REWRITING THE VICTORIANA: HISTORY, MEMORY, AND FICTION IN SELECT NEO-VICTORIAN NOVELS

Doctoral Thesis

by

Apoorva Shekher

(2019HSZ0017)

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ROPAR

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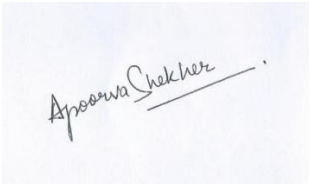
for Mumma, as always

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **Rewriting the Victoriana: History, Memory, and Fiction in Select Neo-Victorian Novels** has been solely authored by me. It presents the result of my own independent investigation/research conducted during the time period from February 2020 to March 2025 under the supervision of Dr. Ansu Louis (Late), Assistant Professor, IIT Ropar and Dr. Sreekumar Jayadevan, Assistant Professor, IIT Ropar. To the best of my knowledge, it is an original work, both in terms of research content and narrative, and has not been submitted or accepted elsewhere, in part or in full, for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship, or similar title of any university or institution. Further, due credit has been attributed to the relevant state-of-the-art and collaborations (if any) with appropriate citations and acknowledgments, in line with established ethical norms and practices. I also declare that any idea/data/fact/source stated in my thesis has not been fabricated/ falsified/ misrepresented. All the principles of academic honesty and integrity have been followed. I fully understand that if the thesis is found to be unoriginal, fabricated, or plagiarized, the Institute reserves the right to withdraw the thesis from its archive and revoke the associated Degree conferred. Additionally, the Institute also reserves the right to appraise all concerned sections of society of the matter for their information and necessary action (if any). If accepted, I hereby consent for my thesis to be available online in the Institute's Open Access repository, inter-library loan, and the title & abstract to be made available to outside organizations.



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Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Rewriting the Victoriana: History, Memory, and Fiction in Select Neo-Victorian Novels** submitted by **Apoorva Shekher (2019HSZ0017)** for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, is a record of bonafide research work carried out under my (our) guidance and supervision. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original and has not been submitted, either in part or full, for the award of any other degree, diploma, fellowship, associateship or similar title of any university or institution.

In my (our) opinion, the thesis has reached the standard fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the Degree.

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Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

-THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT

Lay Summary

The Victorian era continues to capture our imagination, with books, movies, and television often revisiting its history, culture, and literature. Some scholars criticize these modern retellings as unnecessary nostalgia, while others see them as a way to celebrate the past. This thesis explores how neo-Victorian fiction—modern novels that reimagine the Victorian age—engages with history in creative and meaningful ways.

The study examines seven novels that revisit the Victorian period, including works by A.S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Graham Swift, Peter Carey, and Emma Tennant. It looks at how these books reshape and reinterpret Victorian themes, characters, and settings, showing how the past can be recalled and rewritten in new ways. Rather than simply copying historical events, these novels use memory, imagination, and storytelling to offer alternative versions of history.

By analyzing these novels, this research highlights the many ways in which historical fiction helps us understand the past—not as a fixed truth but as something flexible, open to different perspectives, and relevant to contemporary culture. These novels do more than just tell Victorian stories; they challenge traditional history, explore forgotten voices, and show how memory shapes our understanding of cultural identity.

Through this study, neo-Victorian fiction is positioned as part of an ongoing historical conversation, where literature becomes a tool for rethinking history and expanding our collective memory.

Abstract

This thesis critically examines canonical and marginal neo-Victorian works through the lens of postmodernist self-reflexivity and their replicatory consumption of Victorian themes. It explores the interplay of memory, historical fiction, and imagination in contemporary representations of the Victorian era, particularly in an age marked by cultural amnesia. Central to this study is the establishment of nostalgic recollection as a subversive structuring principle of neo-Victorian fiction.

Employing a postmodernist framework, the research interrogates contemporary authors' fascination with the Victorian past, aligning with Lyotard's conceptualization of postmodernism as a form of radical subjective fictionality that eschews mimesis and organic unity. The study engages four critical perspectives—metafictional engagement, the neo-Victorian sensation novel, postmodern anxiety, and nostalgic revisionism—using an array of theoretical paradigms, including historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon, Munslow), Levinasian alterity, and Svetlana Boym's theorization of nostalgia. The corpus of texts analyzed includes A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, Graham Swift's *Ever After*, Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* and Emma Tennant's *Tess*.

Key findings reveal that Byatt employs metafiction not merely as an aesthetic device but as a means to destabilize historical and fictional reliability, challenging the privileging of creative over critical narratives. Waters' neo-Victorian fiction subverts the heteronormative constructs of the Thatcherite socio-political landscape, positioning her characters as anti-family, transgressive figures. Swift's *Ever After* articulates a postmodern anxiety distinct from its Victorian Darwinian counterpart, emerging from encounters with the Victorian 'Other'. Finally, revisionist neo-Victorian novels enact a dual nostalgic impulse—restorative and reflective—wherein the Victorian past is both reimagined and interrogated, coalescing into what this study terms "neo-nostalgia".

The thesis concludes that rather than being imprisoned in a Jamesonian pastiche, neo-Victorian fiction enacts an abrogation of tradition through its apparent fidelity to it. It situates the intellectual tensions of the present within the ostensibly harmonious polyphony of the past, addressing the Nietzschean dilemma of historical engagement. In reorienting the conservative notion of nostalgia, this research contributes to the critical discourse on neo-Victorian fiction as an academic discipline that actively negotiates the intersections of history, memory, and fiction rather than engaging in antiquarian retrospection.

Keywords: Cultural Amnesia, Historical Fiction, Neo-Victorian, Nostalgia, Postmodernism

List of Publications from Thesis

Sections of some of the chapters in this thesis have been published in different versions:

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Other Publications

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Chapter 1
Introduction

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound famously coined the term "Victoriana" as a pejorative label to critique the prevalent obsession with preserving and revisiting the Victorian past. He lamented, "For most of us, the odor of defunct Victoriana is so unpleasant . . . that we are content to leave the past where we find it" (Gardiner 168). However, the passage of time has rendered Pound's declaration somewhat paradoxical, as the Victorian era has continually been reimagined and reconstructed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Far from being a relic of the past, the Victorians persist as an enduring reference point in contemporary discourse, providing a means for modern readers and scholars to contextualize their present through retrospective engagement with the nineteenth century. Despite its rich history of reinterpretation, the academic field of neo-/post-/retro-Victorian studies remains in its formative stage. This thesis, therefore, aspires to contribute meaningfully to the ever-evolving methodological framework of neo-Victorian scholarship. The persistent allure of nineteenth-century Britain—particularly its culture, literature, and ideological structures—offers a sense of continuity amidst the instability of a rapidly globalizing world, where postmodern scepticism serves as the dominant epistemological lens. Contrary to the misconception that neo-Victorian fiction is merely historical fiction set in the nineteenth century, this study reconceptualizes the genre as a dynamic intersection of metafiction, sensation fiction, Darwinian anxieties, and the revisitation of iconic Victorian characters. The four chapters of this thesis endeavor to dissect these elements, offering a nuanced understanding of neo-Victorian fiction beyond its superficial temporal setting.

The remnants of Victorianism are deeply embedded in Britain's urban landscape—its architecture, roadways, and ecclesiastical structures act as palimpsests, reinscribing the legacy of the nineteenth century onto the present. Yet, despite this architectural and cultural continuity, there remains a distinct tendency among contemporary critics and the general populace to treat Victorian culture as an absolute "other". Instead of recognizing the spatial and ideological proximity between the two centuries, modern audiences often perceive an increasing distance between them. This paradox of "familiar unfamiliarity" is succinctly articulated by Robin Gilmour in *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature*, where he observes that contemporary society regards the Victorians with a mixture of "envy, resentment, reproach, and nostalgia . . . . we still live in the long shadow cast by the nineteenth century, in the aftermath of that powerful and seemingly assured civilization" (1). The keyword

"seemingly" serves as a crucial axis for this discussion, as it encapsulates the tension between the grandeur of the Victorian era and the postmodern impulse to deconstruct and problematize historical narratives. This research explores the paradoxical repudiation and simultaneous invocation of the Victorian era within neo-Victorian literature, revealing its persistent influence in contemporary fiction.

In the early twentieth century, modernist writers were eager to cast off the perceived shackles of Victorian moralism and literary convention. They dismissed the period as an age of oppressive ideology and artistic stagnation, as evidenced in their critiques of "the excessive moralism of George Eliot, the journalistic style of Charles Dickens, the insincerity of William Thackeray, and the melancholia of Alfred Tennyson" (Taylor 4). This anti-Victorian sentiment found its most scathing expression in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, which reimagined four prominent figures of the era by exposing their hypocrisies, contradictions, and failures, thus subverting the hagiographic tone of traditional Victorian biographies. However, as Britain transitioned beyond the devastation of the Second World War, attitudes toward Victorian culture shifted. By the mid-twentieth century, scholars and cultural critics began to recognize the era's complexity, acknowledging its vivid dynamism rather than reducing it to a monolithic, oppressive past. The resurgence of Victorian ideals gained momentum in the 1980s, particularly under the political agenda of Margaret Thatcher, who championed a return to "Victorian values". Thatcher's invocation of the era was deeply informed by her advocacy for the traditional family unit and her vision of a stable, moral society—one that stood in contrast to the perceived moral decay of contemporary Britain. Her vision, however, was largely selective and uncritical, idealizing a sanitized version of Victorian society that aligned with her political ideology. Notably, this period also witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of the heritage industry in Britain, leading to a cultural renaissance of Victorian-inspired literature, museums, television series, films, architecture, and fashion. Consumer culture eagerly commodified Victorian aesthetics, transforming them into marketable products that appealed to a nostalgic public. Yet, this commodification often glossed over the complexities and contradictions of the era, reducing it to an aesthetic rather than engaging with its deeper socio-political undercurrents.

We attempt to challenge such one-dimensional analyses by resisting both uncritical glorification and wholesale repudiation of the Victorian past. Instead, the thesis employs innovative analytical frameworks to explore the ways in which neo-Victorian literature repurposes Victorian themes, styles, and characters to engage with contemporary ethical and

critical concerns. By doing so, it positions neo-Victorian fiction not as a mere imitation of the past but as a medium through which modern anxieties, aspirations, and ideological tensions are articulated. At the heart of this thesis lies a deep engagement with the burgeoning subgenre of neo-Victorian fiction, particularly its ability to surface repressed histories and challenge dominant historical narratives. This study aims to critically examine the ways in which neo-Victorian novels negotiate themes of sexuality, metafiction, Darwinian anxieties, race, empire, and nostalgia, revealing their capacity to interrogate both the past and the present. Neo-Victorian fiction remains an evolving and contested field, fraught with complexities that demand rigorous analysis.

Among the key challenges confronting scholars of neo-Victorian fiction is the task of differentiating it from historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to describe novels that self-consciously blend historical fact with literary invention. Additionally, there exists an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which neo-Victorian fiction maintains fidelity to the historical past versus subverting it through contemporary ideological lenses. Is it a form of parody, pastiche, or something altogether distinct? Such questions underscore the fluid and mutable nature of the genre, making it a challenging yet rewarding subject of scholarly inquiry. This thesis endeavors to unravel the perceived dichotomy between nostalgia and subversion, arguing that neo-Victorian fiction operates as more than a cultural doppelgänger of the Victorian Age; rather, it serves as a site of critical reflection and reinvention. We analyze both canonical and marginal neo-Victorian texts, exploring how they incorporate and reframe Victorian themes through the lens of postmodernist self-reflexivity and intertextuality. By investigating the interplay of memory, historical fiction, and imaginative reconstruction, the study seeks to uncover how contemporary representations of the Victorian era both engage with and challenge cultural amnesia. Furthermore, this research establishes the subversive potential of nostalgic recollection as a structural and thematic device in neo-Victorian novels, illustrating how these texts simultaneously critique and celebrate the Victorian past. By achieving these objectives, this thesis sheds new light on the complexities of neo-Victorian fiction, revealing it as a genre that actively negotiates the intersection of history, fiction, and cultural memory.

The push for a precise definition of neo-Victorianism reflects broader processes of academic canonization. The widespread emphasis on self-referentiality acts as a distinct boundary that separates neo-Victorian works from other historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. While this distinction helps solidify neo-Victorianism as a legitimate academic category, it may inadvertently lead to a narrowing of the recognized corpus. In doing so, it mirrors historical

debates about distinctions between high and low culture by elevating texts with critical and self-aware qualities. Beyond the question of what should or should not be classified as neo-Victorian, there exists a deeper philosophical issue: the assumption that the modern perspective is inherently superior to the past. This viewpoint suggests that contemporary culture has the ability to address and rectify historical exclusions and injustices, at least within the realm of fiction. At a time when academic discourse is solidifying its understanding of what constitutes neo-Victorianism, it is important to critically examine the formation of this canon. By applying the same level of self-awareness to the field of study itself, scholars can better assess the constructed nature of neo-Victorianism, identifying both its core attributes and its peripheries. The act of shaping neo-Victorian studies thus serves a dual function: it consolidates past scholarship while also acknowledging that neo-Victorianism has become a cultural and academic trend.

Neo-Victorianism, by its very nature, revolves around repetition and the revisitation of Victorian motifs, with many theoretical approaches—ranging from trauma studies to psychoanalytic nostalgia—emphasizing the theme of return. However, repetition also risks reinforcing the very narratives it seeks to challenge, potentially obscuring unexplored aspects of history. Neo-Victorian fiction both reflects continuity with the past and underscores the differences between eras. The act of historical return is one that generates both a sense of familiarity and an unsettling sense of estrangement. By revisiting Victorian concepts of history, memory, and loss, such works reframe historical inquiry as an act of longing. This perspective serves as a foundation for much of the analysis which examines the desire for repetition in neo-Victorian fiction—whether in the form of traditional narrative structures, authoritative figures, or well-worn plots. The relationship between past and present informs how contemporary identity is constructed, with the Victorian age serving as a point of historical reference that provides stability in a rapidly changing world. Contemporary academic thought often looks to the nineteenth century to trace the origins of consumerism, sexuality, and gender constructs. The enduring appeal of the Victorian period lies in its capacity to serve as a foundation for theorizing modern cultural developments. More broadly, the neo-Victorian project is deeply entwined with contemporary identity politics. It has the potential to shape definitions of Britishness in a post-imperial and globalized society, responding to the political and cultural shifts of the twenty-first century. Rather than merely replicating historical fiction, neo-Victorianism actively engages with the past to articulate present concerns. Consequently, it is

not solely defined by its self-referential nature but also by the immersive strategies it employs to bring history into dialogue with modernity.

Neo-Victorian fiction frequently mirrors the past in ways that reveal a psychological connection between eras. Psychoanalysis plays a significant role in interpreting this phenomenon, as the Victorian age, once dismissed by modernist thinkers, has resurfaced in contemporary discourse. Freudian concepts such as the return of the repressed help explain this persistent engagement with the nineteenth century. Additionally, postcolonial theory provides further analytical tools, highlighting issues of cultural stereotyping, mimicry, and imperial legacies. The return of Victorian themes in contemporary culture suggests an ongoing negotiation with history, in which the past is continually re-examined through a modern lens. As historical theories of evolution have resurfaced in contemporary discussions, they serve as a useful analogy for understanding neo-Victorianism itself. Just as evolutionary ideas persist in cultural discourse, so too does the Victorian age, exerting a lasting influence on modern thought. Neo-Victorian literature functions as a dynamic space where historical narratives are reshaped to reflect contemporary preoccupations. By recognizing this interplay between past and present, we can better understand how neo-Victorianism continues to evolve within both literary scholarship and popular culture.

Dana Shiller in her 1997 article "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel" explores how contemporary fiction engages with the Victorian past, particularly through postmodern historical narratives. She examines how neo-Victorian novels blend historical accuracy with revisionist impulses, engaging both with the aesthetics of the nineteenth century and postmodern historiography. She critiques Fredric Jameson's claim that postmodern historicity erases the political significance of history by reducing it to aesthetic pastiche. Instead, Shiller argues that neo-Victorian novels like A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* engage deeply with history, attempting to reconstruct rather than merely appropriate the past. She situates neo-Victorian fiction within postmodern debates on historical representation. She references Jameson's concern that postmodernism commodifies history, transforming it into a collection of aesthetic styles rather than engaging with its political realities. According to Jameson, historical novels in the postmodern era no longer resurrect the lived experiences of the past but rather reproduce stereotypes and images detached from real historical context. Shiller counters this by suggesting that neo-Victorian novels do more than nostalgically mine the past for aesthetic appeal; they also interrogate historical narratives and the ways in which history is constructed and remembered. To illustrate this point, Shiller uses the example of

Possession in which Byatt constructs a dual narrative set in the present and the nineteenth century. Byatt's fictional Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, are not merely reflections of past literary figures but are used to explore the intersection of literature, gender, and historical narrative. The contemporary scholars in *Possession* act as literary detectives, uncovering long-buried secrets that reshape their understanding of Victorian literature. Shiller points out that Byatt's novel does not present history as an absolute truth but instead highlights the ways in which history is mediated through texts, interpretations, and personal biases. The novel engages with historiographical metafiction, demonstrating that history is constantly being rewritten based on new discoveries and perspectives.

Similarly, Ackroyd's *Chatterton* deconstructs historical authenticity by exploring the theme of forgery and artistic originality. The novel fictionalizes the life of Thomas Chatterton, the eighteenth-century poet known for his literary hoaxes, and follows a twentieth-century writer who investigates Chatterton's legacy. Shiller emphasizes how the novel plays with historical uncertainty, presenting multiple, conflicting accounts of Chatterton's life. In doing so, Ackroyd raises questions about the nature of authorship, the reliability of historical records, and the constructed nature of literary history. Rather than dismissing history as an inaccessible pastiche, *Chatterton* suggests that history remains a vital force that shapes contemporary identity and artistic creation. Shiller connects these neo-Victorian novels to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, arguing that Eliot's historical perspective shares affinities with postmodern historiography. *Middlemarch* presents history not as a grand narrative of major political events but as an accumulation of personal, often unrecorded moments that shape society. Shiller notes that Eliot's approach to history—one that acknowledges the personal and subjective dimensions of historical experience—aligns with the neo-Victorian method of revisiting the past through alternative perspectives. She argues that just as Eliot challenged traditional historical narratives, neo-Victorian authors reframe the Victorian past to recover marginalized voices and hidden stories.

Furthermore, Shiller argues that neo-Victorian fiction does not simply replicate Victorian literature but actively engages with it to critique and expand upon its themes. In *Possession*, for instance, Byatt not only emulates Victorian literary styles but also revises Victorian gender dynamics by giving prominence to female voices and experiences. Similarly, *Chatterton* blurs the boundaries between past and present, reality and fiction, to challenge conventional ideas of historical truth. Shiller argues that these novels are not nostalgic recreations of the past but are instead deeply invested in interrogating the narratives that have shaped our understanding of

Victorian history. Shiller also examines the role of historiographical self-awareness in neo-Victorian fiction. She discusses how these novels acknowledge their own textuality and emphasize the ways in which historical knowledge is mediated through texts. This self-reflexivity, she argues, does not mean that history is entirely inaccessible but rather that it must be approached with an awareness of its complexities and limitations. *Possession,* for example, foregrounds the act of historical research, demonstrating how contemporary scholars construct meaning from archival materials. By including fictionalized Victorian poems, letters, and diaries, Byatt immerses the reader in the process of historical reconstruction while also questioning the objectivity of historical truth. Shiller argues that neo-Victorian novels serve a redemptive function by revisiting and revising the Victorian past in ways that acknowledge both its limitations and its relevance to contemporary concerns. These novels challenge the idea that history is a fixed, unchangeable entity and instead present it as a dynamic and evolving discourse. By engaging with nineteenth-century literature and culture, neo-Victorian fiction offers new perspectives on historical narratives, making the past accessible while also critiquing its representations. Shiller's analysis highlights the complexity of neo-Victorian fiction, showing how these novels both celebrate and interrogate the past. By doing so, they offer a compelling alternative to Jameson's pessimistic view of postmodern historicity, demonstrating that literature can engage with the past in meaningful and transformative ways.

