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(Neo-) Victorian Corporeality: Female Bodies, Trauma, and Agency in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*

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The present article examines the depiction of female corporeality in Michel Faber's neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), focusing on the construction and perception of female bodies, trauma, and agency. Through an analysis of two female characters, Sugar and Agnes, the article explores how each woman contends with her own corporeality within an oppressive environment that perpetuates the commodification and objectification of female bodies. The analysis reveals that the trauma of both women is intrinsically linked to their gendered body and reflects the prevalent societal notions regarding femininity and womanhood. The article further demonstrates that Sugar strategically uses her body as a means of reclaiming control, while Agnes reflects the tragic consequences of women's confinement within oppressive structures.

1. Introduction

In her 2002 book *Judith Butler*, Sara Salih expands on Butler's analysis of the cultural construction on gender[1] and argues that "all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no 'natural body' that pre-exists its cultural inscription" (62). Salih's work reflects a relatively recent shift in feminist discourse that prompts a re-evaluation of the relationship between the body and society, positioning the body, rather than gender or sex, as the fundamental site of inquiry. Elizabeth Grosz' book *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and her essays on what she calls corporeal feminism—a branch of feminist theory that posits the body as the "primary object of social production and inscription" ("Notes" 1)—played an important role in sparking this shift within feminist discourse towards an emphasis on corporeality and the embodied experience. The body is approached as an entity shaped by external markers and negotiated within the socio-political context in which it exists.

The focus on the body resonates with the aim of neo-Victorian literature to revisit,

[1] For Butler's explorations of the performative aspects of gender identity, see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (*Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, 1988).

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interrogate, and challenge the Victorian past. This is often done by focusing on marginalised figures whose experiences were silenced or obscured in the Victorian era, such as queer individuals, women, or prisoners. As Kaplan puts it, neo-Victorian literature is a "self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire" (3). In many neo-Victorian narratives, the body functions as a reflection of the social and cultural dynamics at play, and it often represents a site of resistance, agency, and subversion, but also trauma and anxiety. By reading the body, one can understand how it is shaped, disciplined, and politicised and in what ways it mirrors the construction, regulation, and expectations surrounding it. Although several scholars have recognised the importance of the body in neo-Victorian narratives,[2] there remains a significant opportunity to explore this theme in Michel Faber's novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Thanks to the complex portrayal of prostitution, traumatic symptoms, insanity, and women's biological processes, as well as the graphic detail with which it explores Victorian sexuality, the novel offers a rich area for the analysis of female corporeality.

Michel Faber's vivid portrayal of sexual encounters, filth, and decay align with what Christian Gutleben calls the "aesthetics of the unsavoury" (128), a strategy often adopted by postmodernist authors with the aim of presenting an opposition to "Victorian euphemisms and sexual understatements", or a "dialectic antithesis or parodic double to canonical genres or traditions" (131). This approach also serves the larger purpose of Faber's novel: challenging and negotiating the representations of female bodies in the Victorian era and Victorian literature. Through the explicit, at times almost grotesque account of sexual encounters and fantasies, the novel explores the power dynamics inherent in the construction and perception of female bodies and the consequences of being a woman in a male-dominated society.

The present article examines the portrayal of female corporeality and embodied trauma in Michel Faber's novel *The Crimson Petal and the White*, exploring how female bodies are constructed, represented, and regulated within the male-dominated system of the Victorian era. It further analyses the themes of sexualisation, commodification, and female agency. Through an analysis of two female characters, Sugar and Agnes, this article seeks to examine how each woman contends with her own corporeality within the limitations of her own circumstances. To support my analysis, I employ theories by feminist critics Julia Kristeva,

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[2] See Ashley Orr, "Bodily Fluids: Female Corporeality as Neo-Victorian Agency in Graham Swift's *Waterland*" (*Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies,* vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 85-93), and Lin Elinor Pettersson, "The Deviant Body in Neo-Victorian Literature: A Somatechnical Reading of the Freak in Rosie Garland's *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013)" (*Journal of English Studies,* vol. 14, pp. 183-201).

Simone de Beauvoir, and Laura Mulvey, as well as Sigmund Freud's and Cathy Caruth's theories of trauma. Kristeva's theory of abjection and de Beauvoir's understanding of female biology will be applied to illustrate that Agnes' perception of her body as impure is influenced by societal taboos and silence surrounding female biology, while Mulvey's concept of the male gaze will provide a useful framework for the analysis of sexual abuse, commodification, and objectification of Sugar's body. Finally, Freud and Caruth's theories on trauma will aid in the understanding of the psychological impact of these experiences on both women. The decision to apply different theoretical frameworks to Sugar and Agnes is driven by the distinct ways in which their corporeal existences are shaped by their divergent social positions and life circumstances. Sugar, as a prostitute subjected to commodification and sexual exploitation, naturally lends herself to an analysis through Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, while Agnes, a middle-class woman confined by her husband and terrified of her own body, is best understood through Kristeva's and de Beauvoir's theories. These frameworks are not arbitrarily applied; rather, they allow for a complex exploration of the unique trauma each women endures due to their respective positions in society in ways that might not be accessible through a singular lens. This in turn illuminates how *The Crimson Petal and the White* addresses the different dimensions of the female experience tied to both class and circumstance.

This paper is divided into four substantive sections following the introduction. The first section explores the commodification and objectification of the female body, focusing on how Sugar's experiences as a prostitute are shaped by the male gaze and economic forces. The second section examines Agnes' situation as a middle-class wife and introduces the concept of aesthetic commodification, highlighting how Agnes' body is transformed into an object of male prestige. The third—and longest—section first lays the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent analysis of trauma and then identifies the origins and processes of trauma in both Sugar and Agnes. Additionally, it considers the potential for healing and reclaiming agency over their bodies. This section requires an extended focus due to the complexity of trauma and its far-reaching implications. The fourth section then examines how the novel interrogates the stereotypes of female frailty and madness by exposing the societal and structural forces that confine women within unfavourable circumstances.

The analysis reveals that for both women, their gendered bodies are a source of deep trauma. In Sugar's case, the trauma stems from the commodification and abuse her body has been subjected to, whereas in Agnes' case, it can be largely attributed to objectification, male oppression, and the societal silence regarding women's biological processes. It is further

demonstrated that Sugar manipulates the male gaze and strategically uses her body as a means of reclaiming control, while Agnes, trapped in a loveless marriage and afflicted by severe mental illness, reflects the tragic consequences of women's confinement within oppressive structures. Ultimately, the article comments on the ways in which Faber's neo-Victorian narrative challenges and subverts Victorian norms surrounding female corporeality and experience.

In many ways, Faber's novel can be seen as a social commentary on Victorian society, as it examines the socio-cultural norms of the Victorian era, often in ironic or exaggerated ways. Set in 1870s London, the novel explores the lives of women living in poor London districts surrounded by filth, death, and disease, whose choices to make a living are limited; they can either work manually as seamstresses or perform manual jobs in factories, earning little money for days of hard work, or sell their bodies to men, earning much more than they ever would if they engaged in a more socially acceptable vocation. Sugar Castaway, the protagonist of the novel, is a highly respected prostitute, who was introduced to prostitution by her mother when she was no more than thirteen years old. Therefore, Sugar has been used to offering her body in exchange for money since her childhood, and her reputation is determined by the ability of her body to satisfy men's sexual desires. However, unlike many other prostitutes who she is acquainted with, Sugar is determined to be different. She uses her eloquence, intelligence, and determination to transform her body from a source of shame and trauma into a source of power, which ultimately allows her to ascend the social hierarchy and reclaim control and agency over her own body. With exceptionally high intellect and clever manipulation, Sugar manages to seduce William Rackham, an heir to a perfume company, obtain a large sum of money, become a governess of William's daughter Sophie, and ultimately elope with her, leaving William lonely and devastated. However, her freedom comes at a terrible cost: the mutilation of her own body.

