalistic description of events offered by several (unreliable) first-person narrators, their female protagonists as victims of patriarchy, lesbianism- although only hinted at in Collins's novel, it is picked up by the neo-Victorian authors and transformed into an important theme. The tropes derived from nineteenth-century literature such as the orphan, the London slums, the criminal, the sexually deviant are transformed into agents of sexual and social liberation. These similarities bring the reader back to the escape of being entertained by a traditional Victorian sensation novel and prepares him or her to question the nineteenth century that they imagine when faced with the unconventional neo-Victorian view of the past.

In writing their novels, James Wilson, Sarah Waters and John Harwood prove extensive knowledge of the nineteenth-century novel and the researched history of the Victorian Age. They create characters and settings that imitate those that made the Victorians so famous, but adapt them so that they are relevant to modern-day realities. With the use of postmodern narrative strategies, critical tradition and focussing on marginalized groups, the three authors manage to link the Victorian past with the twenty-first-century present and discuss social, economical and political problems that the two eras have in common.

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