Scholars have highlighted the complexities of defining the term "Victorian" without offering a specific definition themselves. The word "Victorian" remains an inherently difficult term to pin down, a challenge that extends to its postmodern reinterpretations. It is tied to Queen Victoria as a historical figure. However, because it also conveys broader cultural and literary characteristics, its temporal scope often stretches beyond the queen's actual reign. Various disciplines apply the term in different ways to suit their needs. In literary studies, "Victorian" can be examined through historical, theoretical, and aesthetic lenses. Additionally, the term carries connotative meanings that shift depending on how later periods reassess the nineteenth century—whether through the lens of modernism, postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, or cultural studies. These differing perspectives inform how contemporary fiction revisits and reinterprets the era. The meaning of "Victorian" evolved almost immediately after Queen Victoria's death, initially used to contrast Edwardian sensibilities with Victorian ones—often in an oppositional way, where "Victorian values" were perceived as something to be outgrown. Over time, scholars have noted a shift in how the term is viewed: by the mid-twentieth century, Victorianism was less an oppressive father figure and more a distant but familiar ancestor. By

the late twentieth century, the term became more intimate, with reinterpretations reflecting sibling-like familiarity. Moreover, within each historical era that reinterprets the Victorian, internal contradictions emerge, complicating the binaries often drawn between past and present. Postmodernism further problematizes the meaning of Victorian. During the 1960s, for instance, two conflicting views arose: some saw Victorianism as a force of sexual repression, while others, with the benefit of historical distance, began deconstructing that assumption. Similarly, in the political discourse of the 1980s, the term was weaponized by opposing factions. Conservatives, especially under Margaret Thatcher, invoked Victorian values as symbols of progress and prosperity, while their opponents associated the same phrase with hardship and inequality. This demonstrates how the term Victorian is not only historically situated but also politically and ideologically charged, with its meaning shifting according to context.

When considering contemporary rewritings of the Victorian era, a variety of terms have been proposed: Victoriana, neo-Victorian, retro-Victorian, and post-Victorian, among others. The sheer number of terms reflects the diversity of perspectives on this subject. There are two main approaches to categorizing postmodern fiction that reworks the Victorian era. One approach relies on established literary critical categories such as historical fiction or historiographic metafiction. The other approach builds on the term Victorian itself, modifying it with prefixes or suffixes. Some scholars refine these terms further, using 'pseudo-Victorian fiction' to highlight the balance between continuity with and divergence from original Victorian texts. Many critics suggest that rewritings of Victorian texts fit within the category of historiographic metafiction. This classification allows for comparisons between the postmodern reinterpretations of Victorian literature and similar rewritings of Renaissance, Romantic, or Modernist texts. Ultimately, while multiple terms exist to describe the postmodern reworkings of Victorian literature, 'neo-Victorian fiction' emerges as a fitting label due to its flexibility and interdisciplinary applicability. It encapsulates both historical and aesthetic elements without rigidly detaching these works from the broader postmodern literary landscape. Interestingly, Bormann defines a neo-Victorian novel as:

> A neo-Victorian novel is a fictional work that derives meaning from an awareness of time as fluid, balancing the Victorian past with the present. It primarily engages with themes related to history, historiography, or the philosophy of history while maintaining an active dialogue with the Victorian era. This engagement can manifest at all narrative levels and through various

> literary forms, including action-driven storytelling, detailed descriptions, argumentative discourse, or stream-of-consciousness narration (Bormann 2002: 62).

By defining neo-Victorian literature within the broader category of historical fiction, Bormann highlights its specific connection to the Victorian age while leaving room for further refinement. Additionally, Bormann's phrasing suggests a degree of dissatisfaction with existing definitions, as indicated by his reluctant adoption of Shiller's term neo-Victorian novel. He justifies this choice by arguing that it aligns with other approaches to contemporary literary trends and acknowledges the emergence of a distinct "neo" phenomenon (Bormann 2002: 61). Expanding on this, exploring the similarities between neo-Victorian literature and other "neo" movements, such as neo-Renaissance or neo-Gothic, could deepen the discussion.

The term "Victoriana", coined by Ezra Pound in 1918, initially carried a negative connotation, suggesting that the remnants of the Victorian era were best left behind. However, contrary to Pound's dismissal, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a growing fascination with Victorian culture. By the century's end, Victorian influences permeated various aspects of popular culture, including film, television, fashion, literature, and historical scholarship. This enduring interest in the Victorian era has led to the continuous revival and reinterpretation of its themes, suggesting that contemporary culture actively embraces rather than rejects its legacy. Writers have played a significant role in this resurgence by reimagining the Victorian period in their fiction. Some, like A. S. Byatt in *Possession* and Graham Swift in *Ever After*, use parallel narratives to juxtapose past and present, exploring how history is reconstructed. Others, such as Gail Jones in *Sixty Lights* and William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in *The Difference Engine*, incorporate modern perspectives into their portrayal of the past without explicitly acknowledging the anachronism within the narrative itself. The Victorian period offers a rich source of inspiration, with authors drawing from historical events like the Crimean War, the cholera outbreaks, and the expansion of British colonialism. Themes such as scientific discovery, spiritualism, urbanization, and consumerism frequently appear in these modern interpretations. Some writers revisit classic literary characters, as in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, which reimagines the life of Magwitch from *Great Expectations*, or Emma Tennant's *Tess*, which extends the narrative of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Rewriting Victorian novels has become a prevalent practice, with authors offering new perspectives on classic tales. For example, Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* retells *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* from a housemaid's point of view, while Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a backstory for Bertha Mason from

Jane Eyre. This trend spans across genres, from detective fiction to science fiction, and includes authors from diverse backgrounds.

The revival of Victorian themes raises questions about how historical fiction constructs the past. Writers must balance period authenticity with contemporary sensibilities, prompting discussions about whether these novels merely replicate Victorian aesthetics or engage meaningfully with historical realities. While some critics, such as Linda Hutcheon, argue that historical fiction highlights the impossibility of fully recovering the past, others contend that these novels offer valuable insights into how history is remembered and reinterpreted. The resurgence of interest in the Victorian era reflects broader cultural concerns about memory and historical representation. Some scholars view nostalgia as a hindrance to critical historical inquiry, reducing the past to a sentimentalized aesthetic. Others, however, argue that nostalgia can serve a productive function, shaping how societies remember and reinterpret history. Svetlana Boym, for example, suggests that nostalgia is not merely regressive but can challenge dominant historical narratives by exploring alternative perspectives. Rather than dismiss neo-Victorian fiction as nostalgic escapism, it may be more useful to consider how these novels contribute to contemporary understandings of the past. They do not simply reconstruct the Victorian world but actively engage with its complexities, questioning how history is shaped, remembered, and retold. In doing so, they reflect not only on the Victorian era itself but also on the present moment, revealing the evolving ways in which history is woven into cultural memory.

The rise of neo-Victorian fiction appears to coincide with the fading of direct personal recollections of the Victorian era. By the 1980s, there were very few individuals left who had first-hand memories of that period. Many neo-Victorian authors frame their work in terms of memory rather than historical accuracy, and their novels frequently explore memory as a means of engaging with the past. However, critical discussions often associate the genre with postmodern scepticism about historical knowledge rather than an effort to recall the past. Christian Gutleben's early analysis of neo-Victorian fiction approaches it through the lens of aesthetic postmodernism, emphasizing how these novels either mimic or challenge Victorian literary styles rather than engaging with historical inquiry. He does not explicitly consider their connection to historical fiction, a genre with an inherently complex relationship with historiography. At a time when postmodernism challenged conventional historical authority, fiction appeared to gain new freedom from concerns about factual accuracy. However, scholarly discourse largely dismissed any straightforward attempt to resurrect the past as

uncritical nostalgia. This created a binary in which historical fiction was either expected to ironically question representation or risk being deemed naïve. Viewing historical fiction as a mode of memory-making aligns with Mieke Bal's argument that memory is an ongoing process in which the past is continuously reinterpreted and reshaped in the present, influencing the future (Bal, 1999). Approaching neo-Victorian novels as texts of memory acknowledges the diverse ways they engage with history, moving beyond an automatic preference for irony over nostalgia. This perspective also complicates the idea of nostalgia itself, recognizing it as a multifaceted form of remembrance. Furthermore, understanding neo-Victorian fiction as an active process of recollection highlights the reader's role in constructing historical meaning. This perspective sheds light on how contemporary culture, while deeply fascinated with history, often struggles to engage with it in a truly historical manner.

The distinction between history and fiction has been debated for centuries while also seeming, on the surface, to be self-evident. Historically, scholars have attempted to define these categories definitively, either by mutually acknowledging their differences or by prioritizing history as the more authoritative discipline. However, history is paradoxically vulnerable—its claim to truth is continually challenged by the emotional and persuasive power of fiction which can alter the dominant perceptions of the past in different ways. These concerns are particularly evident in debates over historical fiction, which is often scrutinized for its liberties with historical facts. Historical fiction is frequently described as a blend of factual history and creative storytelling. All hybrid genres blur boundaries, but historical fiction does so in a particularly contentious way. Because it draws attention to its dual nature, defining historical fiction inevitably highlights the difficulties in defining both history and fiction. Most analyses of historical fiction view it as engaging with historiography rather than with fiction itself. The traditional historical novel, as defined by early scholars, was meant to entertain and arouse curiosity rather than engage with complex philosophical debates about historical knowledge. However, by the late nineteenth century, challenges to historical objectivity questioned whether history could ever be truly objective. They argued that historians are inevitably influenced by their own perspectives, meaning that historical accounts are always shaped by subjective interpretations. For historical fiction, this presented a dilemma. The nineteenth-century realist novel often included moral judgments about historical figures and events, but such judgments, critics argued, were inevitably anachronistic, reflecting the values of the novelist rather than the past itself. This led some scholars to declare the historical novel obsolete by the end of the nineteenth century. However, Diana Wallace argues that historical fiction persisted into the

twentieth century, particularly among women writers. She suggests that, just as the Napoleonic Wars had shaped historical consciousness in the early nineteenth century, the First World War renewed an awareness of living through history. Women, in particular, turned to historical fiction as a means of exploring their newfound social and political roles. Wallace contends that the dominance of male-centered definitions of the genre, particularly those modeled after Walter Scott, rendered women's historical fiction critically invisible.

In the early twentieth century, many writers distanced themselves from the Victorian period, portraying it as the opposite of modernity. Literary and artistic modernists, along with political liberals, rejected the values of the Victorian era—such as repression, realism, materialism, and laissez-faire capitalism. Writers like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis repudiated Victorian influences to establish their distinct modernist identity. They criticized mid-Victorian authors for excessive moralism (George Eliot), journalistic prose (Charles Dickens), insincerity (William Thackeray), and melancholia (Alfred Tennyson). The strongest expression of this anti-Victorian sentiment appeared in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which rejected the grand, reverent biographies typical of the period in favor of concise, critical portrayals that highlighted the flaws, insecurities, and contradictions of its subjects. This initial rejection of Victorian values was intensified by the economic crises of the 1930s, which widened the gap between Victorian-era materialism and the harsh realities of widespread unemployment. However, even amid this dismissal of the period, some ambivalence remained. By the end of World War II, interest in the Victorian period experienced a resurgence, particularly in Britain and America. The Victoria and Albert Museum contributed to this shift with exhibitions marking the centenary of the Great Exhibition (1951) and the museum's founding (1952), reframing Victorian decorative arts as worthy of scholarly attention rather than mere unfashionable oddities.

The perception of the Victorian era as quaint and distant was reinforced by historiographical approaches that sought to categorize and contain it. By the mid-twentieth century, disenchantment with modernity—due to war and economic instability—led to a shift in how the Victorians were viewed. Earlier critiques that had framed them as outdated or oppressive gave way to a reassessment of their complexity and diversity. Some scholars began to recognize the richness of Victorian intellectual life beyond the well-known "eminent Victorians," incorporating reformers, scientists, theologians, and artists from both mainstream and marginalized cultural spheres. Initially, this revival focused on elite culture, reflecting the Victorian era's own reverence for 'high' art and literature. However, by the 1960s, new

theoretical perspectives—such as feminism and psychoanalysis—broadened the scope of Victorian studies to include previously overlooked groups, such as women, the working class, and colonial subjects. A key turning point in the study of Victorian culture was Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians* (1964), which examined the hidden world of Victorian pornography. Marcus argued that this subculture had been suppressed both during the Victorian era itself and in subsequent historical analyses, and he sought to restore a fuller, more complex picture of Victorian society. His work contributed to a broader perception of the Victorians as deeply preoccupied with sexuality. Michel Foucault later challenged the prevailing narrative of Victorian sexual repression, which he saw as a cultural myth serving modern self-perception. He argued that rather than being silenced, discourse on sex actually proliferated in the nineteenth century, albeit in regulated and coded forms. Discussions of sexuality, while constrained in everyday language, became central to religious, political, and scientific discourses, shaping individual identities and social norms. Foucault questioned why the twentieth century was so invested in the idea of Victorian repression, suggesting that this notion allowed modernity to define itself as a force of liberation against a prudish past. In doing so, he reframed the Victorian period as a site of dynamic and contested discourse, rather than simply one of repression. Foucault's ideas gained traction in the late 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in Britain. Interestingly, both Foucault and Thatcher engaged with Victorian themes, though in starkly different ways. While Foucault sought to deconstruct rigid ideas about sexuality and power, Thatcher invoked the Victorian era as a moral ideal, promoting a return to "Victorian values" as a response to perceived social decay. Her policies reinforced traditional family structures and moral codes. Thatcher's nostalgic portrayal of the Victorians resembled the earlier caricatures put forth by Lytton Strachey, reducing the era to a set of rigid moral standards. Her rhetoric framed the era as a golden age of discipline, self-reliance, and strong family values, in contrast to the supposed moral laxity of contemporary Britain. In this way, she used the Victorian past as a political tool to advocate for conservative social policies. Her portrayal of Victorian society was not grounded in historical accuracy but rather in an idealized vision that served as a critique of modern culture. Thatcher's use of the past functioned as a symbolic contrast to the present, embodying a lost sense of order and virtue. Her vision emphasized hard work, thrift, and moral rectitude, creating an idealized Victorian society populated by industrious and disciplined citizens. This romanticized view of the period aligned with her broader political agenda, promoting deregulated capitalism, reduced welfare dependency, and a return to traditional family structures. Ultimately, Thatcher's interpretation of the Victorian era was a selective and

nostalgic one, standing in stark contrast to the more nuanced and critical perspectives developed by historians, literary scholars, and theorists like Foucault. While she sought to revive the values of the past to shape contemporary Britain, academic discourse continued to complicate and challenge the myths surrounding the Victorians, revealing their era as more diverse, contradictory, and dynamic than simplistic historical narratives suggested.

Margaret Thatcher championed what she called 'Victorian values', emphasizing traits like diligence, self-improvement, independence, financial prudence, cleanliness, self-respect, neighborly support, national pride, and commitment to one's community. However, historian Raphael Samuel challenges this selective portrayal, contrasting Thatcher's rigid moral framework with the more vibrant and communal spirit that emerges from oral histories of the era. These personal recollections highlight a different kind of Victorian experience—one filled with social connection, lively gatherings, and shared traditions. Despite the differences in perspective, both Thatcher's rhetoric and these oral histories present the Victorian era as an idealized golden age—each using it as a reference point to critique the present. However, Thatcher's interpretation of Victorian Britain was far more austere, focusing on discipline, economic restraint, and personal responsibility. As Samuel notes, her recollections are not rooted in fond memories of childhood joys but rather in the lessons of hard work and self-restraint. Yet, Samuel points out the contradictions in Thatcher's vision. While she called for a return to thrift and economic caution, her policies did not reflect this; consumer debt increased significantly during her tenure, and traditional industries were dismantled. In practice, her government pursued modernization rather than preserving the past. Even as she praised Victorian ideals, she targeted historic institutions such as the House of Lords, universities, the Church of England, and the legal profession for reform. At times, she even dismissed elements of the Victorian era as outdated. Samuel argues that her use of 'Victorian values' was a rhetorical device that projected an image of stability while, in reality, enabling sweeping change.

Thatcher's Victorian values were in fact a vague, adaptable concept—readily understood but resistant to precise definition. This made them an effective political tool, as they could be reshaped to fit different agendas. Similarly, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb critiques modern British society by drawing comparisons with its Victorian past, though she avoids the term "values" and instead emphasizes Victorian "virtues". Unlike Thatcher, she portrays the Victorian era not as a time of economic strength and discipline but as one of immense hardship, where moral integrity provided a guiding force amid poverty and suffering. According to her,

the modern era lacks the firm moral convictions that once shaped society, and instead, values have become subjective and fluid, open to personal interpretation rather than absolute moral principles. Himmelfarb argues that Victorian morality was deeply ingrained in public and private life, shaping both policy and personal conduct. By invoking Victorian virtues, she seeks to reintroduce moral clarity into contemporary discourse. She acknowledges the flaws of the Victorian era—its rigid class structure, gender inequality, and harsh social constraints—yet believes that its strong moral framework had merits. However, like Thatcher, her portrayal of the period relies on the notion of a stark divide between past and present. She suggests that modern society has completely severed ties with Victorian ideals, with only faint echoes of them remaining. For both Himmelfarb and Thatcher, the Victorian era serves as a contrasting image—an "other" that highlights the perceived moral and cultural decline of the present.

During Margaret Thatcher's tenure, her endorsement of Victorian values coincided with the emergence of the 'heritage industry'—a growing movement wherein various cultural institutions transformed history into entertainment. This development sparked extensive debates about the historical legitimacy of such an industry. John Gardiner posits that these discussions were a reaction to Thatcher's invocation of Victorian ideals, linking her selective use of history with the nostalgic sentiment pervasive at the time. Similarly, Suzanne Keen argues that, amid the economic struggles of the Thatcher years, idealizing the past served as both an instinctive emotional retreat and a deliberate political strategy, possibly even a means of avoiding accountability for present issues. The heritage industry is frequently associated with a celebratory retelling of history, emphasizing aspects that evoke national pride. Rather than presenting a nuanced account of Britain's past, critics suggest it offers a homogenized portrayal, blurring distinctions between historical periods. Gardiner further argues that references to the Victorian era within this industry are often more about evoking a nostalgic atmosphere rather than fostering an informed connection with the period itself. The 1980s and 1990s saw a surge in the collection of Victorian antiques, a trend fueled by the mid-century reevaluation of *Victoriana* as desirable, alongside a booming consumer economy. As aging Victorians passed away, secondhand markets were inundated with their belongings, accelerating the demand for Victorian jewelry, clothing, and furniture. Heritage aesthetics permeated home décor trends, exemplified by the widespread adoption of the 'Laura Ashley look,' while the proliferation of open-air and industrial museums further cemented this revival. According to Samuel, this rebranding of the Victorian era replaced its historical associations with hardship and grime with notions of beauty, virtue, and sincerity.

This fascination with authentic and reproduced Victorian material culture has been criticized for fostering an idealized and inaccurate view of the past. Critics differentiate contemporary nostalgia from the Victorians' own revivalist tendencies, which sought to creatively repurpose historical influences into new innovations. In contrast, modern reproductions of Victorian styles tend to prioritize an idealized reverence for the past. The analysis of publications catering to Victoriana enthusiasts reveals an overarching narrative romanticizing the era as a gentler, more romantic time. Critics of the heritage industry argue that it distorts history, favoring an aesthetically driven, sentimentalized portrayal over a rigorous historical understanding. The debate over heritage versus history mirrors larger discussions about the relationship between history, memory, and fiction. Keen observes that history is often positioned as objective and scholarly, whereas heritage is seen as emotionally charged and imprecise. Yet, in some instances, public enthusiasm for heritage narratives can overshadow academic history, reframing it as overly specialized, politically correct, or disconnected from everyday life. The late twentieth century also saw historians reevaluating the Victorian era, sometimes in ways that mirrored popular sentiment. Rather than emphasizing historical distance, many scholars sought to highlight continuities between Victorian and contemporary culture. The era remains relevant because its cultural developments foreshadow many aspects of modern life, offering fertile ground for theoretical exploration. This perspective counters the selective framing of Victorian values by Thatcher and historians like Himmelfarb, who treated them as distinct from contemporary society. This further challenges the notion of a 'return' to Victorian ideals, because they never truly disappeared and that laissez-faire policies and state intervention were equally characteristic of the era.