While Sugar manages to escape, Agnes Rackham, William's wife, meets a tragic end. She is a mentally ill woman, who is confined to her bedroom where she spends most of her days in silence and darkness, shut out from the world. Suffering from delusions and hallucinations, Agnes believes that the Virgin Mary comes to visit her to protect her from the Devil, who has entrapped her in such a frail, weak, and sick body. Agnes' alienation from her own body, which she perceives with hatred and shame, manifests itself in the construction of an imaginary and non-existent corporeal form in an ideal Platonic realm, in which the Holy Sisters in the Convent of Health take care of her. In this parallel world, Agnes often seeks refuge from the constraints of her ailing body. The reader is informed that the reason for her

mental illness is a large tumour behind her left eye, a tumour the size of a "quail's egg" (Faber 195), yet its existence is not known to any of the characters, not even Agnes herself. To find a cure for Agnes while sparing himself the public scandal of sending her to an asylum, William employs Doctor Curlew, an "eminent scholar of mental frailty" (232), who regularly visits Agnes to perform genital examinations—often while Agnes is barely conscious or half asleep—looking for any signs of the disposition or peculiarity of her womb that would explain her mental illness. At William's wish, these examinations must be performed notwithstanding her disdain, and Agnes' body thus becomes a recipient of male powers. In her attempt to free herself by running away from William's house to the imaginary Convent, she drowns in the Thames.

In many ways, Sugar and Agnes are polar opposites. While Sugar is a prostitute, a "fallen woman", Agnes is a lady; Sugar can spend each night with a different man, whereas Agnes is married to a controlling husband; Sugar's physical appearance is marked by characteristics that defy Victorian beauty standards—she is "stick-thin, flat-chested and bony like a consumptive young man" (26) and has a skin condition—while Agnes is the embodiment of Victorian ideals of beauty. However, despite their differences, both women grapple with similar challenges, each striving to navigate her corporeal existence in Michel Faber's nineteenth-century London.

2. Commodification of the Fallen Woman

In his short book *An Exposure, from Personal Observation, of Female Prostitution* (1843), written thirty years before the novel's 1870s setting, William Logan documents his own observations and experiences of prostitution in London, Leeds, Rochdale, and Glasgow. The book exposes the socio-economic conditions that drove many women to prostitution, such as poverty, abuse, or lack of education, and introduces a few categories of prostitution. One such category is that of "children who have been urged by their mothers to become prostitutes for a livelihood" (12). In addition, Logan attributes some of the causes of prostitution to men. There are prostitutes, Logan writes, who were servants in taverns and public-houses, where they were seduced by men, while others were "driven to that awful course by young men making false promises" (12). This is a key observation, as the blame for prostitution often fell solely on the women involved, rather than the external circumstances that contributed to it.

By the 1870s, when *The Crimson Petal and the White* is set, the discourse on

prostitution had evolved, particularly through the efforts of figures like Josephine Butler and Henry Joseph Wilson, who led campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts.[3] The campaigns further shifted the focus from moral condemnation of women to broader critiques of structures that perpetuated their exploitation. In her 1871 essay *The Constitution Violated*, Butler argues that the Acts "secure the enslavement of women and the increased immorality of men", which then leads to "degradation, political ruin, and intellectual decay" (219). She believed that by empowering women through proper education, paid work, and advocacy for their rights, many women could break free from the systemic exploitation ingrained in legislation. Thus, in many ways, Butler foreshadowed later feminist movements that would continue to challenge the intersection of patriarchy, law, and morality in the oppression of women.

At the same time, however, the social purity movement gained significant traction, attracting individuals who believed in promoting chastity and moral reform as key responses to the issue of prostitution. Led by figures like Ellice Hopkins or Catherine Booth and supported by organisations such as the National Vigilance Association, the movement advocated for stricter laws regulating sexual behaviour and sought to protect women from perceived moral dangers. While the movement shared many concerns with Butler's campaign, it predominantly emphasised female virtue, the importance of censorship, and the necessity for Christian values in the preservation of moral standards. Hopkins believed that the "sanctity of the family, the purity of the home, the loftiness of love and the sacredness of marriage" were being threatened by the prevalence of vice and moral laxity (2).

Despite the various reform efforts, the entrenched Victorian idea of the prostitute as a moral and social threat persisted. These "fallen women"—women who have lost their innocence and have thus fallen from God's grace—represented a danger to Victorian society, which endorsed female purity, chastity, and domestic duties. For this reason, scrutiny and control were both regarded as appropriate ways of keeping female sexuality subdued, in fear that "any apparent 'angel' could be harbouring a potential 'whore' if sufficient supervision were not exercised" (King 23).

The general focus on female purity paradoxically increased the allure of fallen women,

[3] The Contagious Diseases Acts were four laws passed by the British Parliament between the years 1864 and 1869. They were introduced in response to concerns over the spread of venereal diseases in the armed forces. The Acts granted police officers the right to detain any woman who they believed to be a prostitute. The woman was taken before a magistrate and submitted to a medical examination. If found to have a venereal disease, the woman was confined to a hospital until cured. They were eventually repealed in 1886 due to sustained public pressure from the repeal campaigns.

creating a fascination with the very thing that the Victorian society sought to eliminate. Faber explores this phenomenon through the characters of Ashwell and Bodley, two of William Rackham's friends, who frequently visit London brothels in search for a "truly succulent" young prostitute (Faber 64), a goal which they consider unreachable. Bodley argues that it is because all the young ones are poor and unsightly: "'By the time they come to bud, they've already had scabies, their front teeth are missing, their hair's got crusts in it… But if you want a little alabaster Aphrodite, you have to wait for her to become a fallen woman first'" (64). The fascination with purity, even in the context of prostitution, reflects the fetishisation of innocence, which caters to a male fantasy that thrives on the taboo nature of a woman who possesses both angelic qualities and a readiness for sexual engagement.

Sugar embodies this dichotomy perfectly, as she is a woman who can be both an "angel" and a "whore"; she is "virginal-looking" yet can "surrender to a deluge of ordure and stand up smelling like roses" (35). This virginal facade, coupled with her willingness to engage in any sexual activity a man asks for, contributes to her widespread renown among the patrons of London's brothels as well as other prostitutes. Her accomplishments are spoken of throughout the streets of London and even documented in pamphlets. The allure of sexual pleasure veiled by a cloak of purity is precisely what makes Sugar so captivating. In a way, she represents a fetishised ideal of the fallen woman, and she owes her value on the marketplace of sex to her ability to cater to a man's sexual desires while still maintaining the illusion of virtue and innocence.

The transactional nature of prostitution reflects the underlying idea that Sugar's body is no longer hers to control—as long as a man provides enough money, he acquires all rights to it. Sexual commodification, imposed upon Sugar by her own mother Mrs. Castaway, naturally raises questions of bodily autonomy and consent. As the following section on trauma will demonstrate, Sugar has been subjected to sexual assault and related acts of violence multiple times. A night with Sugar comes at a higher price than a night with other prostitutes, and men are essentially paying for a complete control over Sugar. In other words, her value increases with her willingness to surrender control.