Interestingly, historians link contemporary consumerism to the Victorians, arguing that their fascination with spectacle and aesthetics was a precursor to modern visual excess. Similarly, the roots of advertising culture can be traced to the Victorian period, particularly to the Great Exhibition of 1851, which marked a turning point in how commodities were perceived, transforming them from utilitarian objects into symbols of status and desire. This notion of continuity is explored in various neo-Victorian novels that examine photography's emergence and its connection to contemporary image culture. Gary Day similarly contends that modernity and postmodernity are merely extensions of Victorianism. He argues that the increasing compartmentalization of knowledge in the Victorian era anticipated the academic specializations of today. Likewise, he challenges the idea that scepticism toward grand narratives is unique to postmodernity, citing Victorian thinkers who already expressed similar

doubts. Just as the Victorians experienced rapid technological advancements with the rise of railways and mass print culture, contemporary society navigates the transformation brought by digital communication.

Rather than viewing Victorian society as something distant or alien, many aspects of that era were far more representative of the time than traditionally believed. Victorian culture was as intricate, engaging, and multifaceted as our own. The Victorians have significantly influenced contemporary life in ways we often overlook—they are embedded in our daily routines, shaping our surroundings, habits, and even our bodies. There are numerous cultural elements in British public life we consider distinctly modern, such as investigative journalism, theme parks, and mass consumerism, but they actually have their roots in the Victorian period. The tendency to overemphasize discontinuity can obscure how the past continues to shape the present. Instead, understanding both the consistencies and shifts in history is essential to progress. Neo-Victorian fiction, in general, operates along a spectrum of historical perspectives, balancing between emphasizing continuity and difference. Some works like Emma Tennant's *Tess*, engage with Victorian literature in ways that might obscure the historical divide. Most often, however, these novels incorporate elements of both recognition and estrangement, allowing readers to simultaneously see the Victorians as both familiar and alien. For instance, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* constructs a Victorian world that is at once distinct from and connected to the present. The novel celebrates the intellectual vibrancy of the era while also critiquing its social limitations, particularly regarding women's roles. It acknowledges the lingering presence of Victorian culture in contemporary times through textual transmission and embodied memory. Although nostalgia plays a role in the narrative, *Possession* does not simply romanticize the past; rather, it encourages critical engagement, exploring both the continuities and ruptures between the two periods. Moreover, nostalgia is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, not merely an uncritical longing for the past. Therefore, nostalgia can be forward-looking, serving as a means of retrieving valuable elements from history for contemporary and future use. This view aligns with Jerome De Groot's perspective, which sees nostalgia as a tool for critical reflection rather than a static emotional response. De Groot emphasizes that engaging with the past in diverse ways creates space for questioning, interpretation, and ideological critique. Rather than attempting to fix a singular definition of the Victorian era, neo-Victorian fiction embraces its contradictions and multiplicities. The genre's wide-ranging depictions challenge the notion of an uncritical reverence for the past, instead offering a rich and varied engagement with history. The continued exploration of Victorian themes in

contemporary literature, media, and cultural discourse suggests that the era retains relevance precisely because we continue to reinterpret and assign meaning to it. Ultimately, these novels underscore the importance of historical memory, not as a static account of the past but as an evolving dialogue that shapes our present understanding.

In a nutshell, the study of neo-Victorian fiction has evolved significantly over the past few decades, encompassing a range of perspectives and interpretations. The term itself has been subjected to various prefixes and alternative definitions, leading to a complex and often contested understanding of the genre. From the simple "neo" prefix, which indicates a return or revival of Victorian themes, to "retro", "faux", and even "post", scholars have sought to categorize the movement in ways that reflect its relationship to the nineteenth century. In this chapter, we have explored these evolving terminologies, ultimately arguing in favor of Dana Shiller's conceptualization of neo-Victorian fiction as the most suitable framework for this study. Additionally, we have delved into the distinctions between historical fiction and neo-Victorian fiction, addresses prevailing misconceptions about the genre, and examined the various subcategories into which it branches thematically, stylistically, and in revisionist ways.

One of the challenges in defining neo-Victorian fiction is the sheer multiplicity of prefixes and labels that have emerged alongside the term. "Neo" itself suggests a new iteration of something old, implying both continuity and transformation. However, this is not the only way scholars have attempted to define the movement. "Retro-Victorian" suggests a nostalgic recreation of the past, often with an emphasis on aesthetic or decorative elements rather than deep engagement with Victorian ideologies. "Faux-Victorian" highlights the artificiality of such reconstructions, implying a pastiche rather than a genuine reimagining. "Post-Victorian", on the other hand, suggests an era beyond Victorianism, one that is still haunted by its legacy but fundamentally distinct from it. Navigating this explosion of terminology is essential in situating neo-Victorian fiction within a broader literary and historical framework. Dana Shiller's approach offers a comprehensive perspective by recognizing neo-Victorian fiction as literature that explicitly engages with the Victorian past, not merely as a nostalgic revival but as a dialogue between past and present. Unlike some other definitions that either emphasize aesthetic replication or postmodern detachment, Shiller's perspective acknowledges the critical re-evaluation of Victorian ideals, social structures, and cultural anxieties.

A key component of understanding neo-Victorian fiction is differentiating it from traditional historical fiction. While both genres rely on the past as a setting and often employ period-

specific details, their objectives and methodologies differ significantly. Historical fiction typically seeks to recreate a bygone era with as much historical accuracy as possible, focusing on the immersion of readers into the past. Neo-Victorian fiction, however, is inherently self-aware, often highlighting the act of reinterpretation and revisionism. It does not merely reconstruct the Victorian era but interrogates it, frequently exposing its ideological underpinnings, contradictions, and omissions. Moreover, while historical fiction can be a neutral representation of the past, neo-Victorian fiction is usually political and revisionist in nature. It critiques the Victorian age through a modern lens, often foregrounding marginalized voices and subverting established narratives. This distinction is crucial, as neo-Victorian fiction serves as a mode of both literary homage and historical interrogation, revisiting the past to address contemporary issues related to gender, class, race, and identity.

One of the most commonly held beliefs about neo-Victorian fiction is that it is merely a postmodern refashioning of the fin de siècle. While it is true that postmodernist techniques, such as metafiction, intertextuality, and pastiche, are frequently employed, reducing the genre to a mere aesthetic exercise overlooks its deeper intellectual and political engagements. Neo-Victorian texts are not just playful reworkings of the past; they actively engage in the process of reinterpreting Victorian culture and ethics in light of present-day concerns. Another misconception is that neo-Victorian fiction focuses solely on the concept of "Victoriana"—the material culture, literature, and art of the nineteenth century. While these elements are undeniably present, neo-Victorianism extends far beyond nostalgia for Victorian aesthetics. It interrogates hidden histories, suppressed narratives, and the ideological constructs that shaped Victorian society. By doing so, it reconfigures our understanding of the nineteenth century and its continued impact on the present. Neo-Victorian fiction is not a monolithic genre; it encompasses a wide range of styles, themes, and narrative approaches. Broadly speaking, it can be categorized in three major ways: stylistically, thematically, and in terms of revisionism. Each of these aspects contributes to the genre's richness and complexity. Stylistically, neo-Victorian fiction employs a range of narrative techniques that distinguish it from both traditional Victorian literature and standard historical fiction. Some works adopt a pastiche approach, imitating the diction and structure of Victorian novels while incorporating contemporary concerns. Others engage in deliberate anachronism, blending modern sensibilities with Victorian settings to highlight the constructed nature of historical narratives. Metafiction is another common stylistic feature, with texts frequently acknowledging their own artificiality and questioning the process of historical reconstruction itself. Thematically, neo-

Victorian fiction often revisits key Victorian preoccupations—science and progress, empire and colonialism, gender roles, and moral anxieties—but through a contemporary critical lens. Many works focus on giving voice to those who were marginalized in the original Victorian era, such as women, queer individuals, colonized subjects, and the working class. By doing so, these texts challenge the dominant narratives of nineteenth-century literature and history, offering alternative perspectives that disrupt the traditional canon. One of the most defining features of neo-Victorian fiction is its revisionist impulse. Authors frequently reimagine classic Victorian narratives, either by retelling stories from the perspective of previously overlooked characters or by subverting their original meanings. For example, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* reinterprets *Jane Eyre* from the viewpoint of Bertha Mason, giving a voice to the "madwoman in the attic" and critiquing colonialist and patriarchal assumptions. Other works, such as Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*, weave alternative narratives within the framework of Victorian tropes, exposing the era's underlying hypocrisies and ideological blind spots.

As the introductory chapter has explored, defining neo-Victorian fiction is a complex endeavor, fraught with competing terminologies and conceptual frameworks. While numerous prefixes have been attached to the genre, Dana Shiller's interpretation offers the most comprehensive and useful definition, positioning neo-Victorian fiction as an active engagement with the Victorian past rather than a simple recreation. By distinguishing it from traditional historical fiction, we can better appreciate its critical as well as revisionist nature. Additionally, by addressing common misconceptions and exploring the various stylistic, thematic, and revisionist strands of the genre, we can recognize neo-Victorian fiction as a dynamic and politically charged literary movement. It is not merely a nostalgic return to the past but a meaningful dialogue between history and contemporary discourse, ensuring that the legacies of the nineteenth century remain relevant and continually re-examined.

Chapter 2

A.S. Byatt and Neo-Victorian Metafiction

This chapter analyzes two neo-Victorian novels written by A.S. Byatt, namely *Possession: A Romance* and *Angels and Insects.* Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* has been confronting the critics and readers with several epistemological puzzles for more than two decades. The novel ostensibly offers antithetical views with regard to the prevalent understanding of what counts as knowledge, truth, and authorship. The chapter seeks to uncover the possible rationale behind such apparent inconsistencies, which involve the author's seemingly deliberate attempt to guide our understanding of the narrative while maintaining a metafictional structure in it. It explores the prospect of finding an atypical approach to solving this conundrum that Byatt's acclaimed neo-Victorian novels present to the readers.

Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.

Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?"

He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself . . . . What had happened to him was that the ways in which it could be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not.

A.S. Byatt's *Possession*

A.S. Byatt's Booker Prize winning novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) dramatizes how two contemporary critics attempt to unveil a mysterious convergence in the lives of two fictive Victorian poets. In so doing, the collaborative project of these academics comes into conflict with the notion of what their colleagues perceive to be the 'truth' with regard to the same poets. The novel seems to contradict the general critical trends of its times, that is, all epistemological standpoints are provisional and incomplete. Interestingly, Byatt writes in her collection of essays titled *Passions of the Mind* (1991): "Whilst it was once attractive to think whatever we say or see is our own construction, it now becomes necessary to reconsider the hard idea of truth, hard truth, and its possibility" (17). In *Possession*, however, she probes into the presumably equivocal nature of 'truth.' And for that purpose, she has authored the novel not in a single sub-genre, but has incorporated in it several elements of campus novel, gothic detective

fiction, epistolary technique, poetry, biography, fairy tale, epic, literary essay, Victorian hagiography, and romance. In addition to intensifying the themes of unreliability, mistrust, and suspense that characterize the plot, this amalgamated appearance of the novel serves to amplify the blurring distinction between fact and fiction in the literary landscape of the novel. We argue that this apparent contradiction in Byatt's approach to the notion of truth in *Possession* could be viewed as a nuanced strategy to uncover the intricacies involved in representing the past.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Byatt's stance with regard to the dominant epistemological theories in her novel does not fail to take into account the complexities involved in the play of language. Critics like Susanne Becker suggest that "*Possession* is postmodernism's happy ending: it offers a reassessment of the desire to possess something (something material, something emotional) beyond the intellectual pleasures of playful deferral" (29). However, we claim that *Possession* is a theoretically potent novel about the critical trends in academia, irrespective of the author's pronounced denial of such a novelistic premise. As Jacques Derrida writes in "Signature Event Context": "Writing is read; it is not the site, 'in the last instance,' of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth . . ." (21). Accordingly, we shall try to elucidate how the complexities of the language system and the hermeneutical paradoxes in the novel render its denouement characteristically postmodernist in nature.

In *Possession*, the lives of the Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, remain closely intertwined with those of the twentieth century literary sleuths, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey. The two literary critics who have developed immense intellectual interest in these poets are deeply intrigued by the mysterious possibility of an adulterous relationship between their idols. Roland finds the initial signs of this hidden side of these poets' lives in one of Ash's letters that he stumbles upon during a visit to London Library. Subsequently, Roland and Maud set out on a mission to decipher the letters Ash and LaMotte have exchanged between each other. But their quest does not reach its fruition, and true "coherence and closure" about the past and of the complexities of human relationships elude the two scholars (422). Roland ends up musing on the "plot or fate" that steered the lives of the dead lovers (421). In presenting Roland and Maud's labyrinthine voyage into the secret lives of two legendary poets, the novel addresses several pertinent themes concerning the boundaries of human knowledge and experiences.

In her *On Histories and Stories*, a collection of essays published in 2000, Byatt compares the narrative technique of *Possession* with that of another neo-Victorian novel, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). According to Byatt, Fowles' novel does not have a "frightening and enchantingly desirable" end (422). As she writes:

> Fowles has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case–this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters–as well as providing a Greek chorus–than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical narrative–always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text. (56)

A few critics have interpreted that the use of the said "this kind of narrator" is an attempt to subvert the prevailing theoretical notions that regard the author figure as a mere functional principle in the composition of a text. Further the novel's postscript that is set in 1868 creates the impression that the author is ever-present in the text and is constantly directing the reader's understanding of it. Famously in his *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes distinguishes between a "writerly" text and a "readerly" text: he argues that in the former, the reader is not a "consumer" but a "producer" of the text and has an active role in meaning production, whereas in a "readerly" text the reader is at the receiving end of a fixed and pre-determined meaning (4). Byatt apparently wants her reader to accept and respect the authority of the author and exhibit the "readerly" qualities that Barthes denounces in his book. In Jordana A. Long's view, this attempt on Byatt's part seeks to "destroy the realism of ambiguity in favor of a happy ending" (154).

At the same time, a novel like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* plays precisely on this ambiguity to examine epistemological questions involving truth and its elusiveness. As Fowles' narrator puts it: "Fiction is woven into all . . . . You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it . . . fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo sapiens*" (97). Interestingly, Byatt recounts that the inspiration for *Possession* first struck her while she was in the British Library, observing Coleridge scholar Kathleen Coburn engaged in her research:

> I thought she has given all her life to *his* thoughts, and then I thought: she has mediated his thoughts to me. And then I thought 'Does he possess her, or does she possess him?' There could be a novel called *Possession* about the relations between living and dead minds . . . . I imagined my text as a web of scholarly quotations and parodies through which the poems and writings of the dead should loom at the reader, to be surmised and guessed at. (Byatt 17)

Susanne Becker notes that Byatt's "preoccupation with truth and knowledge" in *Possession* is contrary to postmodernist thinking (23). Becker states: "*Possession* marks the end of postmodernism, or, at least, the threshold between postmodern thought and new forms of more realist representation" (17). Such arguments might tempt one to view the novel's postscript, which establishes the premise for a clandestine meeting between Ash and his daughter Maia, as an authorial device to control meaning in a unilateral way. But the readers of the novel, unmistakably, have an upper hand over the characters in possessing the Victorian poets' biographical details. Yet one can notice that even though the readers are privileged over the characters in their pursuit of knowledge about the Victorian poets, closure eludes them all, leaving them bewildered about the conclusion of the work of fiction they have been engrossed in so far. Significantly, Byatt's novel has not usually been classified as a postmodernist work; it is a 'romance' which, according to Byatt's epigraph to the novel, "attempts to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us," a quote from Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance* (1851).

Nonetheless, the presence of a postscript which registers an authorial note behind the plotline cannot be seen as an accident. Characteristically, Michel Foucault in his essay "What is an Author" (1969) notes that "the notion of writing seems to transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity" (104). Foucault further argues that the society has been conditioned to glorify the author as a "genius" who creates a work and then enriches it with an innumerable number of significations (119). The readers might believe that the moment a writer expresses something, "meaning begins to proliferate indefinitely," when in reality the author is just a functional principle, "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault 118). Byatt appears to disagree with such a stance with the inclusion of a postscript. Its incorporation into the novel may be seen as an attempt on her part to claim her epistemological authority over the text. This often leads to a shadowing of its psychological effect on the reader, that is, undermining of the stability that the novel sans the postscript would have provided them with. As it becomes evident later in the postscript, the lure of "coherence and closure" is illusory in the context of the novel (422). At the same time, the insertion of the postscript does not entail the disappearance of all meaning and knowledge from the already existing corpus on the two poets that Roland, Maud, and other critics have been engaged with so far. Rather, it signals the multiplicity and diversity of knowledge(s), revealed as consequences of the meeting between Ash and his daughter in the postscript and the varied scenarios that ensue therefrom. For instance, Roland, Maud, and the other scholars presume that the lock of hair exhumed from Ash's grave belongs to Christabel, a

misunderstanding of the significance of one of the poet's key souvenirs. Furthermore, as Roland reevaluates the reception of the Victorian era literature during the 1990s, he comes across one of Ash's letters addressed to LaMotte which states: "What makes me a Poet . . . is to do with the singing of the Language itself . . . [the poets] write for the life of the language . . ." (132). It is evident that Byatt too embraces the notion that language has a life of its own beyond all the controlling mechanisms that an author can employ. Seen in this light, the postscript of *Possession* is not an authorial device to direct the reader's understanding of the novel, rather it serves to open up the various possibilities of meaning that language can generate.

Byatt's *Possession* exemplifies a classic postmodern tension by engaging with the paradoxes inherent in literature's relationship with historiography. The novel is frequently interpreted as a critique of historical narratives, with its title often seen as an ironic commentary on the illusion that one can truly "possess" the past. While *Possession* raises doubts about the certainty of historical knowledge, it simultaneously asserts that meaning can be imposed upon the past's disorder through narrative construction. Because the novel portrays history as composed entirely of textual remnants, it suggests that a historian's primary skill lies in decoding and organizing these fragments into a coherent story. Byatt also plays with the boundaries between different modes of storytelling, challenging the notion that any single narrative form is uniquely suited to reconstructing the past. Through her blending of fact and fiction in a neo-Victorian framework, she implies that truth about history can emerge through methods beyond strict objectivity. The novel's protagonists, Roland and Maud, reconstruct a plausible version of past events and the literary contributions of the Victorian poets they study. Their conclusions rely as much on emotional resonance as on factual accuracy, suggesting that a historian's intuition is just as important as their ability to analyze concrete evidence. Though some of their discoveries happen by sheer coincidence, their success is attributed to their unique interpretative abilities—seeing connections and hearing voices that elude other scholars. The novel also underscores the necessity of imaginative engagement in reconstructing history. Breathing life into the remnants of the past requires creative interpretation, enabling scholars to intuitively bridge gaps between surviving traces.

Byatt's portrayal of historical knowledge emphasizes its inherently metaphorical nature—since absolute historical truth remains inaccessible, we instead construct persuasive representations of the past. This recognition of history's textuality, however, creates a desire to simulate a sense of completeness. Byatt's novel weaves together multiple narratives that reflect, contrast, and interact with one another, forming a complex picture of the era it reconstructs. Her use of varied

textual forms highlights how *Possession* serves as an exploration of Victorian discursive practices, ultimately crafting a textualized society that mirrors the mid-nineteenth-century world. This intricate reconstruction reflects Byatt's attempt to keep the past alive and to mitigate both her own and the reader's anxieties about the uncertainties of the postmodern era. Through masterful plotting, she examines the intersections between different discursive traditions and creates an impression of historical coherence. Roland and Maud's journey to uncover the truth about Ash and LaMotte follows this very process—deciphering a multitude of textual clues, they piece together a coherent account of the past. Their intellectual quest culminates in a tangible revelation: Maud's discovery of her own lineage, which validates their research by linking it to a concrete, lived reality.

Byatt invites her readers to engage in a similar interpretative exercise, emphasizing the possibility of uncovering meaningful insights about the past. She suggests that our ability to speak for history depends on our capacity to translate written records into living voices. Some critics have viewed this multiplicity of perspectives as a challenge to rigid, totalizing views of history. However, such readings often overlook Byatt's fundamentally conservative approach, particularly in the way she ultimately reconciles competing interpretations through the novel's postscript. Her use of an omniscient narrative perspective is not merely a stylistic device; rather, it serves as evidence of her investment in establishing a definitive understanding of the past. It is also noteworthy how *Possession* guides the reader's experience. In Chapter 26, during Roland's transformation, an authorial aside introduces different ways of reading. The narrator describes three primary approaches—the dutiful, the personal, and the impersonal. Additionally, she alludes to a rare fourth mode, which might be termed the "epiphanic" or "sublime" reading experience, suggesting that 'true' understanding often arrives as an intuitive realization, one that feels simultaneously novel and deeply familiar. Byatt, through *Possession*, encourages both her characters and her readers to approach history with this dual sense of discovery and recognition.

Byatt further incorporates in *Possession* 'the life of the language' through the poems that Ash and LaMotte compose in the novel's fictional universe. These poems also serve as epigraphs to every chapter, thereby adding an unmistakable Victorian touch to the novel. This aspect can also be seen as a telling example of the author's interest in historical scholarship. As Georges Letissier argues, this feature serves to make a neo-Victorian perusal of the past "the locus of an intertextual, dialogic, historicised self-understanding, going far beyond mere nostalgia, voyeurism or epistemological popularisation" (112). It is a conscious effort on the part of Byatt

to make the said poems resemble the oeuvre of nineteenth century poets. In an interview with Mireia Aragay, Byatt opines:

> Christabel is a mixture of Christina Rossetti, and particularly Emily Dickinson and also Charlotte Brontë. Mostly those three. Bits of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ash is a mixture of Browning, and a bit of Tennyson, and a tiny bit of Matthew Arnold, and a bit of George Henry Lewes, too, all the scientific bits come from there, really. In a sense they both are composite archetypal figures. (156)

Thus, the poems in the novel turn out to be tools to transport the modern reader to the nineteenth century storyline. The ability of poetry to express timeless wisdoms and emotions aids Byatt's readers in linking the past with the present. Therefore, the presence of these poems within this neo-Victorian novel assumes paramount importance. As these poems breathe the past into the present of a novel set in 1980s, one may find more complexity in Byatt's poetic venture than in any other stylistic imitation of Victorian writings. The novel emphasizes what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "presence of the past" and this factor not only serves to situate *Possession* in the tradition of neo-Victorianism but also makes it possible for one to discern its dialogue with the major critical developments of the period (4).

In the novel, Byatt critically takes into account several contemporary notions associated with literary theory and criticism. The narrator, for instance, declares that "what had happened to him [Roland] was that the ways in which it could be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not" (473). Focusing more on the creative aspect of language, Roland seems all set to shun his poststructuralist training which has taught him to believe that "language was essentially inadequate" (Byatt 473). His evolving attitude toward authorship causes his intellectual drifting away from the influence of James Blackadder, his former research advisor with whom Roland currently works as a part-time research assistant. James too has a history of renouncing the legacy of his research guide Prof. F. R. Leavis, who in a seminar at University of Cambridge has ridiculed Ash and denounced Victorian poetry as inauthentic as opposed to the "voice of true feeling" (28). James compensates for this guilt of being once swayed by Leavis' attitude toward Ash and thus writes a thesis titled "Conscious Argument and Unconscious Bias: a Source of Tension in the Dramatic Poems of Randolph Henry Ash."

Further James gives his consent to edit Ash's *Complete Poems and Plays* in 1959 when studies on this poet have been considered obsolete. Although James' theoretical affiliation is not clearly delineated in the novel, he is a scholar who writes articles on 'Ash and relative historiography.' However, he is also a proponent of the preservation of Ash memorabilia in the London Library

in a space called 'Blackadder's Ash's Factory' while resisting Prof. Mortimer Cropper's attempts to host these collectibles at Robert Dale Owen University in New Mexico. At the same time, he is ashamed and contemptuous of the present generation of critics and students of English literature who are no longer "grounded in spelling" or in learning "poetry and the Bible by heart" (26). James is a "stringent scholar" when it comes to literary research and subsequently his influence on Roland withers as the latter becomes more interested in the imaginative flights of poetry into "Proserpina's garden . . . the garden where Eve recalled Pomona and Proserpina" (471). And as a result, Roland loses his curiosity in "ignored, arcane, deviously perspicuous meanings" (7). Roland's way of research does not involve the examination of 'secondary materials' or 'theories,' rather it entails close textual analyses of primary works. Interestingly, his thesis is titled "History, Historians and Poetry**:** A Study of the Presentation of Historical 'Evidence' in the Poems of Randolph Henry Ash." Roland's lack of interest in the dominant approaches to literature and his unwillingness to indulge in literary vocabulary prove to be the chief reasons for his frequent setbacks in academia. When, for instance, Roland applies for a job at London University contending with another candidate named Fergus Wolff, the latter secures it because, in the narrator's view, "he was in the right field, which was literary theory" (14). As Elisabeth Bronfen observes in her essay: "Roland's old-fashioned scholarship, the decoding of citational references in Ash's poetry, lets him fail in the midst of an academic landscape interested almost exclusively in modish theoretical brilliance" (124). Roland shares this outlook with Maud who, while discussing the work of another professor named Leonora Stern, remarks: "She's very good. But I don't want to see through her eyes" (254).

However, it must be noted that in spite of all these, Roland is deeply influenced by poststructuralist strains of thought. Living in an age of cynicism and skepticism about objective reality and truth, he fails to reach anywhere close to the reputation that his idol Ash has enjoyed in the Victorian period. The reader, on the other hand, is acutely aware of the similarity between the trajectories of Ash and Roland in their respective literary pursuits. At one point in the narrative, it is revealed that Ash has a distinct fascination for Wordsworth and especially for the poem "The Solitary Reaper." But as opposed to the speaker in Wordsworth's poem who takes in "exactly as much as he had needed . . . and had refused to hear more," Ash "was a poet greedy for information, for facts, for details. Nothing was too trivial to interest him; nothing was inconsiderable" (277). During his own artistic endeavors, Roland's sentiments also echo a similar approach to poetry as is discernible in the names of his poems: 'The Death Mask', 'The Fairfax Wall', 'A Number of Cats', and 'Cats' Cradle.' But he finds himself unable to emulate

the enchantment of Ash's poetry. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Byatt remarks, "the poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true that they become rather papery and are miserably aware of this" (83). As Roland and Maud remain engulfed in the poststructuralist notions reflecting the times they live in, they feel "imprisoned" in themselves (254). In one of the poignant scenes, Maud confides in Roland: "we can't see things" (254). As she explains:

> In every age, there must be truths people can't fight . . . We live in the truth of what Freud discovered . . . . We aren't really free to suppose–to imagine–he could possibly have been wrong about human nature . . . . They [Ash and other Victorians] valued themselves. Once, they knew God valued them. Then they began to think there was no God, only blind forces. So they valued themselves, they loved themselves and attended to their nature . . . . but at some point in history their self-value changed into–what worries you. A horrible over-simplification. (254)

What brings about this "over-simplification" for Roland and Maud is the prevailing academic trend which posits that unconscious desires govern all human actions.

As an intellectual Roland's interests do not lie in grandiose notions of romantic fulfilment and selfhood. He is trained "to see his self as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones" (424). But in his personal life he continues to be enticed by the glory of the Victorian poets and their ostensible belief in human potential and social progress. He is often at war with himself and is desperately trying to reconcile these two: "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. 'Falling in love', characteristically, combs the appearances of the world . . . out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot. Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite might be true" (422). In another instance in the novel, Roland's internal conflicts become all the more jarring:

> They [Roland and Maud] were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, 'in love', romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing: they knew about phallocracy and penisneid, punctuation, puncturing and penetration, about polymorphous and polysemous perversity, orality, good and bad breasts, clitoral

> tumescence, vesicle persecution, the fluids, the solids, the metaphors for these, the systems of desire and damage, infantile greed and oppression and transgression, the iconography of the cervix and the imagery of the expanding and contracting Body, desired, attacked, consumed, feared. (423)

The literary succor derived from their exploration of Ash's and LaMotte's works apparently offers a means to bridge certain lacunae in the lives of Roland and Maud. Roland longs for a literary fellowship with Ash by embracing the certainties that the Victorian period has outwardly displayed. Furthermore, the subtitle of Byatt's novel 'A Romance' gains in significance as the two twentieth century scholars go on a quest to comprehend the romantic association between these two Victorian poets. As Monica Flegel remarks in her essay, this literary pursuit enables Roland and Maud to "make imaginative and intuitive leaps in order to solve the problems before them, and these leaps illuminate their own lacks" (425).

While Roland is trained as a poststructuralist critic, Maud is a psychoanalytic scholar specializing in Jacques Lacan's theories. Even so, Maud is skeptical of her own research methods, and as she herself admits to Roland:

> I was thinking last night–about what you said about our generation and sex. We see it everywhere . . . . We know all sorts of other things, too–about how there isn't a unitary ego– how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things–and I suppose we *believe* that? . . . . We never say the word Love, do we– we know it's a suspect ideological construct . . . so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them [Ash and LaMotte], here, believing in these things . . . (266-67)

Nonetheless, the textual analysis that Roland and Maud undertake could also be seen as delimiting in itself. Although Roland acknowledges that he is "an old-fashioned textual critic, not a biographer," he has to delve into the biographical details of the two poets to extract the knowledge that is pertinent to his analysis of Victorian poetry (50). For instance, it is their awareness of Ash and LaMotte's sojourn in Yorkshire that helps Roland and Maud lend new meanings to LaMotte's epic poem *The Fairy Melusine.* During their stay there, Ash has ruminated on the presence of anemones in seas and writes about them in his letters to his wife Ellen. One of the interactions between Ash and LaMotte further draws our attention to this aspect:

> "You are in love with all the human race, Randolph Ash."

> "With you. And by extension, all creatures who remotely resemble you. Which is, all creatures, for we are all part of some divine organism . . . And you are a manifestation of its secret perfection. You are the life of things."
>
> "Oh no. I am a chilly mortal . . . It is you who are the life of things. You stand there and draw them into you. You turn your gaze on the dull and the insipid to make them shine." (285)

On another occasion in the novel, the inextricable connection between biographical criticism and textual criticism of poetry becomes even more apparent. In an encounter with Fergus, the Ash enthusiast Mortimer recalls how in 1979 LaMotte's *The Fairy Melusine* has undergone a radical change in critical reception when it was removed from a nineteenth-century poetry course and included instead in a women's studies course. This academic reassessment of LaMotte's legacy has foreshadowed the critical responses the poem has received when speculation about the poet's allegedly lesbian relationship with her roommate Blanche Glover has come to light in literary circles. Predictably, Roland's incessant attempts to dissociate textual criticism from biographical criticism turn out to be self-contradictory as the plot advances.

Upon a casual reading, Byatt's novel might seem to build a sharp distinction between critical and creative endeavors. However, it is interesting that despite their overt privileging of creative works over critical analyses, Roland and Maud's way of decoding Ash's and LaMotte's poems attests to Roland Barthes' idea that there cannot be "a single, theological meaning to literature—the message of the Author-God" (256). As Barthes writes, "the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions . . ." (254). Such an author-centric approach, criticized by Barthes, characterizes both James' and Mortimer's attitudes toward authorship and they treat fiction as if the writer is confiding in the reader through it. Contrastingly, Roland and Maud, who appear to be the embodiment of Byatt's voice in the novel, place language above all else. Favorably for Barthes, Stephane Mallarme believed in the nineteenth century that, "it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'" (Barthes 254). Byatt's novel evokes a similar idea by introducing the ingenuous journal of Sabine de Kercoz, LaMotte's cousin living in France. As Sabine records in the journal dated October 13th, 1859: "A lesson. Work written only for one pair of eyes, the writer's, loses some of its vitality, but *en revanche* gains a certain freedom" (336). Yet these minor references to the privileging of the language and the text over the author in Byatt's novel have

received scant critical attention. Ann Marie Adams in "Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics," for instance, writes: "Roland and Maud discover the affair that served as a subtext for so much of the Victorians' poetry. In this way, the resolution of the mystery is effected through 'correct' literary interpretation, or a recapitulation of the 'theological' approach to literature that Barthes decries" (120). According to Mark M. Hennelly, the paradoxical features of the novel "create a double bind" for a critical interpretation of the text:

> Byatt ultimately criticizes critical readings for being too distant from the Real (whether Lacanian or otherwise) and thus potentially too self-defensive, if not finally self-destructive. Indeed, any self-awareness that all such readings are always already metareadings distances critical readers dangerously far from the 'lived' experience of the text and dangerously close to what Maud confesses to her co-conspiratorial critic Roland: 'Maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists.' (446)

Although Roland and Maud's knowledge of the events related to the relationship between Ash and LaMotte does appear prescient at times, the idea that there is one 'correct' meaning to a work of literature and therefore a 'right' way of reading it is a fallacious hypothesis in the context of the novel. In Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), for example, the protagonist Phineas G. Nanson deplores "the hopeless nature of the project of biographical accuracy . . . . There are a very few human truths and infinite variations on them" (328-329). Interestingly in *Possession*, Byatt prompts the reader to acknowledge the creative affinity that poetry and criticism share while representing human experiences.

Yet *Possession* includes in it characteristically contradictory stances with regard to understanding the notions of fiction and authorship. On the one hand, the novel is clearly meta-fictive; Byatt's postmodernist approach comes to the foreground as she shifts the reader's attention to the processes of fabrication involved in the reconstruction of historical narratives. The novel exemplifies what Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction': "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). For instance, the two nineteenth century protagonists in the novel are based on actual Victorian personages like Rossetti, Brontë, Browning, Tennyson, and Arnold, as Byatt admits in an interview with Aragay (156). Furthermore, there are other historical references, for instance, to the pre-Raphaelite painter Lord Leighton, mentions of other Pre-Raphaelites like Holman Hunt, Millais, Rossetti, and of Dickens, and the Victorian philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts in Mortimer's biography of Ash titled *The*

Great Ventriloquist. On the other hand, there is an overt celebration of the Romantic, idyllic, and idealized Victorian past and an appreciation of conventional literary norms.

Byatt's use of two epigraphs in the beginning of the novel draws our attention to this apparent contradiction in *Possession*. The first epigraph from Hawthorne's preface to his novel *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance* explains the difference between a Romance and a Novel: "when a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel." Moreover, the second epigraph in *Possession*, from Robert Browning's "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'," notes:

> But why do I mount to poets? Take plain prose –
> Dealers in common sense, set these at work,
> What can they do without their helpful lies? . . .
> How did you contrive to grasp
> The thread which led you through this labyrinth?
> How build such solid fabric out of air?
> How on so slight foundation found this tale,
> Biography, narrative? or, in other words,
> How many lies did it require to make
> The portly truth you here present us with?

Through these two epigraphs, Byatt draws our attention to the liberty that befits the author of a Romance. In so doing, paradoxically, she is also able to highlight the postmodernist epistemological notion of the blurring distinctions between 'truth' and 'lies' and also 'fact' and 'fiction.' In spite of all this, the novelist's advancement of what Flegel calls "imaginative and intuitive leaps" that appear by the end of the novel may strike the reader as an anachronistic approach, if one keeps in mind the postmodernist mistrust of such grand metanarratives (Flegel 425). All the same, it is a narrative strategy that the author deploys whereby the "leaps" that the protagonists take happen to spotlight the fleeting nature of the 'knowledge' that they assume to possess at the end. And such a postmodernist outcome is achieved through the constant challenges posed to Roland and Maud's erudition by the perennially incomplete historical narratives, gleaned from "the tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge," which they stumble upon in the course of their intellectual journey (Byatt 4). Byatt does not lay all these cards on the table in the beginning of the novel; these are gradually revealed to be a part of her plan and not accidental occurrences.

The novel suggests that the twentieth-century scholars find themselves in the middle of a chaos as they feel that their world has become deprived of a language that conveys a fixed, stable meaning. In such polyphonous climate, the idea of 'coherence' assumes the qualities of enchantment and desirability for Roland, Maud, and the other scholars of this generation. Yet Roland and Maud are able to continue their interpretative project only when they see themselves as part of a 'dialogue' or a 'conversation' with the past. As Lynn Wells aptly puts it in her analysis of Byatt's novel, "the historian relinquishes monologic control over historical representation, and accepts that his or her own voice is in fact produced through the dialogue with the past" (677).

Additionally, one can notice that the fictional universe that features Ash and LaMotte is idyllic only on the surface. The period in which they live has already been in flux and in a state of transition to some of the anxieties characterizing the century that is to follow. It might look a spiritually stable one from the vantage points of Roland and Maud, but their Victorian predecessors have been acutely aware of the imminent collapse of their worldview under the influence of radically new socio-cultural and scientific theories. Ash has seen his own poetry as a form in flux: "Ash liked his characters at or over the edge of madness, constructing systems of belief and survival from the fragments of experience available to them" (7). His poems have been prevising a postmodernist sense of alienation. His nostalgia for the rapidly disappearing universe of stabilities has made him feel sheltered and secure in the "primaeval" Yorkshire where he could gain access to the roots of early English culture and imaginatively experience an encounter with that seemingly idyllic past (213). However, their brief union in Yorkshire has failed to bring about any sense of peace to the lives of Ash and LaMotte. The two timelines in the novel, therefore, are not very different from each other as far as the human predicament is concerned. The seeds of nihilism have already been sown in the Victorian age. The past is not as glorious as Roland and Maud imagine it to be, rendering their nostalgia hollow all along. The subtitle of the novel *A Romance* tends to reconcile the two opposing strands of thought: a nostalgic celebration of the romantic past as well as a postmodernist skepticism about the singular and unidimensional recollection that historical narratives usually lay claim to.

The author resorts to creative imagination to render the past accessible for a specific narrative purpose. And since the novel is written as a Romance, Byatt determinedly assumes a certain "latitude" to use postmodernist techniques in order to innovatively explore the seemingly conventional form and content used by the Victorian poets. Without subscribing to any clearly discernible theoretical framework, Byatt as a neo-Victorian author follows the approach voiced by Maud in the novel: "You could make up a whole story. On no real evidence" (49). It is

precisely this element of fictionality introduced into the novel which steers its neo-Victorian investigation into the past. And in doing so, the novel foregrounds the discrepancy between the lives led by the Victorian poets and the textualized and documented versions of the same available in the present. Thus, the novel invites the readers' attention to the hermeneutical processes involved in representing history. Byatt is acutely aware of the constructed nature of both history and fiction. And she employs this understanding in the (re)construction of the identities of Ash and LaMotte using biographic metafiction as a subgenre of what Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction.' Despite initial appearances to the contrary, Byatt in fact accentuates the unreliability of language, a notion grounded in the postmodernist outlook on history. Accordingly in the novel, the factual information that Roland and Maud gather about the biographies of the Victorian poets constantly becomes undermined as they advance in their literary quest. Byatt in *Possession*, thus, effectively problematizes the process of biographical writing by incorporating, rather than dismissing, several contemporary views concerning truth, authorship, and historicity.

In *Angels and Insects,* Byatt explores the fairytale genre as a way of twentieth-century intellectual engagement with nineteenth-century fiction. In so doing, she reinvents the novel of ideas for the late twentieth century in post-Thatcherite Britain. To situate Byatt's artistic engagement with this kind of literature, we have highlighted the role of storytelling in the process. Byatt's approach to 'reviving' the past does not constitute an obeisance to the nostalgic traditionalism that she has been accused of. Michael Levenson comments on *Angels and Insects*:

> In a more than clever analogy, Byatt has drawn a connection between the 'afterlife' of the Bible and the 'afterlife' of the nineteenth-century novel. We live in the shadow of both. But the task, as Byatt sees it, is not to get out from under the shadow into the white modern light. It is to respect and to love our old shadowy needs, to keep faith with faith, and with realist fiction. (343)

Both novellas in *Angels and Insects* stem from academic inquiries into Victorian literature and culture. Her discussion is shaped by the notion that fiction wrestles with an elusive form of truth, while modern scholarship increasingly adopts artistic techniques and sensibilities. She likens this shift to a dance in which fiction and scholarship have exchanged roles. Byatt herself navigates this interplay skillfully, as evident in both her richly layered fiction and her insightful critical writing. Both works examine the Victorian anxiety about the physicality of human

existence and the fear that death results only in bodily decay. They also suggest that spiritualism provided reassurance by affirming the continued identity of the deceased. Byatt acknowledges that her grasp of these ideas deepened through the act of writing *The Conjugial Angel*, a "hidden history" narrative inspired by a brief reference to Tennyson's sister, Emily. In developing the story, she imaginatively constructs characters and scenarios that illuminate the intellectual and cultural concerns of the nineteenth century. Rather than offering a direct critical analysis of Tennyson and Hallam, the novella engages with their intellectual world through imaginative reconstruction. The presence of the Victorian séance—a motif that appears in both *The Conjugial Angel* and *Possession*—serves as a fitting metaphor for Byatt's method. This approach revives and reinterprets historical voices, creating a dynamic, multi-layered dialogue rather than a singular authoritative interpretation. Byatt's work embraces an open-ended, intertextual engagement between writers, readers, and texts, ensuring a continuous and evolving literary conversation.