In addition to sexual commodification, there was a widespread circulation of so-called cartes-de-visite in the Victorian era. These cartes were a popular hobby especially in the early 1860s and the precursor of social media as we know it nowadays. They were small photograph cards which were collected and then exchanged among friends, family, or in parlours. As Teukolsky notes, they positioned women as "hot properties marketed in legitimate capitalist enterprises" and signified that "a woman's body could be bought and sold

and handled in card format" (463). Sugar, who once had her naked photographs taken, now contemplates the permanence of her image: "Whatever violations she routinely submits to in the privacy of her bedroom, they vanish the moment they're over, half-forgotten with the drying of sweat. But to be chemically fixed in time and passed hand to hand forever: that is a nakedness which can never be clothed again" (Faber 37). Unlike the physical act of prostitution, which fades with time, the photograph captures and infinitely perpetuates a specific image of her. This image becomes a commodity, a fixed version of herself defined by the male gaze. Her aversion to being immortalised in the photographs reflects her desire to break free from the societal constraints that have made her body the object of consumption. The naked/clothed dichotomy Sugar refers to has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning; although she is accustomed to being naked during sex work, this nakedness happens in the privacy of her own bedroom. Being shown in a photograph to others and thus having her body—naked and positioned in a way to reflect and appeal to male fantasies— commodified even further, with no control over who can see her and buy her, also exposes her socially, bringing with it the social ramification of being observed not only as a naked woman but, more importantly, as a prostitute.

Sugar's journey is marked by a constant struggle against being viewed as a sexual object and relying on male appreciation for survival. Her attempts at resistance are, however, laced with a paradox; while she desires to escape the confines of prostitution, she also recognises that using her body and playing by societal rules are the only tools available to her for achieving autonomy. Sugar's eventual relationship with William Rackham exemplifies this tension. She becomes his exclusive lover and ultimately a governess to his daughter Sophie, yet it is through a number of financial transactions that she arrives at this position. William, generally dissatisfied with life, deeply insecure about his financial struggles, and ashamed of his mentally ill wife Agnes, first visits Sugar and pays for her services to find an outlet for his sorrow. From the moment he first lays his eyes upon her, he decides that "she is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen" (92), and while looking into her eyes, he "rediscovers the elusive joy of being William Rackham" (93). Using her intellect, flattery, and clever manipulation, Sugar senses William's vulnerability and interest in her, and uses her commodified body as a powerful strategic tool to seduce him and establish a sense of dependency in him. Her willingness to submit, capacity for complex conversations, and caring nature quickly draw him in, and he soon begins to crave her presence and attention. Sugar subverts the power dynamics inherent in this transaction—a man paying for a prostitute—allowing him the illusion of control, while being, in fact, the one who has power

over him. Ultimately, William becomes so infatuated with her that he decides to purchase her for himself, signing a contract with Sugar's mother, Mrs. Castaway, to obtain what he refers to as "exclusive patronage" (146) of Sugar.

Sugar and William's subsequent encounter aligns with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which, though first linked to film and cinema, has since been applied to studying other forms of art, including literature. Mulvey argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (11). It is then the determining male gaze that "projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (11). After the first night with Sugar as his own prostitute, William observes her when she is naked, referring to her as his "prize", a "thing designed for no purpose but to bring him to orgasm" (Faber 155). In his eyes, Sugar is merely an erotic object engineered perfectly to fulfil his own needs. William's inspection exemplifies the active/passive binary not only because of his observance, but also his recognition that she is the commodity he now possesses; he is the one who actively bought her, whereas she was passively purchased.

However, the omniscient narrator reveals a different aspect to this situation. William's infatuation with Sugar's body and attractiveness completely blinds him, and he fails to recognise her manipulation. While he revels in his perceived control, Sugar, beneath the surface, is the one pulling the strings, using precisely the structures of which he is the creator and perpetrator to achieve what she wants. Thus, William ultimately becomes a victim of his own design. In her carefully constructed game, from which she eventually emerges victorious, Sugar uses her body as a means for liberation, while William participates in it under the illusion that it is he who is in control. Because of the exclusive patronage, Sugar gains a house for herself and with it a certain level of control and comfort, allowing her to continue writing her novel and plan her next move on her quest for liberation.

Sugar's use of her own sexuality and body is a form of resistance within the system. She manipulates the very tools used to commodify women to carve out a space for herself within a male-dominated society. According to Jeannette King, making female experience central to the narratives and giving them back their place in history not only as victims, but also as agents, is one of the ways that postmodern historical fiction engages with the past (3). These subtle acts of resistance, while not immediately obvious, should not be overlooked since they emphasise the existence of agency within constraints. Women's agency throughout history was often marked by limited options and quiet acts of defiance rather than grand gestures, especially if these women belonged to the lower classes or were regarded as racial

Others. Consequently, such hidden resistance often goes unnoticed in traditional historical narratives, which depict women as passive victims of patriarchy and/or institutional power.

3. Marriage and the Aesthetic Commodification

While Sugar's body is commodified on the sex market, Agnes' body is commodified on the market of marriage. In her 2016 book, Kirby-Jane Hallum examines five British novels from the 1860s–1890s, focusing on the Victorian marriage market and the aesthetic value of women. Hallum concentrates on the "aesthetic commodification of women" (31) in the selected novels and emphasises that "the female appears more as a work of art than a physical being" (88). It is then the man who "naturally gains prestige through the selection of a visually and culturally pleasing bride" (Oestreich 253). Agnes's appearance represents the "high-Victorian ideal"; she is a "paragon of porcelain femininity", with "eyes of blue" and blonde hair "smooth and fine" (Faber 118). After marriage, she serves as a symbol of William's success, a socially approved wife who, to an external observer, perfectly corresponds with the ideal Victorian woman. Not only is she beautiful, but also pious and largely ignorant of any sexual desires. She speaks in a high-pitched, angelic voice, and wears expensive gowns that prove William's financial stability. Therefore, by marrying Agnes, William solidifies his worth and status in the public sphere. As the narrative progresses and Agnes' mental health deteriorates, her aesthetic value deteriorates in parallel. She becomes increasingly volatile and erratic, exhibiting signs of paranoid behaviour and causing scandals in public, which disrupts the placid image of domestic harmony. She further loses a considerable amount of weight, ages prematurely, and grows unhealthily pale. In response, William confines her to a dark bedroom in an attempt to preserve the external façade of a respectable household—an act largely reminiscent of Rochester's imprisonment of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—and his self-esteem begins to crumble. Agnes' worth in the marriage is thus contingent upon the ability to perform the role of the ideal Victorian wife. Once her appearance and behaviour begin to deviate from societal expectations and the aesthetic value is disrupted, she is deemed unsuitable for public life and hidden away, while William experiences a profound sense of failure, now ashamed of his sickly "madwoman in the attic", as Gilbert and Gubar would put it.

Agnes' marriage is a form of transferring control over her body from one man to another, from her stepfather to William Rackham. In her diary, shortly after her marriage to

William, she writes: “My step-father was plotting all the while . . . to *sell* my poor Self to the first man that would take me off his hands. He chose William on purpose, I can see that now!” (677, emphasis added). Agnes perceives the arrangement of her marriage as a betrayal; the decision to marry William was made for her, and it led to desperation rather than emotional fulfilment. The verb “sell” emphasises the economic dimension of her marriage, suggesting that Agnes’ body, like that of many women in patriarchal societies, is treated as an object to be exchanged. This resonates with Elizabeth Grosz’s viewpoint of the body as socially and culturally inscribed, shaped by historical and ideological forces. For Grosz, the body, particularly a woman’s body, is not merely a biological entity but is produced and regulated through cultural practices that dictate its roles and capacities. In Agnes’ case, it is expected to fulfil a specific role—belong to a husband and give birth to a child—for which Agnes has been preparing herself since her childhood. While Sugar’s teenage years were spent in prostitution, Agnes’ were devoted to learning about the virtues, learning how to play the piano, and educating herself so that she would make a good wife one day. She was educated in a school for girls, whose key aim was to teach middle- and upper-class girls everything they need to know if they want to marry a rich and successful man. In one of her early diary entries, Agnes writes: “I have been thinking deeply on this and have decided that it would be a good thing if I was Clever & Beautiful because then I should marry well, to an Officer of the True Faith” (473). Therefore, Agnes’ appearance was cultivated and her qualities nurtured to enhance her future value in the eyes of potential suitors, making her a valuable commodity.