In *Angels and Insects,* Byatt's historiographic and mythopoeic endeavors coalesce into a feminist reimagining of historical narratives. Byatt's innovative engagement with realist forms allows her historiographic metafictions to serve a dual function: they persuasively depict aspects of the 'real' while simultaneously critiquing the dominant cultural forces that assert authority while disregarding their own provisional and constructed nature. Byatt's works present a diverse array of intellectual figures, both male and female, positioning them within an alternative mythology beyond the conventional paradigm of the public intellectual. Her feminist narrative strategies—such as concealed letters, poetry, fairy tales, and introspective monologues that appear to shape history and its ideological constructs—invoke and deconstruct the intellectual archetype. Byatt's fiction reconfigures our understanding of intellectual women in both historical and contemporary contexts, illustrating that just as historical events are subject to reinterpretation through scholarly critique (as seen in the evolving narratives of Ash and LaMotte in *Possession*), historical consciousness itself can be expanded to accommodate multiple possible and plausible accounts.

Angels and Insects, as a work of historiographic metafiction and neo-Victorian literature, engages in a complex interplay between literary and non-literary discourses. It represents aspects of historical reality while simultaneously emphasizing its own fictionalized elements, such as references to actual institutions and events. This paradox, as outlined by Linda Hutcheon, reflects the fundamental nature of historiography, which reconstructs events that are inherently inaccessible. In Byatt's work, history is not merely questioned but its underlying discourses are critically examined and reconfigured—much like a mythographer's approach to

myth. Byatt's historiographic fiction challenges not only the conventional binary between factual and imaginative texts, but also the distinction between mythical and historical discourses. This remains highly significant given the persistent belief in fixed and authoritative historical narratives, which serve to reinforce the dominance of the male public intellectual. The novel engages thematically with the tension between the 'real' and the 'imagined,' but more crucially, it interrogates the relationship between the 'real' and the 'written,' emphasizing the power of textuality in constructing reality. In *Possession*, characters such as Roland Michell and Maud Bailey endeavor to uncover historical truths about Victorian figures through surviving documents, reputations, and legends. However, only the novel's omniscient narrator and the reader possess full knowledge of the past, which remains distinct even from the new revelations unearthed by contemporary scholars. *Angels and Insects* consists of two interconnected novellas set in the nineteenth century, one entirely fictional yet grounded in real cultural transformations, and the other incorporating both invented characters and historical figures such as Alfred Lord Tennyson and his family, as well as the subjects of his 1850 poem *In Memoriam*. In Byatt's novels, the real and imagined pasts emerge as fluid and intertwined from the outset. Consequently, Byatt's fiction positions the imaginary within the framework of historical reality, lending the fictional a discursive authority comparable to that of historical fact.

In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White argues that a narrative is shaped by certain fundamental assumptions—concepts that structure it in a way that makes it coherent. He further reflects on the traditional conviction that storytelling serves as an effective means of representing reality, which plays a crucial role in shaping socially significant beliefs. This perspective highlights why Byatt engages with the neo-Victorian literary category, given that the Victorians were notably committed to crafting narratives about themselves for future generations. Her novel *Angels and Insects* interrogates and extends the process of narrating the nineteenth century, an era that White identifies as the 'golden age' of historical storytelling. Byatt's analyses contribute to broader late-twentieth-century debates—recognized by White—about the essence of narrative, its claim to knowledge, its cultural role, and its broader social importance. The same concerns were deeply embedded in the literary culture of the nineteenth century.

Byatt's novels assert a specific kind of epistemic authority, aligning with White's argument that narrative functions as a 'metacode,' transforming knowledge into storytelling. Her works, while critical in nature, use narrative structures to convey particular forms of knowledge. While White primarily examines factual narratives, his theories are also applicable to Byatt's fiction,

since storytelling inherently depends on existing knowledge. The nineteenth century has incorporated a range of narrative strategies for recounting the past. Her engagement with these forms suggests a deliberate interrogation of history's tendency to marginalize, erase, or delegitimize intellectual women. She appears to take White's assertion literally—that mythic narratives are not bound to distinguish between real and imagined events—implying that the real challenge arises when attempting to impose a narrative structure on historical events, which do not naturally conform to storytelling conventions. Byatt critiques the illusion of historical coherence, dramatizing this issue in *Possession*, where academic figures construct idealized biographies, and in *Angels and Insects*, where outwardly conventional Victorian family life conceals deeper, more complex realities.

Angels and Insects has often been categorised as revisionist fiction, meaning it critically reexamines and disrupts established historical narratives, making readers aware of their inherent instability. *Possession* directly engages in revising accepted historical knowledge, reinterpreting the lives and relationships of two Victorian poets through the discovery of lost letters and diaries, as well as the imaginative construction of new biographical insights distinct from established accounts. In *Angels and Insects*, the first novella, *Morpho Eugenia*, follows a protagonist who uncovers unsettling truths about his wife and her aristocratic family, intertwining these revelations with contemporary evolutionary theory. The second novella, *The Conjugial Angel*, delves into the lives of late-Victorian women involved in spiritualist practices, including Emily Tennyson Jesse, sister of the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. In both novels, Byatt interrogates the mythic qualities of history and their influence on personal identity, challenges the assumed division between public and private life, and examines how intellectual culture of any given period shapes its narratives. A recurring concern in these texts is the reassessment of women's historical roles, emphasizing their intellectual contributions where they have been traditionally overlooked or excluded from 'serious' history. This approach resonates with the myth-making tendencies of feminist literary criticism and theory, which seek to recover and reframe women's intellectual and creative lives.

Byatt has referred to the novellas as historical fantasies. She explores the omissions and gaps which she has encountered in historical records during her research. She clarifies that her research was deliberately kept to a minimal factual scope, functioning as an extension of a typical reading process—whether in fiction or history—designed to construct a richer, more vivid, and speculative narrative precisely around the elements that are left unsaid. Within these "historical fantasies", she both crafts and reconstructs intellectual dilemmas of the past, dramatizing the intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century as shaped by historical fiction

and factual accounts alike. A central concern in both novellas is how these intellectual dilemmas impacted men and women differently, with male thinkers of the time more frequently documenting their experiences than their female counterparts. Despite this historical imbalance, Byatt's intellectual figures—whether real or fictional, male or female—defy conventional expectations, reflecting the diversity of intellectuals that actually existed rather than conforming to dominant historical representations.

In *Morpho Eugenia*, the protagonist, William Adamson, is a naturalist who, after spending a decade in the Amazon, becomes a guest of Reverend Harald Alabaster and his family. Both men are deeply engaged in the scientific debates of their time—William's fascination centers on the social behaviors of insects, such as bees and butterflies, while Harald, a collector of natural specimens, approaches science with a religious perspective. He seeks to reconcile Darwinian theory with traditional Christian belief, attempting to compose a book that upholds the idea of a divine creator while maintaining intellectual credibility. While Harald enjoys the privilege of promoting his worldview, William, having lost his own scientific collection in a shipwreck, finds himself financially dependent on the Alabasters and entangled in their domestic and intellectual world. The novella's setting, populated largely by original characters, reflects the intellectual tensions of the era. The name "Adamson" carries biblical connotations, while the family estate, Bredely Hall, subtly references themes of reproduction and natural selection. William and Harald's social positions allow them to engage in these intellectual debates professionally—Harald collects and categorizes specimens while William, at his host's behest, documents them. Meanwhile, Harald spends his time attempting to justify divine design in the natural world through his writing.

The narrative also explores gendered dynamics in Victorian intellectual life, particularly through the characters of Eugenia Alabaster and Matilda "Matty" Crompton. Eugenia, whose name evokes the concept of eugenics, conforms to the expectations of upper-class women, engaging in domestic pursuits such as embroidery and decorative arrangement of her father's specimens. Her engagement with scientific discourse is purely aesthetic; she helps make her father's work visually appealing rather than participating in any intellectual inquiry. This superficial engagement ultimately proves dangerous, both for her and for William. She is objectified, much like one of her father's pinned butterflies, and William's attraction to her is rooted in appearance rather than intellectual connection. Harald acknowledges Eugenia's artistic contributions to his specimen displays, praising their beauty even if they do not adhere strictly to scientific principles. However, her role remains decorative rather than substantive. The Alabaster household, including Eugenia, William, and Harald, integrates texts into their

intellectual and domestic lives—Eugenia embellishes specimen cases with biblical verses, while William copies romantic poetry into his notebook. The governess teaches the children about ants through myth, and Matty Crompton writes a fairy tale, *Things Are Not What They Seem*, inspired by ant societies. These embedded narratives, along with references to Darwinian thought, reinforce the novella's central theme: the interplay between storytelling and the intellectual discourse of the Victorian era, where facts are often secondary to narrative.

The novel acknowledges itself as a constructed narrative when William reflects on his situation at Bredely Hall, feeling simultaneously like an anthropologist and a fairy tale protagonist trapped in an enchanted castle. His intellectual pursuits are constrained by the expectations of aristocratic life, religious beliefs, and social customs. For instance, his marriage to Eugenia is rushed to avoid the social impropriety of her younger sister marrying before her. Matty Crompton, in contrast to Eugenia, exists on the margins of male intellectual life but resists her social limitations. Initially perceived by William as an unremarkable spinster, she appears to be a dependent relative of the Alabasters, responsible for the younger children without formal employment. While she might seem like a character from a Victorian novel rather than a "real" historical figure, her sharp intellect aligns her with the discourse of thinking women. On nature walks with William and the children, she demonstrates knowledge of both scientific and literary subjects. When William comments on her thoughtfulness, she pointedly remarks that he almost added "for a woman" before choosing not to—an observation that subtly challenges gendered assumptions about intellectual capacity. Despite her keen mind, Matty's intelligence does not capture William's admiration as much as Eugenia's beauty does. Eugenia, frightened by a display of butterflies that William arranges for her, manoeuvres him into a marriage proposal. She convinces him of their compatibility by citing her father's belief in William's intellectual worth—valuing his mind as highly as land and wealth. However, there is an underlying tension in this moment, as William treats Eugenia with a paternalistic indulgence, as if speaking to a child afraid of imaginary monsters. After marrying Eugenia, William remains bound to Harald Alabaster's intellectual world, expected to spend time discussing the philosophical conflict between Darwinian science and religious belief. This tension represents the point at which Byatt's "historical fantasy" intersects with the ideological debates of the Victorian era. Meanwhile, William's marriage to Eugenia is reduced to physical attraction, as she proves passionate in the bedroom but disengaged intellectually.

As the story unfolds, its narrative form becomes increasingly self-aware, drawing attention to its own mythological structure. This is made explicit when the narrator directly intervenes to highlight the text's storytelling nature, reinforcing the interplay between historical reality and

the fictionalized, symbolic world Byatt constructs. In a debate on religious belief with Harald Alabaster, William insightfully remarks:

> "We have made our God by a specious analogy, Sir—I do not mean to give offence, but I have been thinking about this for some years—we make perfect images of ourselves, of our lives and fates, as the painters do of the Man of Sorrows, or the scene in the Stable, or as you once said, of a grave-faced winged creature speaking to a young girl." (89)

This moment underscores the novella's intrinsic layering of traditional stories, myths, and disguised ideological narratives. Byatt's novel embeds the intellectual, spiritual, and scientific discourses of the Victorian era, which must either be perpetuated or reshaped through further dialogue. William realizes that religious and poetic texts have not only shaped Christianity but have also constructed a version of world history. This process of mythmaking imposes restrictive narratives that condemn any horizon of new possibilities as sinful. Both William and his father-in-law contribute to this mythmaking in contrasting ways. Harald Alabaster seeks to craft a Christian response to Darwin, while William and Matty Crompton co-author a book advancing the study of the natural world. In doing so, Matty also challenges the prevailing discourse on nineteenth-century women's roles, resisting a life of mere usefulness and dependence. Matty resists being confined within the literary stereotype of the Victorian governess, a fate that would render her a mere "spinster". It is she, rather than William, who first envisions their book as something "useful" (93), positioning it as a contribution to the fact-based intellectual discourse of the time. However, she is also adamant that William's book should be natural history rather than a "major scientific study" (93). This distinction suggests her awareness of how nineteenth-century historical works would later be preserved—as narratives rather than strictly scientific texts. The book is eventually purchased by an eager publisher, enabling William and Matilda to leave Bredely Hall together after William uncovers Eugenia's incestuous affair with her brother Edgar. The carefully maintained cycle of William and Eugenia's married life, marked by confinements and childbirths, is shattered by this revelation. The journey of William and Matilda toward a new future represents both a hopeful resolution and an opening into a fresh narrative—an escape from the constructed history of William and the Alabasters. In *Morpho Eugenia*, Byatt weaves her own critical perspectives into the novella's fabric, using key metaphors to explore recurring artistic tensions—nostalgia versus skepticism, realism versus experimentation—that also surface in her academic writing.

Each metaphor is deliberately employed, acting as a bridge between the novella's literary structure and its mythopoeic exploration of historical narratives.

While *Morpho Eugenia* presents fictional characters within a reconstructed nineteenth-century setting, *The Conjugial Angel* in *Angels and Insects* engages with real historical figures to explore how they have become cultural constructs over time. The novella's central theme is remembrance, as it follows Emily Tennyson Jesse's engagement with spiritualism and recounts the story-within-a-story of her betrothal to Arthur Henry Hallam, a close friend of her famous brother, Alfred Tennyson. Hallam died young before the marriage could take place, and the novella examines how writing memorializes certain figures while leaving others forgotten. This process of memorialization—alongside archetypal narratives such as the lost young genius and the unwed bride—demonstrates literature's ability to shape historical discourse. Hallam is remembered in multiple ways: through Tennyson's poetry, Byatt's imagined recollections of Emily, and even his unsettling ghostly appearance to the fictional medium, Sophy Sheekhy.

Byatt has explained that in crafting works of historiographic metafiction, she structures narratives in different styles, particularly using the 'hypothetical' voice of a researcher. This approach highlights how mythical storytelling can reveal new perspectives on history. In doing so, Byatt validates historical fantasy as a means of challenging patriarchal narratives built around selective historical accounts. Before fully crafting Emily's perspective, Byatt introduces two other significant female characters: Lilias Papagay, a widowed woman who turns to spiritualism as a profession, and Sophy Sheekhy, a genuine medium. Through Lilias's eyes, Byatt's portrayal of Emily is that of a tragic heroine. Lilias herself, fascinated by storytelling, frames her experiences through narrative, marking her as an inquisitive and intellectual woman. In another era, she might have been a theologian, while in a later time, she could have studied philosophy, psychology, or medicine at a university. This characterization reinforces the idea that fantasy can reshape historical realities, shedding light on women's intellectual contributions often overlooked in male-dominated narratives. Although Mrs. Papagay lacks formal historical knowledge, she has read all of Walter Scott's novels, aligning her with the literary construction of nineteenth-century history. Byatt presents her as an intellectual figure whose identity transcends any single historical period, mirroring the ongoing feminist efforts to recover and reinterpret women's intellectual legacies. As a work of historiographic metafiction, *The Conjugial Angel* interrogates women's intellectual history by revisiting historical moments through an alternative lens. The séance at the novella's core functions as Byatt's means of 'recovering' Emily's voice. This scene is inspired by a Tennyson family legend, dramatized in the story, in which Emily is told by a spirit that she will reunite with

Hallam in another life. In defiance, she informs her living husband, Captain Jesse, that since she had shared her earthly life with him, she intended to share her afterlife with him as well. For the fictional Emily, spiritualism offers a space to reflect on and claim her own memories of Hallam—separate from her brother's poetry, which sought to erase her presence in favor of his own persona. The novella underscores how easily women could be written out of historical narratives by male authors, their lives reduced to mere footnotes in patriarchal accounts.

Spiritualism plays a crucial role for the women in the story, culminating into moments where class, gender, and personal identity intersect. The séance becomes a space where history, imagination, and fantasy merge, reinforcing the novella's feminist re-examination of Emily Tennyson Jesse's life. Byatt legitimizes the imaginative elements of her story, recognizing that such reinterpretations are essential for challenging restrictive historical narratives. Emily is portrayed as someone who values intellectual pursuits over domestic concerns. Her intelligence is evident in Hallam's letters, where he reprimands her for reading an essay he wrote for the male-exclusive Cambridge Apostles. As a young woman, she was quite astute, but Hallam treated her as a blend of goddess, house angel, child, and pet lamb—a set of mythical roles that nearly consumed her after his death, leading her into eleven years of socially prescribed mourning. Despite this, Emily resists the constraints imposed upon her. She secretly joins a women's poetry group called the 'Husks'—a name both ironic and poignant—created by the young women in her family. While intellectual life remains the domain of men, as reflected in their authoritative letters and poetry, Emily's home eventually becomes a bibliophile's haven. She forms strong opinions and, in a symbolic act of defiance, sells her copy of Hallam's *Remains*. Byatt's portrayal of Emily challenges the notion that intellectual women of the past left no mark; instead, she reveals that their stories, though rarely documented like those of Tennyson and his male peers, undoubtedly existed.

Beyond these intellectual explorations, Byatt incorporates broader aspects of Victorian women's history. As Louisa Hadley points out, Mrs. Hearnshaw—a fictional séance attendee seeking to communicate with her five deceased infant daughters—reflects the harsh reality of high infant mortality in the nineteenth century. Here, as throughout the novella, women's intellectual and physical experiences are presented as inseparable. *The Conjugial Angel* effectively layers these realities, demonstrating that factual historical discourse relies on women's narratives to uphold patriarchal structures. The novella suggests that binary oppositions—where femininity is constructed as subordinate to masculinity—are inherently fragile, destabilized by women's ability to manipulate discourse through imagination, speech, and writing.

A.S. Byatt's novels present a unique challenge to literary theorists, particularly when examined through the lens of postmodernist hermeneutics. Byatt herself has often rejected the classification of her work as postmodernist, preferring to situate her narratives within a more traditionally realist or romanticist lineage. Yet, a closer examination of her novels reveals that they operate within and respond to hermeneutical paradoxes in a manner that renders their denouements distinctly postmodernist. This paradox of intent versus textual effect leads to the emergence of what we through this thesis have termed **'meta-metafiction'**—a category of fiction that, while engaging with metafictional strategies, simultaneously transcends them in such a way that the work becomes untethered even from the author's own intentions. **Meta-metafiction**, therefore, denotes a category of narrative that inadvertently manifests postmodernist characteristics despite the author's explicit denial of such an orientation.

To understand this concept, we must first revisit Linda Hutcheon's definition of metafiction as postmodernist or self-reflective. Metafiction, in Hutcheon's formulation, foregrounds its own textuality, drawing attention to the constructed nature of narrative and challenging conventional realist notions of representation. Metafiction acknowledges the artifice of fiction, often breaking the fourth wall, incorporating self-referential commentary, or thematizing its own narrativity. It is, in essence, fiction about fiction. By contrast, **meta-metafiction**, as we propose, is a further evolution of this phenomenon. It is the kind of fiction that not only reflects on its own artifice but also extends beyond the parameters of the author's own control or intentionality, becoming postmodernist despite its "creator"'s disclaimers.

Byatt's oeuvre exemplifies this paradox in a compelling manner. Her works, particularly *Possession: A Romance* and *Angels and Insects,* are deeply engaged with questions of literary history, textual interpretation, and the epistemological instability of meaning. *Possession*, for instance, operates on multiple narrative levels, intertwining past and present through a tapestry of letters, poems, and scholarly discourse. The novel's structure—combining intertextual pastiche, historical ventriloquism, and metatextual reflection—clearly resonates with postmodernist aesthetics. Although Byatt asserts that her novel *Possession* does not conform to the conventions of postmodernist fiction, it becomes evident upon closer analysis that the novel aligns with key postmodernist characteristics, effectively fulfilling the criteria associated with the genre. In an interview with Nicolas Tredell, Byatt opines:

> Most postmodernist fiction cuts out any emotion very much earlier on. It doesn't allow the reader any pleasure, except in the cleverness of the person

> constructing the postmodernist fiction. I think that's boring. I think you can have all the other pleasures as well.

This resistance on the part of the author itself becomes a feature of **meta-metafiction**. Unlike self-consciously postmodern writers such as John Barth, Italo Calvino, or Paul Auster, Byatt does not overtly seek to dismantle narrative authority. However, her texts nevertheless enact a form of epistemological skepticism characteristic of postmodernist fiction. This occurs through their treatment of literary interpretation, the unknowability of the past, and the ultimately irresolvable nature of meaning. The characters in *Possession*—notably Roland Michell and Maud Bailey—engage in acts of scholarly detective work that highlight the inherent limitations of interpretation. Their discoveries are always contingent, mediated through textual fragments and intersubjective biases. The novel, in this way, embodies the postmodernist assertion that meaning is always deferred, contingent upon shifting perspectives and inaccessible origins.

This feature of Byatt's fiction situates it within the realm of **meta-metafiction**. Byatt's reluctance to align herself with postmodernism does not negate the postmodernist effects produced by her narratives. If metafiction explicitly foregrounds its own textuality, **meta-metafiction** extends this reflexivity to an ontological level where even the author's own intent is destabilized. This is particularly significant in light of Roland Barthes's concept of the "death of the author." Byatt's novels illustrate this principle by demonstrating that authorial intention is ultimately subordinate to the interpretative mechanisms inherent in textual production and reception. Despite Byatt's claims to the contrary, her fiction exceeds her own authorial framework, producing meaning that aligns with postmodernist aesthetics.

A similar pattern is evident in Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*, which further problematizes the act of narrative reconstruction. The novel follows Phineas G. Nanson, a graduate student who abandons the abstraction of literary theory in favor of empirical biography, only to find himself entangled in layers of textual deception. The novel's recursive structure—blurring the boundaries between fiction, biography, and historiography—creates a mise-en-abyme effect that aligns it with postmodernist narrative strategies. Yet, once again, Byatt's treatment of these themes remains ostensibly grounded in a realist tradition. She does not employ the overt pastiche or playful subversion typical of Barthesian or Pynchonian metafiction. However, the novel still operates within a fundamentally postmodernist paradigm by demonstrating the impossibility of achieving an objective biographical truth.

What distinguishes **meta-metafiction** from conventional metafiction, then, is its inadvertency. While metafiction is typically a self-aware and deliberate engagement with narrative

construction, **meta-metafiction** arises when a text manifests postmodernist tendencies despite an author's reticence toward such a classification. This inadvertency stems from the text's internal logic, which transcends the author's framework and situates itself within a broader epistemological landscape of postmodern thought. In Byatt's case, her novels inevitably confront the limits of representation, the instability of textual meaning, and the hermeneutic dilemmas central to postmodernist discourse. Her insistence on maintaining a realist orientation– of "feel[ing] the passion" as well as "do[ing] the standing-back and thinking"– paradoxically enhances the postmodernist dimensions of her work, making her novels prime exemplars of **meta-metafiction**.

This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the relationship between authorial intention and textual interpretation. If a text can be postmodernist despite its author's disinclination, does this imply that postmodernism is an intrinsic property of certain narrative structures rather than a consciously adopted literary mode? Through our use of **meta-metafiction,** we proffer that postmodernist effects can emerge organically through textual engagement with hermeneutical complexity, even when the author resists such a classification. This complicates traditional genre distinctions and challenges the boundaries between literary movements. It also highlights the evolving nature of literary theory itself, demonstrating that theoretical categories are not always determined solely by authorial intent but also by readerly and critical reception. Ultimately, Byatt's novels exemplify the paradox of **meta-metafiction**. While she may resist the label of traditionally postmodernist, her narratives engage with themes, structures, and interpretative challenges that align them with postmodernist aesthetics. This inadvertent postmodernism, which arises despite Byatt's intentions, underscores the necessity of re-evaluating theoretical classifications. By introducing the concept of **meta-metafiction**, we offer a framework for understanding how certain texts exceed their own authorial premises, engaging in a form of self-reflexivity that transcends even the conventional boundaries of metafiction. Through this reassessment of Byatt's works, we have attempted to contribute to the study of her novels and problematize the broader discourse on postmodernist literary theory.

The exploration of truth, authorship, and historicity in contemporary literary studies remains a deeply contested terrain, particularly in postmodern narratives that challenge traditional historical representations. A.S. Byatt's novels, *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*, engage with these themes through a lens of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to describe narratives that self-consciously address the act of historical representation. By employing Roland Barthes's theories of 'biographemes' and Hutcheon's idea of 'metafiction,'

Byatt constructs biographic metafiction as a subgenre of historiographic metafiction. In this chapter, we have problematized contemporary views on these issues by examining Byatt's narrative strategies that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, and authorial intent versus textual autonomy.

Barthes's notion of the 'biographeme'—a fragment of an author's life that resists traditional biographical narratives—plays a crucial role in understanding Byatt's engagement with authorship and textuality. Byatt's novels often appear to maintain an anti-Barthesian stance, as they seem to celebrate authorial presence and historical accuracy. However, upon closer examination, they subtly privilege language and text over the author, a nuance that has been overlooked in much of Byatt scholarship. Byatt's intertextual play with fictional and historical authors, along with her embedding of biographical elements into her narratives, underscores her engagement with postmodern epistemological concerns about how we know the past and what can be known of it.

Hutcheon's concept of metafiction, which refers to fiction that self-consciously reflects on its status as a constructed text, is central to Byatt's historiographic project. Byatt's *Possession*, for instance, is a novel that stages a dual narrative—one set in the Victorian era and the other in the contemporary period—interwoven through the discovery of letters and poems that reshape historical interpretations. The novel problematizes notions of authorship by presenting fictional poets whose textual remnants become the subject of scholarly inquiry, thus mirroring the ways in which real historical figures are reconstructed through their surviving texts. The interweaving of past and present through literary artifacts in *Possession* exemplifies Hutcheon's assertion that history is always mediated through narrative.

Similarly, *Angels and Insects* engages with historiographic metafiction by reconstructing Victorian scientific and social discourses. The novella *Morpho Eugenia* centers on a naturalist, William Adamson, who finds himself entangled in the intricate social structures of a Victorian household, paralleling the entomological studies he conducts. The narrative draws attention to the constructed nature of historical knowledge by embedding scientific discourse within its storytelling, demonstrating how both literary and scientific texts contribute to historical understanding. The interplay between fiction and historical reality in *Angels and Insects* aligns with Brian McHale's theories of postmodern fiction, particularly his distinction between modernist epistemological concerns and postmodernist ontological inquiries.

Furthermore, Ansgar Nunning's exploration of historiographic metafiction further informs an analysis of Byatt's work. Nunning argues that historiographic metafiction problematizes historical representation by exposing the ideological underpinnings of historiography. Byatt's

novels challenge dominant historical narratives by incorporating alternative perspectives, often through marginalized characters or subversive textual strategies. In *Possession*, the act of archival discovery and the reconstruction of a fictional literary past question the reliability of historical narratives, aligning with Nunning's assertion that historiographic metafiction foregrounds the process of historiography itself. *Angels and Insects* similarly interrogates the authority of historical discourse by juxtaposing scientific narratives with the personal and the mythical, highlighting the constructed nature of knowledge.

Byatt's strategic use of biographemes reinforces the Barthesian notion that an author's life is only accessible through textual fragments, not through a cohesive biographical whole. The fictional poets in *Possession*, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, exist primarily through their writings, letters, and scholarly interpretations rather than as fully realized biographical subjects. This narrative strategy mirrors real-life literary studies, where authors are often understood through incomplete and mediated textual traces. Byatt's engagement with Barthes's ideas, therefore, is more nuanced than a mere rejection or affirmation; her novels demonstrate how language and text ultimately shape our understanding of historical and literary figures.

Furthermore, Byatt's privileging of text over authorial intent resonates with poststructuralist critiques of authorship. The frequent use of embedded narratives, pastiches of Victorian poetry, and fictional scholarly articles within her novels disrupts any singular authoritative voice, reinforcing the notion that meaning is generated through intertextual dialogue rather than authorial decree. This technique aligns with Barthes's declaration of the "death of the author," wherein the interpretation of a text becomes a collaborative act between reader and text, rather than a transmission of a fixed authorial meaning. Additionally, Byatt's approach to historicity reflects Hutcheon's assertion that history is always mediated and constructed through narrative. Byatt does not present the past as an objective reality but as a series of textual encounters that are shaped by present-day interpretations. In *Possession*, the contemporary scholars' pursuit of historical truth is continually refracted through their own biases and the limitations of available texts. This recursive structure highlights the instability of historical knowledge and aligns with postmodern theories that question the possibility of retrieving an unmediated past.

Byatt's *Possession* and *Angels and Insects* serve as exemplary texts of biographic metafiction within the broader category of historiographic metafiction. By incorporating Barthes's biographemes and Hutcheon's metafictional strategies, Byatt problematizes contemporary views on truth, authorship, and historicity. Her novels engage deeply with postmodern epistemological questions, demonstrating how historical knowledge is always a textual

construct subject to reinterpretation. The nuanced interplay between fact and fiction, past and present, and author and text in Byatt's works reveals the complexity of historical representation in contemporary literature. By highlighting the overlooked elements of textual privilege in her narratives, we have attempted a more intricate understanding of Byatt's engagement with postmodern literary theory.

Chapter 3

Sarah Waters and Neo-Victorian *Sexsation*

Since the 1990s, British literary fiction has seen a notable resurgence in the historical novel, exemplified by the critical and commercial success of writers like Sarah Waters. Previously regarded as a somewhat diminished literary form, the historical novel was often perceived as formulaic—particularly when compared to the more innovative narrative techniques seen in works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. No longer confined to the margins of literary culture, historical fiction is now widely reviewed in major media outlets, has been recognized with dedicated literary awards, and is increasingly regarded as a significant standalone genre. This resurgence has been driven in part by the ability of historical novelists to bridge literary and popular fiction. Many of these writers have gained critical acclaim, won prestigious literary awards, and positioned themselves firmly within the literary establishment. Sarah Waters, in particular, has achieved recognition through her success in literary competitions, endorsement by key critical institutions, and acceptance within academic circles. Uniquely among this cohort, Waters is the only writer to engage exclusively with historical fiction, distinguishing herself from others such as Ian McEwan, David Mitchell, and Kazuo Ishiguro, who have all incorporated historical narratives but do not define themselves solely by the genre.

The historical novel's marginal status throughout much of the twentieth century—often dismissed as a 'female' genre—demonstrates the literary prejudices that have shaped its reception. The renewed interest in historical fiction since the 1990s may thus be interpreted as a delayed acknowledgment of the genre's intrinsic complexity and literary value. Since the time of Sir Walter Scott, authors have recognized the historical novel's capacity to engage with intricate themes and challenge conventional historical narratives. Rather than merely reconstructing the past, historical fiction interrogates its own representational strategies, underscoring the inherent partiality and constructed nature of historical knowledge. While novelists frequently emphasize the meticulous research underpinning their work, they simultaneously acknowledge its fictive nature, positioning historical fiction at an intriguing intersection between authenticity and invention. As a literary form, the historical novel raises fundamental questions about representation, authorship, and reader engagement with historical narratives. It compels readers to navigate temporal disjunctions and acknowledge the inherent 'otherness' of the past. In doing so, historical fiction exposes the mechanisms through which history is narrated, authorized, and disseminated. These narratives not only replicate dominant historical discourses but also provide alternative perspectives that challenge monolithic

representations of identity and experience. Consequently, reading and writing historical fiction involve an ethical negotiation with history, requiring an aesthetic and epistemological sophistication. The genre's ability to blur the boundaries between 'real' and 'fictional' history offers a means of interrogating historiographical assumptions, particularly regarding the ways in which history has traditionally silenced marginalized voices. The act of translating the past into a coherent, accessible narrative introduces ethical dilemmas tied to the illusion of historical authenticity. By analyzing Waters' fiction in relation to her theoretical interventions, we gain deeper insight into her politicized approach to representing the past. Her engagement with historiography is central to her work, though it is primarily articulated through her use of historical fiction as a medium for narrative exploration. Three key elements underscore this contention: her deployment of the term 'queer' to navigate the intersection of past and present temporalities, her strategic use of objects to critique the constructed nature of historical representation, and the role of utopian thinking in her early novels as a counterpoint to conventional historiography.

Before establishing herself as a novelist, Waters was an academic studying historical fiction, a background that offers valuable context for understanding her creative approach. She completed a PhD on historical fiction in 1995, positioning her early scholarship as both revisionist and revelatory. Her critical work sought to extend the boundaries of the historical novel by exploring narratives beyond the conventional literary canon, engaging with middlebrow fiction and popular culture. She also examined the representation of queer identities within historical fiction, foregrounding narratives that had previously been marginalized. In doing so, she revealed how fictional depictions of sexuality reflect contemporary preoccupations more than historically fixed identities. While her early work approached the genre with a degree of caution, her subsequent academic writing developed a more explicitly queer theoretical framework. Waters' scholarship aligns with a broader shift in literary studies toward a more nuanced engagement with the historical novel, moving beyond rigid questions of genre definition to consider its aesthetic and theoretical implications. As she herself observes, an excessive focus on the form of the historical novel has often detracted from critical analyses of its content. Waters' critical contributions reflect and contribute to this evolving discourse, and her fiction actively participates in redefining the genre's possibilities. By embracing the historical novel's hybridity, she challenges conventional literary hierarchies and explores new modes of historiographical engagement. Through both her scholarly and

creative work, Waters plays a crucial role in the ongoing reimagining of historical fiction as a vital and dynamic literary form. Waters herself admits:

> I started [to write] for two reasons: one, because I was reading a lot of historical novels and really enjoying the genre (there seemed to be a burst of interesting historical fiction around in the late '80s/early '90s: *The Name of the Rose*, *Nights at the Circus*, *Possession*, *Oscar and Lucinda* . . .); two, because in 1991 I started work on a PhD thesis looking specifically at lesbian and gay historical fiction, and I ended up wanting to write a lesbian historical novel of my own. I've never lost the basic excitement I felt then, at taking on a very familiar area of history ('Victorian Britain') and a very familiar style of writing ('the nineteenth-century novel') and making it do something new and a bit startling.

Scholars of contemporary literature have frequently aligned Waters' work with the broader neo-Victorian movement. As Kate Mitchell observes, these novels grapple with the complexities of reconstructing history, interrogating the implications of refashioning the past for modern audiences. She questions whether such narratives can authentically recreate historical experience or merely engage in a form of aesthetic revivalism, playing at nineteenth-century imitation. We have already established in the previous chapters that neo-Victorian literature exists at an intricate intersection of historical representation, cultural nostalgia, postmodernist inquiry, and collective memory, constructing nuanced dialogues with the historical imagination. Central to this literary mode is its self-reflexive engagement with historical fiction as a genre, an aspect that underscores its effectiveness. Mitchell asserts that historical novels have always engaged with historical memory while remaining conscious of the provisional and interpretive nature of historical representation.

In 2000, Waters collaborated with the distinguished queer theorist Laura Doan on a scholarly examination of lesbian historical fiction. This intellectual engagement reflects Waters' academic investment in theorizing historical fiction, situating her not only as a novelist but also as a critical voice within literary studies. By the time of this publication, Waters had already established herself as a prominent writer of historical fiction, particularly within the subgenre of lesbian historical narratives. This collaboration with Doan marks a pivotal moment in shaping her public identity as a historical novelist, offering a productive contrast between her theoretical perspectives and her creative practice. As Waters' fiction evolved, so too did the critical sophistication of her engagement with the genre. Doan and Waters explore the quest for

historical precedent pursued by lesbian and gay communities, positing that this search manifests in historical fiction's attempts to construct a lineage of queer existence. They highlight the distinct challenge faced by lesbians in this endeavor, given that male homosexual traditions have often been subsumed within broader patriarchal narratives of cultural transmission. To navigate this historical lacuna, they examine various literary texts that negotiate representations of the past within lesbian writing. Their analyses critique narratives that merely replicate conventional literary forms without offering innovative articulations of identity. In doing so, they reject approaches that seek to impose a genealogical continuity between past and present, particularly when such connections risk obscuring the socio-political contingencies of contemporary queer identities.

A significant aspect of Waters' fiction is her deliberate and layered use of the term 'queer,' which operates on multiple levels of meaning. The dual signification of 'queer' functions as a metafictional device, drawing attention to the novel's constructed nature while reinforcing its historical authenticity. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters employs the term 'queer' with striking intentionality:

> My view of her now, of course, was side-on and rather *queer*.
>
> For the oyster, you see, is what you might call a real *queer* fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!
>
> You must know too that I can never be happy while your friendship with that woman is so wrong and *queer*.
>
> The man had looked like Walter; I had pleasured him, in some *queer* way, for Kitty's sake; and the act had made me sicken. (*TTV* 17, 49, 134, 199)

These instances illustrate the term's fluidity: in the first, 'queer' conveys an unusual perspective; in the second, it references gender fluidity; in the third, it operates as a moral judgment; and in the fourth, it captures an unsettling moment of transgression. The term thus serves as a site of semantic multiplicity, embodying historical plausibility while simultaneously engaging with contemporary discourses of queer identity. Ultimately, Waters' strategic deployment of 'queer' functions as both a marker of historical authenticity and a means of interrogating the constructed nature of identity across temporal boundaries. It exists in a liminal space, signifying both the alien and the familiar, the past and the present. Through its very ambiguity, 'queer' becomes a mechanism by which historical fiction navigates the tensions

between historical representation and present-day resonances, reinforcing the neo-Victorian novel's ability to engage critically with the past while acknowledging its own fictive nature.

Waters' novels present a fertile ground for scholarly exploration due to their sophisticated engagement with historical narratives and diverse literary traditions. These works address critical themes such as history, collective memory, trauma, gender dynamics, class structures, and sexuality. Despite their accessibility, Waters' novels exhibit remarkable formal and generic innovation, skillfully incorporating and reinterpreting elements of sensation fiction, gothic literature, mid-20th-century women's fiction, and the country house novel. Her narrative techniques include complex storytelling, nonlinear structures, intertextual allusions, and unreliable narration. As Waters acknowledges, her academic background informs her writing, leading to texts that naturally invite literary analysis. A significant contribution of Waters' work lies in the evolution of historical fiction, a genre that has witnessed a surge in popularity in recent decades. Notably, the 2009 Booker Prize shortlist, which included her novel *The Little Stranger*, was entirely composed of historical fiction. Critical inquiry into Waters' approach to historical representation often questions the extent to which she prioritizes historical authenticity or actively reinterprets the past. Given that historical fiction inherently involves a degree of self-awareness and an unavoidable departure from absolute historical accuracy, Waters' novels embody this tension. As Jerome de Groot explains, historical novelists navigate the interplay between past and present, making historical events simultaneously recognizable and unfamiliar. Fictional accounts serve to fill in the gaps left by recorded history, providing space for imaginative reconstruction. Waters utilizes these historical gaps to recover overlooked narratives, particularly those concerning lesbian identities, or to introduce queer perspectives into historical contexts. She describes the fragmented nature of lesbian history as a challenge for historians but a creative advantage for novelists. Along similar lines, in her collaborative work with Laura Doan on lesbian historical fiction, she raises crucial questions about how history is appropriated by lesbian writers, whether historical fiction should strive to reclaim real historical figures or instead invent pasts shaped by contemporary queer discourses. They also consider whether such novels function more as performative engagements with queer identity rather than as strictly descriptive historical accounts.