The divergent, yet unsettlingly parallel realities of Sugar and Agnes, demonstrate that the commodification of the female body extends beyond socio-economic background and social class. Both women are thrust into worlds where their bodies are perceived as a means to an end and where they must develop specific sets of skills to win male approval. While Agnes has to prepare herself to be an ideal candidate for a marriage, Sugar has to learn how to satisfy men’s desires to be able to make a living. Ultimately, the bodies of both women are commodified, and, as such, they need to possess desirable traits in order to be “marketable” amidst the other available commodities. This process of commodification is largely reflected in Agnes’ and Sugar’s response to traumatic experiences, which is the key concern of the following section.

4. Embodied Trauma and Healing

In *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction,* Kate Mitchell asserts that "the body is engraved by time" and "etched with past experience", which is why "memory is carried with us bodily, not so much remembered as 'membered' or 'embodied'" (162). In keeping with neo-Victorian fiction's focus on the corporeal, Faber's novel illustrates how women's bodies are shaped by physical and psychological scars from their histories of oppression and violence. The bodies of Sugar and Agnes are far from blank slates; they bear the marks of traumatic past experiences, many of which have entailed bodily violence, such as sexual abuse, oppression, and commodification. As the following paragraphs will illustrate, these experiences have established a close connection between trauma and the body, contributing to the development of post-traumatic symptoms that are intrinsically linked to their reproductive organs and biological processes.

Because of the complex, interdisciplinary, and temporally expansive nature of trauma as a concept, a more detailed engagement with trauma theory is necessary. Trauma is a multifaceted phenomenon that has been examined across centuries and in various fields, including psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, or literary studies. Its complexity stretches beyond the psychological and has recently been studied in connection with emotional, physical, and societal dimensions. By engaging with foundational thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, alongside later scholars like Cathy Caruth or Ann Cvetkovich, this section provides a theoretical engagement that will later aid in providing a comprehensive understanding of trauma within *The Crimson Petal and the White.*

The term 'trauma', derived from the Greek word τραῦμα (meaning 'wound' or 'damage'), was previously used to refer to physical injuries. However, it acquired a psychological meaning at the turn of the twentieth century when it was employed by prominent figures such as Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer, or J. M. Charcot to "describe the wounding of the *mind* brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock" (Leys 3). Sigmund Freud repeatedly returned to the concept of trauma throughout the many years of developing his psychoanalytic theories. It is already in his early work *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) co-authored with Josef Breuer and in his paper "The Aetiology of Hysteria" (1896) where he establishes a connection between childhood experience of sexual assault and the subsequent development of hysteria. Freud further explored the concept of trauma in his post-WWI work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which he discusses traumatic neuroses present in war veterans and individuals who experienced severe accidents involving danger to

life. In this paper, Freud posits that the patient repeats the traumatic act under pressure of compulsion, despite knowing that the experience has only led to unpleasure and dissatisfaction (21). This *repetition-compulsion*, which has also been referred to as *trauma reenacment*, is a largely unconscious process, through which the traumatised individual attempts to master the stimulus retrospectively, while possessing a certain sense of agency and control over it. The repetition can take the form of dreams, hallucinations, or reliving similar situations.

Another key aspect of trauma in Freud's work is the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, which has been translated into English as 'deferred action', 'belatedness', or 'afterwardness' and presupposes that "the effects of a potentially traumatic experience can be delayed by several years and require a second constituent moment in order to arise" (Bistoen et al. 674). After experiencing a traumatic event, an individual can therefore continue to live their life without exhibiting any psychopathological symptoms for long periods of time. However, upon encountering an event that is "actually or symbolically reminiscent of their traumatic event", the original traumatic experience can be brought to the forefront again (Horesh et al. 864). The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* has also been employed in the field of trauma studies pioneered by, among others, Cathy Caruth in the 1990s. Caruth adopts the term 'belatedness' as a parallel term to Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, arguing that the traumatic event "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (*Trauma* 4). This leads her to conclude that to be traumatised is "precisely to be possessed by an image of event" (5).

Despite the large body of research on trauma stretching across multiple centuries and disciplines, a large number of critics contend that factors beyond the psychological have not been sufficiently explored. Recent discourse has thus called for the need to consider the structural, institutional, societal, economic, racial, and gender-related aspects in understanding trauma.[4] Laura Vickroy's notion that trauma is a "consequence of political ideologies, colonization, war, domestic violence, poverty, and so forth" (2) has been echoed by other feminist critics, many of whom also criticise the endeavour of trauma theory to provide a single, universal model of trauma. According to Ann Cvetkovich, such a model "runs the risk of erasing essential differences between traumatic experiences, differences of historical

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[4] See Puleng Segalo, "Trauma and Gender" (*Social and Personality Psychology Compass,* vol. 9, issue 9, pp. 447-454); Emma Tseris, "Trauma and Women's Rights… According to whom? Decolonizing the psychological trauma narrative" (*Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 25, issue 1, pp. 34-38), or Lucy Thompson, "Toward a Feminist Psychological Theory of 'Institutional Trauma'" (*Feminism & Psychology,* vol. 31, issue 1, pp. 99-118).

context and geopolitical location, as well as the specifities of individual experiences" (31).

In light of the recent advances in trauma discourse, this section considers trauma not only as a psychological phenomenon, but also as a broader issue that encompasses a variety of other factors, including oppression, abuse, parental neglect, commodification of women, and restrictive societal norms. The section further examines how both Sugar and Agnes embody and process the enduring and transformative effects of trauma.

Sugar's Trauma and Agency

Most of Sugar's embodied trauma is rooted in the many years of prostitution. Not only was she used by men ever since her early teenage years, but she has also had multiple sexual encounters with clients who took pleasure in inflicting pain upon her body. One of them twisted her nipples "so hard she almost fainted in pain" (Faber 35), while another one "almost strangled her" (430). Once she even had a "knife-point pressed to her throat just a little too hard when she was fifteen" (35), which is the reason why her voice has been husky since then. In comparison to Agnes, whose voice is angelic and high-pitched, Sugar's voice sounds "ugly and unmusical" to her (298). However, it is precisely her hoarse voice that she uses to advance her quest for freedom. The act of silencing women, both literally and figuratively, has been a persistent theme throughout history. In many feminist and postmodern narratives, the act of giving women their voice back is a central concern. Sugar's voice may have been altered, but it has not been fully silenced; she uses its hoarseness strategically as a tool to cultivate an image of fragility and mystery, which is one of the aspects that initially draws William in. Furthermore, it is her voice that she uses to influence and manipulate him by offering words of sympathy, flattery, and praise. Her body, which was subjected to years of pain and abuse, functions as a means to captivate and seduce William. This is one of the ways Sugar attempts to cope with her trauma, using the pain inflicted on her body for her own advancement.

Despite her socio-economic background, Sugar possesses many qualities and skills that were in the Victorian era typically associated with middle- or upper-class women, or even men. She reads books, journals, and newspapers extensively; she has knowledge about history, geography, politics, and business affairs. This allows her to utilise writing as a means to reclaim agency and process her traumatic experiences. She is writing a novel in which she, in turn, inflicts pain on male bodies the same way they previously did to her. Sugar's heroine,

a projection of her own ideal, powerful, emancipated self, has the power and tools necessary to physically hurt men, or even murder them. The knife that was once held to her throat transforms into a means of inflicting injuries on the tied-up, powerless bodies of men, who are left bleeding and begging for their lives: "'Please,' he begged, tugging ineffectually at the silken bonds holding him fast to the bedposts. 'Let me go! I am an important man!' – and many more such pleas" (203). Sugar's body is no longer the commodified object of male desire but a source of power and strength. This is further reinforced by the position of the bodies in her novel. While the men are below her, she kneels above them—a direct opposition to the sexual encounters during which it was her who was forced into submission.