Waters' fiction operates within both modes—recovering lost histories while simultaneously reimagining them. Her novels, though set in historical periods preceding the emergence of contemporary LGBTQIA+ political movements, are shaped by modern queer theory and activism. This interplay between the obligation to historical representation and the influence of

contemporary queer politics is central to both her novels and the critical discourse surrounding them. For instance, *Affinity* serves as both a plausible recreation of marginalized women's experiences—such as those of 'spinsters', spirit mediums, and working-class servants—and an engagement with the literary conventions of 19th-century sensation fiction. The novel thus navigates the dual impulses of feminist historiography and historical literary aesthetics, acknowledging that every act of reconstructing the past is inevitably shaped by contemporary perspectives. Beyond the tension between historical fidelity and modern concerns, Waters' fiction is deeply invested in literary tradition. Her knowledge of history is largely mediated through textual forms, which she repurposes to suit contemporary storytelling. This metafictional engagement has led to the classification of her works as 'neo-Victorian'. While Waters is not the first author to explore neo-Victorianism, her novels have played a pivotal role in defining the genre and shaping discussions about the significance of revisiting and reconstructing history for contemporary audiences. Scholarly approaches to neo-Victorian fiction often draw upon Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction, which views historical novels as inherently self-aware and revisionist. However, some critics argue that neo-Victorian fiction does not wholly conform to this model. Louisa Yates, for example, contends that rather than overtly challenging historical representation, neo-Victorian fiction balances authenticity with playful anachronism. Accordingly, she suggests that *Tipping the Velvet* resists straightforward classification as historiographic metafiction, as it simultaneously reconstructs Victorian cultural landscapes while revising the sexual identities of its characters. The interplay between past and present in Waters' fiction is also evident in her use of language, particularly the term 'queer'. Mandy Koolen highlights how the repetition of 'queer' in *Tipping the Velvet* reinforces the novel's status as contemporary historical fiction, connecting historical meanings of the word with its present-day connotations. This technique emphasizes both the continuities and discontinuities in queer experiences across time. *Affinity* also employs 'queer' in a manner consistent with its late-19th-century meaning, denoting peculiarity or strangeness, while simultaneously inviting readers to recognize its modern subversive implications.

Although Waters' later works shift their focus from the 19th century to the postwar era, they retain thematic and stylistic traces of the Victorian period. Ann Heilmann, for instance, interprets Waters' *The Little Stranger* as a reworking of Victorian Gothic conventions within a 1940s setting, arguing that the novel reflects contemporary anxieties about historical nostalgia and postwar disillusionment. According to Heilmann, Waters' fiction engages in a nuanced interplay between historical longing and contemporary critique, mirroring the ways in which

modern culture simultaneously venerates and interrogates its Victorian inheritance. Waters' body of work exemplifies the dynamic relationship between historical fiction and contemporary discourse. Her novels do more than reconstruct the past; they interrogate the process of historical storytelling itself, questioning whose stories are told, how they are framed, and what they reveal about present-day cultural and political concerns.

The publication of *Tipping the Velvet* coincided with the emergence of queer theory within academic discourse, with Judith Butler's concept of performativity serving as a foundational reference point for critical interpretations of Sarah Waters' early fiction. Helen Davies observes that it is now a well-established critical perspective to recognize Butler's theories as influential in discussions of *Tipping the Velvet* and its depiction of male impersonation in the music hall setting. Stefania Ciocia, meanwhile, examines the novel's interplay between performance and authenticity, appearance and reality, and deception and truth, linking Nan's personal growth to her ability to navigate London as a performative space. This could be extended to the neo-Victorian genre itself, that novels foregrounding gender performativity also expose neo-Victorian fiction as a performative enterprise. Interestingly, the simultaneous rise of the neo-Victorian novel and developments in gender theory is no mere coincidence. However, the novel's depiction of performance as a means of exploring alternative gender expressions and desires is not universally portrayed as liberatory. Many scholars contend that Nan's journey is one of personal transformation, ultimately leading her away from performance, which is presented as inherently limited in its possibilities. Critics posit that Waters engages critically with Butler's ideas, demonstrating that the subversive potential of queer theory is not necessarily translatable to the historical context of Victorian England. Early critical reception of Waters' work often situated it firmly within the framework of queer theory, yet more recent studies of her later novels suggest a more complex and sometimes ambiguous relationship with these theoretical paradigms. The relationship between Waters' fiction and feminist thought remains a central concern in scholarly discourse. All of her novels grapple with gender politics, exploring women's bodies, relationships, and histories from a feminist perspective. However, Waters does not idealize her female characters; rather, she frequently portrays women who engage in deception, criminality, and even the supernatural. Her treatment of key feminist themes, including pornography, female agency, and motherhood, is often characterized by a degree of ambiguity. Critical responses to *Affinity* frequently highlight Waters' use of Victorian spiritualism, interpreting it as both a metaphor for the persistent presence of queerness and a means of interrogating 19th-century femininity. Nevertheless, the novel's engagement with

female agency does not necessarily yield a celebratory vision of women's relationships. Instead, Margaret becomes increasingly entangled in Selina's manipulations, ultimately serving as her mouthpiece and puppet. In turn, both women are subjected to the influence of the scheming servant, Ruth Vigers. Class dynamics emerge as a recurring theme across Waters' body of work, with increasing scholarly attention devoted to this aspect of her fiction. Her fiction consistently intertwines themes of gender, sexuality, and class, while maintaining an acute awareness of contradiction, ambivalence, and unresolved tensions.

The Victorian era's idealization of the family paradoxically amplified the dramatic and emotional impact of its recurrent failures to provide security and protection. This dynamic was strategically utilized by Victorian authors and artists, who leveraged these failures for sensationalism, emotional resonance, and social critique. The apparent disintegration of the civilized society became a lens through which these authors assessed its underlying weaknesses. Sensation fiction, particularly the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Reade, repeatedly explored and intensified narratives of familial disruption. These texts foregrounded the dissatisfaction of individuals—especially women—who sought liberation from restrictive familial and marital ties, often expressing their frustrations through acts that destabilized the very institution of the family. The emergence of the sensation novel in the 1860s became a testament to the role of the nuclear family and the domestic sphere not only in concealing but in actively enabling transgressive desires and clandestine activities. Victorian literary portrayals of the family were imbued with a sense of melancholy—an ongoing yearning for an idealized domesticity that persists despite its evident disintegration.

While analyzing neo-Victorian works of fiction, it forms a simplistic reading to view the neo-Victorian family as the tangible yet unattainable attempt to dispel postmodern anxieties and fragmentation. Because the very fractures and fabrications which neo-Victorian creators critique were already acknowledged by the Victorians themselves and extensively reflected in their literary works. Time and again, the nineteenth-century novel interrogated the family unit, depicting it not only as a site of protection and mutual support but also as a space of harm and dysfunction. Consequently, the aspiration to reclaim an imagined past of familial harmony and stability lacks a firm grounding within the cultural consciousness of the period itself.

In this chapter, we extend our textual analyses to two of Sarah Waters' novels, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, utilizing Marie-Luise Kohlke's concept of "sexsation" to examine the

intricate interplay of desire, transgression, and power dynamics in the neo-Victorian landscape. Kohlke's notion of "sexsation" underscores the intersection of sexuality and sensation fiction, illuminating how contemporary neo-Victorian novels rework nineteenth-century tropes of secrecy, scandal, and social constraint to foreground marginalized identities and repressed desires. Applying this framework, we explore how Waters' texts navigate a historical era marked by competing forces—retribution and rebellion, repression and indulgence, and so on.

Tipping the Velvet (1998) and *Affinity* (1999) both engage with Victorian narratives of power, desire, and identity, yet they do so in distinct ways. *Tipping the Velvet* follows the journey of Nancy Astley, a working-class woman who undergoes a radical transformation as she moves through various social spheres, engaging in cross-dressing performances and same-sex relationships that defy the rigid moral codes of the era. The novel repurposes elements of the Victorian bildungsroman, but rather than reaffirming conventional ideals of domesticity and propriety, it subverts them by celebrating queer desire and fluid identity. Waters employs sensation fiction's hallmarks—secret affairs, double lives, and scandalous revelations—to create a narrative that is as exhilarating as it is disruptive. Similarly, *Affinity* weaves a tale of repression and obsession, set within the claustrophobic confines of Millbank Prison. The protagonist, Margaret Prior, an upper-class woman plagued by grief and familial expectations, becomes entangled in an intense, erotically charged relationship with the enigmatic spirit medium Selina Dawes. Unlike *Tipping the Velvet*, which revels in the possibilities of sexual exploration and liberation, *Affinity* presents a more sombre meditation on desire as both empowering and perilous. The novel's gothic overtones and psychological depth align with Kohlke's assertion that neo-Victorian fiction frequently revisits themes of imprisonment—both literal and metaphorical—especially concerning women's restricted agency in a patriarchal society. Through Margaret and Selina's ill-fated connection, *Affinity* critiques the oppressive structures that police female sexuality, while also exposing the potential for self-deception and manipulation within intimate relationships.

Both novels, while distinct in tone and narrative trajectory, utilize sensation tropes to expose the contradictions of Victorian morality, wherein the very mechanisms designed to suppress deviant behaviors simultaneously generate clandestine spaces for their existence. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy's gender and sexual transgressions unfold in underground music halls and hidden domestic arrangements, challenging the binaries of gender, class, and propriety. In *Affinity*, the spiritualist movement provides a subversive outlet for women like Selina, whose performances of supernatural communication become a metaphor for the subjugation and

reclamation of female agency. The push and pull between repression and indulgence, rebellion and punishment, remains central to both texts, reflecting the broader tensions within Victorian society and its neo-Victorian reinterpretations. By applying the concept of "sexsation" to these works, we highlight how Waters not only reimagines Victorian sexualities but also critiques the lingering constraints of gender and class that extend into the present. In doing so, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* serve as powerful reworkings of the sensation genre, demonstrating how contemporary historical fiction can both honor and subvert the past's literary traditions.

Victorian literature is densely populated with characters who exist on the fringes of or entirely outside the conventional family structure. These include ridiculed "spinsters", "disgraced" women, unfaithful or runaway wives, absent husbands, concealed mentally ill relatives, isolated governesses raising other people's children, and the most prominent of all—orphans who are unloved and exploited. The family, symbolizing legitimacy, race, and national identity, was inherently unstable, requiring an excluded figure or "scapegoat" against which to define and reinforce itself, even if only as an imagined construct. However, beyond the orphan, other marginal figures similarly functioned to uphold the norm by way of exclusion and opposition. Just as the orphan served as a counterpoint for Victorians to reaffirm traditional family values, contemporary representations of Victorian familial dysfunction operate as a symbolic target. By portraying the Victorian social unit as deeply flawed, modern discourse may be seen to reassert its own familial ideals despite facing comparable challenges regarding the stability and function of the family in the present postmodernist era. Despite the progress made in the nineteenth century regarding the legal protection of women and children, including advancements in custody rights, divorce laws, and legislation against domestic abuse and incest, similar forms of familial violence—such as domestic cruelty, child neglect, sexual exploitation, and even murder—continue to persist globally. The socio-economic forces that once led to family fragmentation in the Victorian era, such as industrialization, famine, and imperial expansion, eerily prefigure modern patterns of displacement caused by economic migration, refugee crises, and the militarization of global politics. These parallels suggest that the fundamental threats to familial stability remain largely unchanged, with only the visibility and prosecution of related crimes having increased.

Whether romanticized as an idealized relic of lost values or critiqued as a site of oppression and dysfunction, the (neo-)Victorian family is ultimately a construct of cultural imagination. Viewed as an "other" against which contemporary society measures and reassesses its own fragile family values, the Victorian family functions as a revenant in the Derridean sense—a

spectral presence that belongs to the past yet remains an integral part of the present [more on Derridean hauntology and Levinasian 'other' in Chapter Four]. The act of rejecting the Victorian family as repressive and crisis-ridden paradoxically resurrects it, much like the orphan figure in Victorian literature who continues to haunt the very families that attempt to exclude them. In this way, rather than dispelling the spectres of the past, the neo-Victorian family invites them to linger, transforming family life into an uncanny and unstable construct that blurs the line between reality and fiction. This inherent instability is particularly evident in neo-Victorian literature, which frequently explores themes of homelessness, estrangement, and the illusory nature of familial belonging. One recurring motif that encapsulates this longing for an unattainable past is the use of portraits and photographs as memorials for lost or imagined familial connections. As Kate Mitchell observes, photography in neo-Victorian fiction serves as both a shrine to the past and a means of confronting its transience. These photographs, often misattributed, faded, or staged, highlight the fictive nature of the family itself—a construct shaped as much by desire and imagination as by lived reality. In neo-Victorian fiction, this paradox is further reinforced through narratives that engage with incest, secrecy, and moral transgressions while simultaneously adopting nineteenth-century literary strategies of omission and obfuscation. For instance, *Affinity* alludes to paternal abuse without depicting it explicitly. The neo-Victorian family thus embodies the unresolved tensions between past and present, reflecting a cultural psyche that remains deeply intertwined with the nineteenth century yet fundamentally unable to locate a stable sense of belonging within it.

Neo-Victorian literature critically reevaluates the concept of family by emphasizing the inevitability of dysfunctional families while simultaneously highlighting the possibilities of chosen families. This perspective challenges traditional norms and calls for an ethical shift in thinking. Regardless of the form of communal living explored in neo-Victorian fiction, the moral responsibility of caring for others—whether they are imposed or chosen—remains a central theme. It is intriguing, and perhaps reassuring, that neo-Victorianism, despite its revisionist and subversive tendencies, is grounded in a traditional, almost humanistic, ethical framework centered on care for others. Ultimately, neo-Victorian fiction reinterprets and reimagines human relationships across time. Its portrayal of the nineteenth-century family functions as both a reference and a critique, serving as a foundational narrative to be dismantled as well as a collection of counter-narratives that challenge and expand upon contemporary understandings of family and social bonds.

Marie-Luise Kohlke examines the modern "sexsational" trend in neo-Victorian fiction, which constructs contemporary sexual identity in contrast to the supposedly repressed sexuality of the nineteenth century. In this framework, the "Victorian" serves as a symbol of outdated sexuality against which modernity defines itself. The neo-Victorian "sexsation" deliberately entices readerly desire only to frustrate its fulfillment. For instance, in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, the relationships of both the nineteenth-century poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, and their modern academic counterparts, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, are structured around prolonged anticipation. Yet, when these relationships are finally consummated, the actual descriptions are fleeting and elusive. In the case of the poets, the narrative offers only a vague reference to "the first of those long strange nights," leaving the details undisclosed and the reader's curiosity unfulfilled. At this point in the novel, many readers shift their expectations onto the twentieth-century academics, whose pursuit of historical truth symbolically parallels their own developing romance. Their quest for knowledge ultimately culminates in a sexual encounter, yet here too, the narration remains oblique. The scene is condensed into a single sentence, its language deliberately old-fashioned and highly romanticized: Roland "entered and took possession" of Maud's body in a moment of passion described in abstract, euphemistic terms that refuse any graphic detail. The reader remains at a distance, denied any visceral participation—there are no explicit descriptions of bodies, movements, or sensations. Byatt reinforces this approach through a metafictional commentary on the nature of reading itself. The narrator reflects on literature's self-referential, almost auto-erotic quality, where words create an experience that is distanced rather than immediate, and lacking the raw sensuality of physical intimacy. Instead, the text offers a cerebral form of pleasure, privileging intellectual engagement over bodily immersion. Byatt constructs a narrative that builds erotic tension only to withhold satisfaction, turning desire into a game of deferral and denial.

Kohlke contends that contemporary perspectives on Victorian sexuality often construct it as a captive figure—"a princess in a tower"—awaiting rescue by the supposedly more enlightened and sexually liberated postmodern age. She suggests that modern readers engage with neo-Victorian fiction as voyeurs, seeking to uncover and possess the perceived sexual mysteries of the past. This desire, according to Kohlke, is frustrated by the very structure of the narrative, which transposes the anticipated erotic energies of the Victorian past onto its modern protagonists, thereby disrupting the fulfillment of the reader's expectations. The result is a textual dynamic wherein the neo-Victorian novel resists straightforward historical revelation

and instead problematizes the interplay between past and present, desire and repression. We argue that, contrary to the assumption that the Victorian era was characterized by rigid sexual restraint, neo-Victorian novels frequently reconstruct it as a realm of transgressive sensuality that mirrors, if not exceeds, contemporary hedonistic representations of desire. While historical accuracy may be subject to question, these novels depict a Victorian world that subverts the moral virtues traditionally associated with the period, particularly as they were reimagined in Thatcherite Britain's nostalgic revival of Victorian values. *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* reengage with Victorian literary genres—the Sensation novel and the Gothic, respectively—both of which have historically functioned as vehicles for exploring the instability of gender and sexuality. Through these novels, Sarah Waters reconfigures the Victorian literary landscape by centralizing lesbian desire, thereby challenging the supposed immutability of historical narratives and offering a revisionist take on the Victorian past.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters adopts the mode of the Victorian Sensation novel to construct a narrative that revels in bodily pleasure, gender fluidity, and social transgression. The novel follows Nancy Astley's journey from a naïve oyster girl to a performer, rent boy, and eventually, an independent woman who navigates the complex social and sexual hierarchies of late-Victorian London. By situating Nancy's story within the framework of a picaresque adventure, Waters not only foregrounds the erotic potential of her protagonist's encounters but also exposes the performativity inherent in gender and sexuality. In her role as a male impersonator and later as a rent boy, Nancy traverses the city in a manner that challenges the Victorian moral economy, embodying a vision of sexual freedom that seems at odds with the era's conventional representations. However, rather than presenting a simplistic narrative of liberation, *Tipping the Velvet* complicates this notion by demonstrating how Nancy's survival often depends on her ability to conform to the very structures she seeks to subvert. Her movement through different social spheres—from music halls to aristocratic households—reveals the ways in which power, desire, and economic necessity intersect to shape women's experiences in a patriarchal society. Similarly, *Affinity* engages with the Gothic tradition to explore the themes of repression, spiritualism, and the dangers of unchecked desire. Unlike *Tipping the Velvet*, which revels in its protagonist's overt expressions of desire, *Affinity* presents a more shadowed and restrained eroticism, one that underscores the perils of female passion within a society that demands its containment. Margaret's attraction to Selina is steeped in secrecy, longing, and ultimately, betrayal, highlighting the tragic dimensions of desire that cannot find legitimate expression within Victorian moral and legal frameworks. The novel's engagement with the

supernatural functions as a metaphor for the unseen, unspoken nature of same-sex desire, reinforcing the idea that women's erotic lives are often rendered spectral within dominant historical narratives.

By rewriting the Victorian past through the lens of same-sex desire, Waters not only disrupts the notion of a rigidly heterosexual Victorian literary canon but also interrogates the relationship between historical representation and contemporary identity politics. The sexualities depicted in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* challenge the dominant cultural perception of the nineteenth century as an era of unyielding moral conservatism. Instead, Waters presents a past that is as sexually charged and conflicted as the present, thus calling into question the assumption that progress is linear or that modern sexual freedoms represent an unequivocal departure from Victorian repression. Moreover, the invocation of Victorian literary traditions—the Sensation novel in *Tipping the Velvet* and the Gothic in *Affinity*—serves to emphasize the transgressive potential that was always embedded within these genres. Sensation novels, with their emphasis on scandal, deception, and social upheaval, provided a means of critiquing Victorian norms even in their own time, and Waters extends this tradition by using it to explore gender and sexuality in new ways. Similarly, the Gothic's preoccupation with the uncanny, the forbidden, and the liminal makes it a fitting vehicle for *Affinity*'s meditation on sexual repression and its consequences. By reworking these literary forms, Waters situates her novels within a broader historical continuum of subversive storytelling, demonstrating that Victorian literature was never as monolithic or morally uniform as it is often assumed to be.