By writing her novel and deliberately reversing the power dynamics, Sugar engages in a form of trauma reenactment with the aim of confronting and symbolically mastering her traumatic experience. This aligns with Freud's later idea that the traumatised individual attempts to gain control over the traumatic event retroactively. That her mind is able to evoke the brutal encounters years later with such vivid detail indicates the possession with the traumatic image, as Caruth would put it. Sugar's trauma, rooted in the original traumatic events of repeated sexual abuse and violence, is closely linked to her body; thus, the way she reenacts the past is likewise tied to the body and physical pain. Despite the repetition-compulsion, Sugar's novel ultimately offers a way for Sugar to confront her own trauma and project her rage in a socially acceptable manner. It appears that writing does indeed have a cathartic nature for her, as she eventually pronounces the novel wretched and dead (711), refusing to continue writing or reading it. Sugar's healing through writing corresponds with what psychologist James Pennebaker termed "expressive writing". In his 1997 research article on writing about emotional experiences, he argues that "writing about upsetting experiences, although painful in the days of writing, produces long-term improvements in mood and indicators of well-being" (162). By reenacting past traumatic experience in a narrative that she can control, Sugar confronts the image possessing her and moves one step closer towards recovery.

Sugar further processes and heals her trauma by taking care of William's daughter, Sophie, as her governess. Sophie enables Sugar to further assimilate her childhood trauma, which can, in psychological terms, be interpreted with the aid of a phenomenon nowadays widely known as the "inner child"—a "psychosynthesis of all ages, the transition from childhood to old age" (qtd. in Sjöblom et al. 2). The inner child is understood as a part of each individual's psyche that holds past memories, goals, and feelings from childhood. In other words, it reflects the child that each person once was. Many psychologists and therapists

believe that healing the inner child is an efficient way of processing childhood trauma.[5] Sugar's desire to make Sophie happy and to protect her is a form of healing her own inner child, providing Sophie with love and safety, which she did not receive from her mother.

Through Sugar's interactions with Sophie, Sugar's childhood trauma and memories of abuse repeatedly resurface. One day, Sugar glimpses the "smooth infantile vulva between Sophie's legs, the firm, clearly defined sex glistening with water", and helplessly imagines a "swollen, mauve-headed prick shoving its way inside" (Faber 468). The juxtaposition of Sophie's purity with the violent imagery mirrors Sugar's own lost innocence resulting from violent encounters that were forced upon her when she was not much older than Sophie. The sight of Sophie's innocent, vulnerable body triggers in Sugar her past memories, specifically ones of her own infantile, bruised, commodified genitals. This passage illustrates the gendered nature of Sugar's trauma, as its return is conditioned by the sight of Sophie's untainted reproductive organs, the "clearly defined sex"—a part of Sophie's body that bears the marker of womanhood. Interestingly, the reenactment of Sugar's trauma at the sight of Sophie's "smooth infantile vulva" alludes to Agnes' trauma likewise located in her genitals, since Sophie was born as a result of marital rape. The complex interplay between gender and trauma is thus evident here, with the female body functioning as both the site and symbol of trauma and suffering.

As Sugar continues to build a relationship with Sophie, she repeatedly finds herself in situations when her trauma is brought to the forefront. When Sugar dictates words for Sophie to write, many come to mind that have strong sexual undertones, spoken in her mother's voice: "'Mistress – no … ah… Girl.' *Virgin,* suggests a phantom prompter in Sugar's head, a sly devil with the voice of Mrs Castaway. *Virgin.* 'Ah…' (she looks around for inspiration) 'window.' *Kept intact especially for you, sir.* 'Door'. *Whore.*" (469). The internalised voice of her mother, this "phantom prompter", illustrates the haunting presence of past trauma that intrudes in her present experience. The "literal return of the event against [her] will" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 59) and the compulsion to reproduce the same words uttered by her mother clash with Sugar's determination to prevent Sophie from suffering the same fate she did as a child. Ultimately, Sugar successfully resists the temptation to repeat. Her final choice of words like "window" and "door" amidst the suggestive prompts can be viewed as acts of

[5] See Asser Mikkel Hestbech, "Reclaiming the Inner Child in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: The Complementary Model of the Personality" (*The American Journal of Psychotherapy,* vol. 71, issue 1, pp. 21-27); Carol Ren Kreisl, "Healing the Wounded, Neglected Inner Child of the Past" (*Nursing Clinics of North America,* vol. 26, issue 3).

agency, similarly to her writing of her novel. Sugar's deliberate selection of words that are not only neutral but also symbolise escape and freedom reflects her resilience and determination to break free from the cycle of abuse and trauma, releasing the possessing image along the way. By choosing words that offer a way out, Sugar demonstrates her commitment to protecting Sophie from the same fate that she had to endure, all while simultaneously healing her own inner child.

The last major source of Sugar's trauma comes in the form of unexpected pregnancy and self-induced miscarriage. Shortly after Agnes' tragic death, Sugar realises that she is pregnant with William's child. At this point, it is becoming obvious to her that William is losing interest in pursuing a relationship with her; he is now a wealthy, respectable man, while she is a former prostitute posing as his governess, and the public attention that their relationship would draw is a disgrace that he would never willingly expose himself to. If he found out about her pregnancy, he would most likely cast her out from his house, and she would once again find herself on the street selling her body for money. Additionally, carrying William's child is a reminder of her dependence on him. The unborn child represents a return to the very power structures that she has fought so hard to escape, and a major step back from the life she has worked towards. Desperate for autonomy and for continuing with her plan to eventually run away from William, she ultimately decides not to keep the baby: "This baby – this creature – this tenacious clump of flesh – cannot be permitted to live. Her own life is at stake; if William finds out she's in the family way it will be the end, the end of everything" (Faber 652). She performs the first, unsuccessful attempt at a miscarriage with chemicals, pouring a "tea-cupful of tepid water" and "sulphate of zinc and borax" directly inside her (633). The second one, days later, is performed with the aid of pennyroyal and brewer's yeast and results in terrifying pain and convulsions of her stomach muscles. Such dangerous methods were not uncommon in Victorian England. According to Patricia Knight, abortion was widespread despite being illegal, and spermicidal solutions often had to be mixed by the women themselves due to the lack information regarding birth control and safe options for abortion (57-59). Abortion was regarded "with the same horror as infanticide" and appeared in press debates surrounding the "flight from maternity", and some abortionists faced either illness or death, while others were prosecuted (57-60).

Sugar's disdain for her pregnancy is evidenced by the way she refers to the foetus. She views it as a "substanceless anxiety", a "worm in the bud", a "parasite" she must dispose of to achieve liberation (Faber 650). These metaphors imply an active, destructive force, an organism that feeds off her, stealing her hope for an independent future and making her

perceive her body as no longer hers. To regain control over her body, she decides to throw herself down the stairs to induce a miscarriage. A few days later, during an excursion in one of William's factories, she miscarriages in a female lavatory. The event is accompanied by "fearsome pangs" in her bowels and her stomach being "skewered in agony" (690), and the sight of the foetus leaving her body disturbs her so profoundly that she loses consciousness. Feeling weak and nauseous, Sugar continues to bleed during the days following the miscarriage. The raw, graphic portrayal of the event signifies how many injuries Sugar has inflicted on her own body in a desperate attempt to sever any remaining ties to William. Her self-induced miscarriage mirrors the "flight from maternity" mentioned in the Victorian press in relation to abortion, yet it is not only maternity Sugar wants to escape; rather, she wants to free herself from the oppressive structures that put her in this position in the first place.

After the three attempts at a miscarriage, Sugar's body is now severely damaged, and the trauma is—again—inflicted upon the most private, sensitive, and vulnerable part of her body. The location intensifies the violation, as her reproductive organs are the markers of womanhood and sexuality, which were already exploited throughout her life as a prostitute and determined her marginalised position in society. The situation is exacerbated by a letter from Doctor Curlew, in which he informs William that Sugar is pregnant. He noticed it when he was treating Sugar's ankle and rib injuries after she had fallen down the stairs. William, refusing to believe that Sugar has miscarried, immediately orders her to leave his house. Sugar's injured body is therefore rejected by the very man who directly contributed to its mutilation. It is likely that she will not be able to conceive a child in the future, and it is unclear how long she will survive after inflicting so many injuries upon her organs. The novel ends shortly after her miscarriage with her and Sophie running away from William's house, far away from London. It is implied that William never succeeds in finding them.

The decision to induce a miscarriage can be interpreted as the last reenactment of her trauma, becoming thus a way to confront the past by transforming passive experiences of victimisation into an active choice. The permanent bodily markers left by the miscarriage then serve as constant reminders of the cost of her liberation and mirror the nature of traumatic experiences, which are repeatedly reenacted and cannot be fully erased. Sugar's injured organs reflect her internal struggle, and the scars left behind are a physical representation of her internal wounds.

Sugar's journey exemplifies the profound impact of trauma on an individual's psychology. Through her actions and experiences, she attempts to reclaim control over her life after being exposed to multiple traumatic experiences directly connected to her body, such as

sexual abuse, commodification, objectification, and miscarriage, all while battling with repetition-compulsion and the involuntary, belated resurfacing of her trauma. Sugar's strategic use of her voice, writing, and care for Sophie are all acts of agency that can be read as ways of assimilating and healing from trauma. Despite the severe costs, Sugar's story is ultimately one of survival and transformation, highlighting not only the enduring impact of trauma, but also, more importantly, the possibility of healing through confronting and processing past experiences.

Living in an Oppressed Body

Unlike Sugar, whose trauma is rooted in her many years of prostitution, Agnes grapples with the psychological torment stemming from societal expectations, male oppression, her father's death, and marital rape. The impact of these traumatic experiences, which is exacerbated by the unacknowledged presence of a tumour behind her eye, repeatedly manifests as repetition-compulsion in the form of hallucinations and nightmares. Although Agnes' life circumstances and societal status are different from Sugar's, her trauma is also intrinsically connected to womanhood and reflected in her loathing of her own body, particularly its frailty, weakness, and biological processes. It is especially menstrual blood that evokes a visceral reaction accompanied by angst, nausea, and delusions.

When Agnes was a child, she saw her father die and bleed on his deathbed, which is likely the foundational moment of trauma that shapes Agnes' subsequent fear and misunderstanding of her own body. As trauma theory posits, trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but rather resurfaces later, often in response to symbolic or actual reminders of the original traumatic event. Agnes' ongoing encounters with her own menstrual blood act as potent triggers, reenacting the initial trauma of seeing her father die and leading her to believe that menstrual blood is a sign of illness: "Everyone knows that ill people bleed: bleeding is the manifestation of serious illness. Her father . . . bled on his deathbed, didn't he, despite not being in any way injured . . ." (212). Each instance of menstruation not only reminds her of her father's death but also reinforces her fear and apprehension, creating thus a cyclical pattern of trauma reactivation. Her body, in bleeding monthly, echoes the original traumatic event and forces her to repeatedly re-engage with it through these bodily reminders. The sight of blood thus functions as a terrifying confirmation of her deepest anxieties and traumatic memories, fuelling her belief that menstruation is an "affliction" (212) rather than a

natural biological process.

It is also heavily implied that Agnes was raped by William during their wedding night, which then resulted in her pregnancy and childbirth. William recalls this event while sexually abusing her again, years later: "'I never meant to hurt you, on that first night . . . I was … made hasty by urgency. The urgency of love'" (542). He continues, "'And I thought . . . once we were underway, you'd begin to like it'" (542). This violation marks the second traumatic event, presumably also accompanied by blood, and firmly roots Agnes' trauma—sustained on her reproductive organs—in her womanhood. The rape, with its violent and bloody connotations, intertwines with the foundational trauma of her father's death, reinforcing her association of blood with pain, violation, and loss of control. Agnes is bound to reenact this trauma monthly due to the regular occurrence of menstruation, which reinforces her perception of her body as flawed and abhorrent. The cyclical experience of trauma is thus rooted in her biological functions, making Agnes' suffering inescapable.

As evident from her diaries, Agnes further associates menstruation with demonic and evil entities. In one of them, dating from the early years of her marriage with William, she writes about experiencing "an unreadable hallucination of demonic harassment, decorated in the margins with hieroglyphical eyes scrawled in clotted menstrual blood" (677). According to Caruth, trauma can manifest belatedly in the "uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (*Unclaimed Experience* 11), which function as images possessing the traumatised individual. The fact that Agnes' delusions are closely linked to menstrual blood suggests a repetition-compulsion of rape and her father's death, two traumatic events in which blood was the key element. The imagery of "demonic harassment" suggests a sense of malevolent entities encroaching upon her, stripping away her agency and autonomy, much like William did on their first night. The demon who she believes is harassing her can, however, also symbolise the oppressive male forces and male treachery in general. Her marriage to William, which has resulted in rape, suffering, and confinement, was arranged by her stepfather, which Agnes perceives as betrayal:

> My step-father was plotting all the while, to kill my dear Mother inchmeal with his cruelty, and to sell my poor Self to the first man that would take me off his hands. He chose William on purpose, I can see that now! . . . But he knew that William would drag me down from the heights, and that once I was sunk as low as I am now, he need never set eyes on me again!" (Faber 677)

Agnes' fate was thus sealed on the day of her marriage. The "eyes scrawled in clotted

menstrual blood" may symbolise the ever-present male gaze, which, though it constantly observes, constructs, and judges women's bodies, does not, in fact, truly *see* them. The female body is defined by and perceived largely for its aesthetic and sexual appeal, for what it looks like on the outside to those who gaze at it; however, there are certain aspects of female corporeality, such as menstruation, which remain invisible, unseen, and unacknowledged: "Everyone, from her step-father to the man who delivers the woodfowl, compliments her on how she has blossomed into a *lady*, but no one informs her she has become a *woman"* (494, emphasis added).

To cure Agnes of her delusions and mental delirium, William employs Doctor Curlew to perform regular physical examinations of her womb in an attempt to locate the origin of her illness. In line with Elaine Showalter's observation that madness was regarded as a distinctly female malady due to the prevalent belief that "women were believed to be more vulnerable to insanity than men" (7), Michel Faber constructs the character of Doctor Curlew as an example of the Victorian medical profession with its tendency to view women's bodies through a lens of pathology and control. Doctor Curlew's invasive procedures, accompanied by pain, discomfort, and leeches, concentrate on Agnes' reproductive organs, reinforcing the connection between her genitals and angst. She perceives the examinations with profound hatred and fear, often dissociating from her physical body in order to bear the repeated violations of her bodily autonomy: "This time, however, there is no shame to feel, for the doctor's finger is sliding (as she perceives it in her dream) not on her body, but on a surface somewhere beyond it: a windowpane perhaps" (152). The dissociation is a clear indication of the severe psychological impact these procedures have on her. Doctor Curlew's oppressive presence is also symbolised through the various metaphors Agnes uses to describe him. She refers to him as a "long shadow" (143), a "Demon Inquisitor", "the Leech Master", "Belial", and the "Usher of Maggots" (663). Curlew's role in her life is not that of a healer but an oppressor. Instead of curing her, he only aggravates Agnes' illness, further reinforcing her fear of her own body and menstrual blood.

In addition to the above-mentioned traumatic events, Agnes' suffering is compounded by the societal repression of female biology, which exacerbates the severity of the traumatic symptoms. Limited by her young age at the time of seeing her father die and by the subsequent death of her mother, Agnes' opportunities for further guidance on menstruation were restricted. In addition, there was pervasive taboo and secrecy surrounding menstruation in Victorian England. Even though Agnes is twenty-three years old and has already given birth to Sophie, she believes that "bleeding from the belly is a terrifying and unnatural thing"

(211). The narrator reveals that it is precisely because "no . . . one has told her about menstruation" (211). As Elaine and English Showalter emphasise, "an almost complete silence on the subject [menstruation]" was maintained in the Victorian era, and any information on it was largely excluded from any literature aside from medical reports (83). It was also surrounded by "prevailing superstitions, prejudices, misinformation, and medical opinion" (89), which contributed to its remaining a topic existing on the margins of dominant discourse. Because the ways to learn about menstruation were limited, many women did not fully understand its purpose. The pervasive silence and taboo, combined with the foundational moments of trauma, illustrates how lack of knowledge and societal repression aggravate Agnes' symptoms, reflecting the idea that trauma can be continually reinforced and reactivated by subsequent symbolic and cultural reminders.

Agnes' fear of menstrual blood can be understood through Simone de Beauvoir's notion of female biology and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. In her work *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir argues that when a girl finds menstrual stains on her underwear, she thinks she has "diarrhea, a fatal hermorrhage, a veneral disease" (372), which is often exacerbated by her mother's failure to provide her with necessary explanations (374). The "menstrual stain inclines her toward disgust and fear" (378), de Beauvoir writes, and she begins to fear the "disgusting event repeated monthly" (375). Although de Beauvoir's theories on female biology have since been widely contested by feminist critics,[6] she rightfully emphasises the connection between proper parental guidance and women's understanding of their menstrual cycle. Similarly, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva establishes a link between menstrual blood, disgust, and horror. Building on psychoanalytic theories by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Kristeva explores the concept of abjection, which she defines as a "process that negotiates the limits in the formation of the subject through the rejection of unwanted things" (Arya 48). Prior to the occurrence of Lacan's mirror stage and the infant's *méconnaissance*, the infant is separated from the Mother through the process of abjection, which is accompanied by feelings of disgust and nausea. The process must occur so that the child can subsequently create an autonomous identity through a variety of cleansing rituals, such as toilet training, which then enables it to maintain a clean and proper body—the *corps propre* (50). The infant's separation from the Mother thus marks the first experience of abjection. This initial experience is a precursor to later encounters with the abject throughout life. The abject "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4) and "does

[6] For a further discussion on Simone de Beauvoir, see Sarah Fishwick, "Reassessing Beauvoir's Account of the Body in 'Le Deuxieme Sexe'" (*Simone de Beauvoir Studies,* vol. 16, pp. 55-68).

not respect borders, positions, rules" (4); it is the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Abjection is experienced when the subject encounters such objects and phenomena that disturb their sense of identity and order, such as corpses, certain foods, waste, and notably, menstrual blood. Kristeva identifies excrements and menstrual blood as two categories of "polluting objects" (71) and posits that the latter "threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate" (71). The ambiguity of menstrual blood also lies in its representation of both woman's ability and inability to procreate. Hence, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, abjection is a "refusal of the defiling, impure, incontrollable materiality of a subject's embodied existence" (*Sexual Subversions* 72).

The societal taboos that have surrounded menstrual blood for centuries exemplify the broader implications of Kristeva's theory. Menstrual blood is often subject to cultural stigmatisation and taboo because it threatens to disrupt established norms and boundaries, and its abject nature challenges the societal desire for cleanliness, order, and predictability. The taboos reinforce the process of abjection by marking menstrual blood as something to be hidden, controlled, or purified, thus attempting to maintain the social order through the rejection of what is considered polluting or impure. As Leonore Davidoff asserts, "middle-class Victorians shrank from naming their own bodily functions", and these functions as well as sexuality were "separated from the public gaze" (89). Agnes perceives her menstrual blood as the ultimate abject, which mirrors society's abjection of the feminine and the societal pressure dictating the maintenance of a clean, pure, untainted body.

Agnes's resentment of her own body nevertheless extends far beyond the aversion to the regular discharge of menstrual blood; her self-loathing is deeply ingrained in her perception of her body as "frail and treacherous" (Faber 211). She regards her body as a burden, a site of failure and vulnerability. The notion of her body as "treacherous" alludes to a profound sense of betrayal by her own physical form, a treachery that was pre-determined by her gender before she was even born and further exacerbated by the acts of violence inflicted upon her flesh. "As for me, my earth-born flesh is showing dreadful signs of decay", Agnes writes in her diary, "and I cannot bear the thought of being trapped in it for much longer" (514). The sense of entrapment stems from her confinement in a dark bedroom, regular examinations by Doctor Curlew, and nonconsensual sexual intercourse William subjects Agnes to. Many scholars have revealed a relatively high prevalence of marital rape in Victorian society, and the legal approaches towards marital sexual coercion during this period

remain a topic of debate.[7] For instance, Helen Goodman posits that marital rape was perceived as a "technically impossible concept during the nineteenth century", since a husband's "enforcement of his conjugal rights was entirely legal, and as such could not constitute the illegal act of rape" (51). Agnes' entrapment in her oppressed body leads her to construct a belief in what she calls a Second Body, a Platonic ideal, a perfect and untainted form existing somewhere in another realm that will free her from the constraints of her earth-born body once she leaves the material world. Apart from living in a body that was gendered from the start, manipulated by her stepfather, confined in a dark bedroom, and subjected to rape, Agnes does not possess the means to break free from the oppression.

In failing to conform to Victorian ideals of womanhood, Agnes feels a profound sense of inadequacy, since in many ways, she has failed to be a woman—that is, to fulfil the ideals of what a woman should be. As a lady, she is expected to be a motherly, gentle "angel in the house", a nurturing, self-sacrificing wife who upholds the sanctity of the domestic sphere. However, her growing paranoia, hallucinations, and eventual confinement in a dark bedroom are rather reminiscent of Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman in the attic, who must be locked away due to her dangerous "deviation". Ultimately, Agnes' attempt to escape the oppressive circumstances by running away from William represents the pinnacle of her failure to conform. The notion of an upper-class woman leaving her husband and child, although popular in Victorian sensation novels, was a radical departure from the norm in nineteenth-century Britain, and the punishment for this transgression—drowning—is a tragic consequence of her attempt to take her own life back.

As evident from the analysis above, Agnes' story illustrates the devastating effects of societal pressures, expectations, and traumatic experiences on female autonomy. Her trauma is deeply intertwined with her body and the societal expectations placed upon it, and her life is marred by repeated violations of her bodily autonomy. Her reproductive organs, violated through rape and invasive medical examinations, are central to her suffering, much like Sugar's. The traumatic events, intertwined with societal repression and abjection of female biology and exacerbated by the cyclical nature of her trauma, reinforce her self-loathing and despair, ultimately leading to her tragic death. Through Agnes' journey, Michel Faber offers a critique of the oppressive structures that dictate and confine women's bodies while revealing

[7] Marital rape in Victorian England has been studied quite extensively, especially in feminist and psychological discourse. For a more detailed account of marital sexual violence and its position in the law, see Carolyn A. Conley, "Rape and Justice in Victorian England" (*Victorian Studies,* vol. 29, pp. 519-536), or Joanna Bourke, "Sexual Violence, Marital Guidance, and Victorian Bodies: An Aesthesiology" (*Victorian Studies,* vol. 50, pp. 419-436).

the profound effects they have on female psychology.

5. Subverting Stereotypes

At a first glance, Faber's portrayal of Agnes seems to reinforce the very stereotype of the frail, deficient, and flawed female body that has received a lot of criticism in feminist discourse. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, "misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control" ("Notes" 13). Agnes' characterisation aligns with Grosz' assertion; she is a sickly "madwoman" trapped in a weak body, and her tragic path was forged for her by the male authorities in her life rather than her own choices. However, a closer examination reveals that the novel does not present a straightforward endorsement of the inadequate female body stereotype; rather, it exposes the reasons behind Agnes' frailty, insanity, and fear, providing the reader with the necessary context.

Through its omniscient view, the narrative exposes the limitations placed upon women's knowledge about their own bodies and the true origins of Agnes' distress. Thanks to the all-seeing narrator, who provides a critical distance from the story, the reader knows what the characters do not. Agnes' fear of menstrual blood is not a product of an inherent female weakness but rather a belated reaction to multiple traumatic events, further exacerbated by the overall societal silence on the subject of menstruation. This emphasises the power of the structures that limit women's agency and adequate understanding of their own biology. Agnes' mental illness can further be attributed to her tumour—whose existence is unknown to all but the narrator and the reader—not to the disposition of her womb. As the narrator puts it: "No one will ever find [the tumour]. Roentgen photography is twenty years in the future, and Doctor Curlew, whatever parts of Agnes Rackham he may examine, is not about to go digging in her eye-socket with a scalpel" (Faber 195). Her fits of rage are likewise contextualised and, arguably, from the view of a contemporary reader fully justified; indeed, most of her stem from her frustration, loneliness, confinement, surveillance, loveless marriage, forceful sexual encounters, and painful physical examinations. In view of nineteenth-century ideals, however, she is considered a madwoman.

The description of and approach towards Agnes' mental illness illustrate that the body

is also negotiated through language, particularly within the context of patriarchal and medical discourses. Language actively shapes how the body is understood, controlled, and valued, and has the power to inscribe meanings onto it. William refers to Agnes as a "madwoman", a "candidate for an asylum" (262), while Doctor Curlew regards her as a lost cause who cannot be helped unless William allows for her confinement in a mental institution. Doctor Curlew believes that women have a natural predisposition towards hysteria and madness due to their biology, e.g. their wombs, whereas madness in men is the product of external factors. As he puts it, "mental illness in the male has nothing to do with nature" (75). He further claims that men "have no womb that can be taken out if things get beyond a joke" (75). It is precisely by revealing the true origin of her disease—the tumour behind her left eye and the trauma she experienced—that the novel subverts and challenges the nineteenth-century attitudes towards female psychology. Doctor Curlew's futile attempts to locate a displacement of Agnes' womb do indeed seem almost absurd in view of the real cause of her condition, exposing the fallacy of attributing women's mental health issues to their reproductive organs or an inherent liability.

Michel Faber also explores the power of language through the characters' names. The name "Sugar Castaway" blends the ideas of sweetness and disposability. As a prostitute, Sugar is both desired and exploited, her body commodified like sugar—a luxury, yet easily consumed and forgotten. Her surname "Castaway" suggests her marginalisation and status as an outcast, a woman discarded by respectable society, forced to live on its margins. Agnes' name, which evokes religious and moral connotations like purity, innocence, and virtue, becomes tragically ironic as she descends into paranoia, fear, and madness. Faber juxtaposes Agnes' symbolic name with her mental deterioration, emphasising the tension between societal ideals and the personal toll they take on women who fail to conform to them. William Rackham's surname, associated with the notorious pirate Jack Rackham, subtly reinforces his role as a man who pillages the lives of those around him. He figuratively steals the autonomy of both Agnes and Sugar to exercise control over their bodies and lives. Faber's use of such names invites the reader to see his characters not just as individuals but as representations of different societal and/or systemic forces, which are then challenged, questioned, and criticised throughout the novel.

Agnes' struggle is, in a way, a critique of a society that reinforces the perception of the female body as "unruly", without acknowledging the reasons why it came to be unruly in the first place. By revealing the underlying causes of Agnes' physical and mental distress, the novel illustrates that systemic injustices and societal expectations possess the power to

confine women within limiting physical representations that further serve to reinforce and reflect their subordinate status. Like many neo-Victorian novels, *The Crimson Petal and the White* problematises and interrogates the Victorian past, providing the necessary context for the understanding and construction of female bodies in the Victorian era and presenting a different set of perspectives that scholars like Grosz have called for, those that are based on "women's specificities, experiences, positions, rather than on those of men" ("Notes" xi).

6. Concluding Remarks

The present article has examined the complexities of female corporeality as depicted in Michel Faber's neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Built largely on feminist and psychoanalytic theories, it has analysed the themes of commodification, trauma, agency, and healing in relation to the female body. The exploration of female corporeality and trauma draws attention to the complex relationship between the body, trauma, and societal structures. Through the characters of Sugar Castaway and Agnes Rackham, whose lives are in many ways parallel despite their different socio-economic backgrounds, I illustrated how women's bodies are commodified, regulated, and subjected to violence within a male-dominated society. Agnes represents the Victorian ideal of a lady wrapped in purity and innocence, whereas Sugar embodies its living antithesis. Sugar is a woman who operates in a space designated to contain and satisfy male desire, a space that allows respectable women like Agnes to maintain their purity. In other words, Sugar works to satisfy the desires that Agnes is expected to remain ignorant of, but, as the analysis demonstrates, both spaces—prostitution and the pedestal of pure upper-class womanhood—ultimately contribute to the development of trauma in both women.

I have first concentrated on the commodification of the female body in relation to prostitution and marriage, respectively, arguing that Sugar subverts the power dynamics inherent in the act of commodification and strategically uses her body to ascend the social hierarchy. Conversely, Agnes embodies the aesthetic commodification, cultivating her beauty and virtues since childhood to become a valuable commodity on the marriage market.

I have further explored the concepts of trauma and agency, identifying the trauma in both women as intrinsically linked to their bodies and gender. Sugar's body was abused and violated multiple times, with her genitals bearing much of this violence. The trauma then resurfaces repeatedly, unexpectedly, and involuntarily, exemplifying the notion of

Nachträglichkeit or belatedness as proposed by Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth. It often manifests as repetition-compulsion in her attempt to master the traumatic stimulus retrospectively and is at times accompanied by the intrusive voice of her mother. Sugar eventually finds solace in writing a novel and nurturing Sophie, disrupting thus the cycle of abuse and integrating her trauma, yet the repeated assaults and exploitation she endured finally culminate in her self-induced miscarriage. This enables her to finally escape from William, but her organs, a marker of her womanhood, are permanently mutilated.

Agnes' trauma, rooted in her father's death and marital rape, is exacerbated by societal pressures and manifests through hallucinations and delusions, particularly connected to her menstrual blood, which she experiences as abject in line with Julia Kristeva's theory. Much like Sugar, whose trauma is intimately linked to her reproductive organs, Agnes' suffering is likewise tied to her own genitals. The pathologisation of her body perpertuated by Doctor Curlew further reinforces her conviction that her body is weak, inadequate, and flawed; thus, she constructs a belief in what she calls a Second Body, a perfect flesh that she will transform into after death. While Sugar manages to elope, Agnes drowns in the Thames in her escape attempt. The analysis of both women emphasised the connection between the psychological aspects of trauma and the broader systemic, institutional, and gender-related dimensions, which is, according to critics such as Ann Cvetkovich or Laura Vickroy, a necessary further step in contemporary trauma studies.

The Crimson Petal and the White approaches the Victorian past with a critical re-examination and engages in a dialogue with it, which is one of the key aims of neo-Victorian literature in general. The omniscient narrator is employed to expose the hidden reality beyond the protagonists' challenging circumstances, revealing the systematic inequalities that directly contribute to them. The novel explores the universality of struggles for female agency that transcend not only social classes, but also historical context, and emphasises the lasting impact of these structures on women's psychology and bodies. As such, the novel provides an intriguing insight into the complexities of the female experience, allowing thus for an in-depth examination of the historical and contemporary sacrifices made in the fight for women's rights.

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