Ultimately, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* reveal the ways in which neo-Victorian fiction engages in a complex dialogue with the past, simultaneously uncovering and reimagining the sexual possibilities of Victorian society. By crafting narratives that foreground lesbian desire, Waters not only provides representation for historically marginalized voices but also interrogates the act of historical reconstruction itself. These novels challenge the notion that Victorian sexuality is something to be unveiled or possessed by modern readers; instead, they assert that the past is always already mediated through the desires and anxieties of the present. In doing so, Waters' work resists the temptation to view history as a site of simple discovery and instead positions it as a space of ongoing contestation and reinterpretation.

This perspective fundamentally challenges Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which posits that literary history operates as a burdening presence, shaping contemporary writers who struggle to emerge from the shadow of their predecessors. Instead of the past

influencing the present in a deterministic manner, Waters' work suggests a reversal of this dynamic, wherein the concerns, ideologies, and desires of the present actively reshape and reinterpret the past. This reversal destabilizes the notion of literary genealogy as a hierarchical lineage of influence and instead proposes a more fluid, dialogic relationship between historical and contemporary texts. In *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, the Victorian era is not a static source of literary authority but a contested space that modern sensibilities continuously rework, demonstrating that history is not a fixed legacy but an evolving discourse shaped by contemporary engagements.

Michel Foucault's seminal work, *The History of Sexuality*, revolutionised the understanding of sexuality, power, and discourse. His argument that sexuality is not a natural given but rather a construct shaped by power relations and societal institutions has been influential in queer theory and literary criticism. In particular, his concept of the 'sexualised Other'—a category that marks individuals as deviant or transgressive—provides a useful framework for analysing queer representation in literature. Waters' novels *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* depict lesbian identities within historical contexts that simultaneously eroticise and marginalise queer women. By situating these novels within Foucault's theoretical framework, this thesis examines how Waters critiques and reclaims the 'Othered' lesbian subject in a literary tradition that has long relegated such figures to the periphery. Foucault challenges the notion that Victorian society repressed sexuality. Instead, he argues that sexuality became a site of knowledge production, subject to surveillance and classification. The emergence of sexual taxonomies in the nineteenth century—including categories such as the 'invert'—illustrates how sexuality was medicalised and pathologised. This classification process positioned certain desires as normative while relegating others to the realm of deviance. The 'sexualised other' thus emerged as a construct that defined and reinforced dominant sexual norms. In the context of Waters' novels, this Foucauldian framework becomes especially relevant. *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* depict queer women navigating Victorian society, which constructs them as both objects of desire and figures of transgression. Waters' depiction of lesbian identity engages with the historical discourse that sought to define and control female same-sex desire, revealing the mechanisms through which queer women were simultaneously eroticised and marginalised.

Tipping the Velvet's Nan King, a working-class woman who becomes immersed in the world of music-hall performance, explores her lesbian identity. The novel's focus on theatricality and disguise resonates with Foucault's notion of sexuality as a performative construct rather than an inherent truth. Nan's career as a male impersonator allows her to subvert gender and sexual

norms, positioning her both within and outside societal frameworks of desire. Her experiences reflect the complex interplay of visibility and invisibility that characterises the sexualised other. Throughout the novel, Nan's queerness is shaped by structures of power and surveillance. Her relationships with upper-class women, such as Diana Lethaby, highlight the intersection of sexuality and class, as wealthier women exploit their privilege to control and eroticise working-class queer women. This dynamic echoes Foucault's discussion of how power operates through knowledge production: Nan's sexuality becomes a spectacle, controlled and defined by those with greater social authority. Yet, Waters also grants her protagonist a certain agency, allowing her to reclaim her desire and identity on her own terms by the novel's conclusion.

Whereas *Tipping the Velvet* presents a more celebratory narrative of queer desire, *Affinity* explores the darker consequences of sexual othering. The novel employs gothic conventions to frame lesbian desire as a site of both fascination and danger, echoing Victorian anxieties about female same-sex relationships. The prison setting functions as a microcosm of Foucauldian power structures, wherein bodies are subject to constant scrutiny and regulation. Margaret's growing attraction to Selina is marked by secrecy, repression, and guilt—elements that reflect the Victorian construction of lesbianism as an illicit and pathological condition. The novel critiques the ways in which institutions such as the prison and the family enforce heteronormativity, positioning queer women as both objects of desire and figures of transgression. Selina's role as a medium further complicates her status as the sexualised other. Her apparent supernatural abilities render her both alluring and dangerous, reinforcing her marginality. This depiction aligns with Foucault's claim that sexuality and knowledge production are intertwined: Selina's otherness is constructed through discourses that simultaneously eroticise and condemn her. By the novel's end, Waters subverts gothic tropes, exposing how the true horror lies not in Selina's queerness but in the rigid structures that seek to contain and punish non-normative desire. Waters' novels engage in a critical dialogue with the historical discourses that Foucault describes. By rewriting Victorian narratives from a lesbian perspective, she challenges the traditional construction of queer women as tragic figures doomed to suffering and erasure. *Tipping the Velvet* offers a revisionist take on the classic bildungsroman, granting its protagonist sexual agency and self-determination. *Affinity*, while darker in tone, similarly interrogates the forces that render queer women invisible within historical and literary traditions.

Moreover, Waters' use of pastiche and intertextuality aligns with the Foucauldian idea that history is not a fixed narrative but a series of competing discourses. Her engagement with

Victorian tropes both exposes and destabilises the historical construction of lesbian identity, offering a feminist and queer intervention into the literary canon. By foregrounding the perspectives of women who have been historically othered, Waters not only critiques the mechanisms of power that Foucault describes but also imagines alternative possibilities for queer existence. The intersection of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and Sarah Waters' novels highlights the enduring impact of historical discourses on contemporary representations of queer identity. Foucault's analysis of the sexualised other provides a valuable lens through which to examine how Waters' novels both engage with and resist Victorian constructions of lesbianism. Through their nuanced depictions of queer desire, performance, and repression, these novels challenge traditional narratives of otherness, offering instead a reclamation of lesbian subjectivity. Waters' work ultimately illustrates how historical fiction can serve as a site of resistance, reimagining the past to create new possibilities for queer storytelling.

The two novels participate in the neo-Victorian literary tradition by revisiting and reimagining the nineteenth-century era through a lens that subverts traditional heteronormative paradigms. Drawing on Marie-Luise Kohlke's concept of 'sexsation,' Waters employs sensational representations of Victorian sexual lives to interrogate and challenge patriarchal structures. This chapter examines how Waters' fiction enables a radical revision of Victorian discourses on sexuality and gender through her depiction of lesbian desire and female agency. Furthermore, we explore how her characters function as neo-Victorian manifestations of the New Woman, engaging with late-nineteenth-century feminist discourses while reconfiguring them for contemporary readers. Marie-Luise Kohlke's framework of 'sexsation' is particularly useful in understanding how Waters employs eroticized narratives to confront the regulatory mechanisms of Victorian society. Both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* disrupt traditional representations of female sexuality, presenting lesbian relationships that challenge patriarchal heteronormativity. By focusing on marginalized sexual identities, Waters' texts act as counter-narratives to the mainstream Victorian novel's emphasis on domesticity and the nuclear family.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy Astley's journey from an innocent oyster girl to a male impersonator and queer performer illustrates a radical departure from the conventional Victorian bildungsroman. Her trajectory through various sexual and social spheres—including her relationships with Kitty Butler, Diana Lethaby, and Florence Banner—foregrounds a diverse spectrum of lesbian identities that defy rigid categorization. Similarly, *Affinity*, though more gothic in its tone, explores the repressed and illicit desires of its protagonist, Margaret

Prior, whose obsession with the enigmatic spirit medium Selina Dawes reveals the constrained sexual and emotional lives of Victorian women. By employing the gothic trope of the haunted heroine, Waters critiques the enforced celibacy and social restrictions placed upon unmarried women in the period. A key theme in Waters' novels is the subversion of patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires through performativity and artistic expression. Drawing from Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance, *Tipping the Velvet* showcases Nancy's transition from passive observer to active participant in shaping her sexual identity. Her engagement in the music hall scene, particularly her male impersonation act, destabilizes fixed notions of gender and allows her to navigate a fluid and autonomous sexuality. By assuming multiple personas—Nan King, Neville, and later, a socialist activist—Nancy effectively deconstructs the essentialist binaries of masculinity and femininity. In contrast, *Affinity*'s Margaret Prior is initially confined by her role as a lady visitor in Millbank Prison, where she is expected to embody Victorian ideals of middle-class femininity. However, her interactions with Selina Dawes expose the porous boundaries between power and submission, reality and illusion. The spiritualist practices depicted in the novel can be read as metaphors for female authorship and storytelling; just as Selina manipulates Margaret's perceptions, Waters manipulates historical narratives to center queer female voices that have been historically silenced.

The New Woman novel of the 1890s sought to challenge gender roles and advocate for female autonomy. Waters' heroines embody many of the characteristics of the New Woman—independence, nonconformity, and a rejection of marriage as the primary locus of fulfillment. However, while the original New Woman novel often positioned its protagonists in ambiguous or tragic conclusions, Waters offers a more expansive, though at times ambivalent, vision of female self-determination. Nancy Astley's ultimate decision to forge a life with Florence Banner, a socialist and advocate for women's rights, reflects an ideological shift from the pleasure-seeking hedonism of her relationship with Diana Lethaby to a politically engaged form of lesbian identity. This echoes the concerns of the late-Victorian women's movement, which linked female sexuality with broader struggles for social justice. In *Affinity*, Margaret's fate is more tragic, as she remains trapped within the constraints of her class and gender, her yearning for Selina culminating in betrayal and disillusionment. This divergence between the two novels highlights Waters' nuanced engagement with feminist history, acknowledging both the progress and limitations of women's emancipation in different socio-historical contexts.

Waters' revisionist approach to the Victorian era allows for the reclamation of queer histories that were either repressed or misrepresented in mainstream nineteenth-century literature. By incorporating elements of both sensation fiction and the New Woman novel, her works construct a neo-Victorian feminist aesthetic that interrogates the intersections of sexuality, class, and power. In doing so, she not only revisits but reinvents the past, creating narratives that resonate with contemporary discussions on gender and identity. The novels exemplify the potential of neo-Victorian fiction to serve as a site of resistance against the ideological constraints of both the past and the present. Waters' heroines, in their defiance of conventional norms, embody the spirit of the New Woman while also expanding its parameters to accommodate queer and non-binary identities. Thus, Waters' fiction can indeed be considered as a form of neo-New Woman literature—one that challenges, disrupts, and reimagines the gendered and sexual politics of both the Victorian and modern eras.

Waters employs the music hall in *Tipping the Velvet* as a potent symbolic site where alternative articulations of gender and sexual desire find a space for expression. Waters harnesses the music hall's potential to stage female-to-male cross-dressing performances that explicitly articulate a lesbian subjectivity. The performance of the lesbian male impersonator in *Tipping the Velvet* is structured around the very same ambiguity between the "authentic" and the "artificial". The reader is immediately drawn into this layered paradox within the opening pages of *Tipping the Velvet*, as the young and inexperienced Nan Astley attends a performance at the Canterbury Palace, where she witnesses the "masher" act of Kitty Butler. Clad in the impeccable attire of a "perfect West-End swell", Kitty performs a sentimental ballad, theatrically concluding by tossing a rose into the lap of "the prettiest girl" in the audience. This overt display of same-sex attraction is rendered permissible precisely because it is framed within the conventions of a music-hall act, where it is presumed to be mere performance rather than an expression of authentic desire. However, as Kitty's growing relationship with Nan reveals, the act itself veils a genuine attraction: in this case, "authentic" desire must masquerade as "artificial" in order to be articulated. Nan's reception of Kitty's performance introduces yet another interpretive layer—though initially lacking the vocabulary to articulate her reaction, she instinctively perceives its authenticity from the outset.

Emily Jeremiah identifies *Tipping the Velvet* as a queer Bildungsroman, charting Nan's trajectory "from oyster-girl to dresser, to music-hall artiste to rent boy, to sex slave to housewife/parent and socialist orator" (135). Yet the intricate gender codes embedded within the masher's act suggest the challenges of such self-realization: while she dons male attire, her

performance is not intended to be mistaken for masculinity, instead serving as a spectacle of titillation for a heterosexual gaze. When Nan joins Kitty's act, she becomes increasingly aware of this dynamic, recognizing that "in every darkened hall there might be one or two female hearts that beat exclusively for me, one or two pairs of eyes that lingered, perhaps immodestly, over my face and figure and suit. Did they know why they looked? Did they know what they looked for?" (129). Despite the intimate relationship that develops between Kitty and Nan, Kitty ultimately rejects a lesbian identity. She distinguishes their bond from the "toms" she dismisses, insisting, "We're not like anything! We're just—ourselves" (131). However, Waters resists such an individualistic conceptualization of gender identity, which cannot be extricated from the broader context of collective experience. Thus, Kitty emerges as one of the novel's least sympathetic figures, a character whose refusal to acknowledge the shared dimensions of identity renders her an ultimately unsuccessful subject. Kitty ultimately emerges as a dissatisfied heterosexual, unwilling to fully embrace a "tommish" existence. In contrast, Nan refuses to settle for anything less than authenticity—yet her subsequent relationships remain entangled in performative constructs that prove equally unfulfilling. Upon discovering Kitty's affair with their manager, Walter, Nan abandons the music hall and repurposes her stage costumes to survive as a rent boy on the streets of London. This shift marks a departure from theatrical performance into deception, as her success now hinges on convincingly "passing" as male rather than heightening her femininity through masculine disguise. Later, as the kept lover of the wealthy and hedonistic Diana, she is permanently costumed, compelled to maintain the illusion of masculinity for her mistress's pleasure. It is only through Florence, a socialist activist in Bethnal Green, that Nan finally finds resolution. Although she continues to wear men's clothing, the garments serve a pragmatic, rather than theatrical, purpose. Through Florence, Nan integrates into a chosen family of like-minded women, marking the culmination of her journey.

Tipping the Velvet concludes with a deliberately utopian resolution, where authenticity supplants performativity, and genuine love replaces unanchored desire. As a retrospective narrative, the story is narrated from the vantage point of a Nan who has achieved a stable lesbian identity. In this sense, the act of storytelling itself becomes a thematic element of the novel. Nan's identity remains fundamentally "queer"—unrecognized and unvalidated by the broader Victorian society, and only given public expression within the artificial, performative realm of the music hall.

Our analysis of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* is framed through the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians*, allowing us to critically examine the notion of the 'sexually othered Victorian' and its limitations. Foucault's contention that sexuality is not merely a natural given but a discursive construct shaped by power and social institutions is crucial to our understanding. Steven Marcus, on the other hand, provides a lens through which to view Victorian sexuality as a paradoxical mix of repression and fascination. The representation of sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* challenges traditional assumptions about nineteenth-century sexual identities. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters reimagines a Victorian world in which female same-sex desire is not just acknowledged but explored in multiple spaces—public, private, and theatrical. Foucault's notion of the 'repressive hypothesis' suggests that power operates not through outright prohibition but through the proliferation of discourse about sexuality. In *Tipping the Velvet*, we see an engagement with this concept as the novel presents lesbian desire as something both concealed and revealed. The existence of hidden spaces—such as the male impersonation theatres, secret rendezvous in affluent households, and Nan's later involvement with the socialist movement—demonstrates that Victorian society did not simply suppress sexual deviance but actively created mechanisms for its survival and codification.

Steven Marcus's analysis of clandestine Victorian sexuality is equally pertinent in the case of *Affinity*. The novel delves into the world of female spiritualists, where erotic power structures are both obscured and heightened through the supernatural. The protagonist, Margaret Prior, represents the quintessential repressed Victorian woman—bound by societal expectations and her own conflicted desires. Her fascination with the enigmatic spirit medium, Selina Dawes, exemplifies the ways in which marginalized sexualities found expression through alternative means. *Affinity*'s use of spiritualism as a metaphor for repressed desire aligns with Foucault's argument that power produces resistance within the same framework that enforces norms. Margaret's attraction to Selina is never explicitly acknowledged as sexual within the confines of her social reality, yet it manifests in intense emotional and psychological investment. The novel thereby critiques the notion that Victorian sexuality was merely suppressed, instead revealing that it operated through coded interactions, subtle intimacies, and non-verbal communication.

In broadening the definition of 'sexsation'—a term that refers to the sensationalization of sexuality in Victorian discourse—we must recognize the intricate ways in which non-normative desires were both constrained and expressed. Waters' novels exemplify this complexity, as they

do not simply depict hidden sexualities but rather interrogate the structures that made these desires simultaneously visible and invisible. This redefinition allows twenty-first-century Victorian studies to move beyond reductive binaries of repression and liberation, offering a more nuanced view of the period's sexual landscape. Moreover, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* engage with class dynamics that intersect with sexual marginalization. Nan's journey in *Tipping the Velvet* highlights the economic and social implications of her sexuality, as she oscillates between dependence on wealthy female patrons and the pursuit of autonomy within working-class circles. This interplay of class and desire echoes Marcus's insights into how Victorian sexuality was shaped not only by moral codes but also by material conditions. Similarly, in *Affinity*, Margaret's upper-class status shields her from overt scandal, but it also traps her in a world where desire must be sublimated into socially acceptable forms, such as charity work or spiritual guidance. Our analyses challenge the notion of the 'sexually othered Victorian' by demonstrating that Victorian sexuality was not simply about exclusion or deviance but was embedded within the very fabric of the era's social, cultural, and institutional structures. By reassessing 'sexsation' through this lens, we examine the new pathways for contemporary Victorian studies, encouraging a deeper engagement with the complexities of hidden, coded, and transgressive desires in the nineteenth century.

During the 1960s and 1970s, lesbian scholars critically examined feminist theory and discourse, contending that its predominant focus on heterosexual women effectively marginalized and excluded female same-sex subjects from the broader women's liberation movement. Consequently, lesbian feminism emerged as a distinct intellectual and political framework aimed at articulating the specific dynamics of female same-sex desire in relation to systemic gender oppression. Scholars like Adrienne Rich challenged mainstream feminist discourse for its failure to engage with the particularities of lesbian identity and sexuality within gender politics. These theorists collectively argued that feminism had historically overlooked critical issues such as heterosexism and homophobia, which function as mechanisms through which dominant social structures regulate and define gender. Lesbian-feminist theory thus emerged as a challenge to such regulatory frameworks, positioning lesbianism as a powerful site of resistance against heteronormative conceptualizations of womanhood. A more radical interrogation of the category of 'woman' emerged with the advent of postmodern feminist theory, which later evolved into what is now recognized as queer theory. Postmodern feminist critics challenge the viability of fixed identity categories, arguing that defining identity in terms of gender reinforces and normalizes the female subject within dominant binary frameworks,

thereby excluding or devaluing certain bodies, practices, and discourses while simultaneously obscuring the constructed and contestable nature of gender identity. This critique underscores how feminism's reliance on gender as an organizing principle ultimately reinforces its dependence on a gendered subject, rendering feminist politics unstable by presupposing a coherent and universal 'woman' whose identity is ostensibly defined by female gender. While feminism has historically sought to challenge heterosexist constructions of womanhood—often predicated on biological determinism—Judith Butler argues that privileging gender as a foundational category ultimately serves to reinforce heteropatriarchal systems of meaning. According to Butler, feminist discourses that uphold the categories of 'man' and 'woman' fail to account for the central role of heterosexuality in structuring gender itself. In this framework, gender operates as a reflection of preexisting sex categories, which in turn serve to sustain normative heterosexual subjectivities.

The mutual reinforcement of sex and gender as fixed categories effectively suppresses the possibility of fluidity and disrupts the coherence of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual identities, imposing a regulatory framework that organizes desire along a singular axis of normative and deviant behavior. Butler contends that because feminism has historically sought to construct a unified notion of 'woman'—thereby attempting to speak on behalf of a singular female subject—the resulting identity politics remains flawed. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler advocates for a critical reorientation of feminist theory, urging scholars to develop genealogies of gendered practice that emphasize the contingent and socially constructed nature of gender categories. Rather than perceiving dominant gender formations as stable and immutable, Butler argues that gender identity must be understood as a field of perpetual reconfiguration and resignification. While postmodern feminist thought, and Butler's work in particular, has significantly influenced contemporary feminist discourses on gender and identity, these theoretical interventions have not been universally embraced. Lesbian-feminist scholars, while critiquing the heteronormativity inherent in mainstream feminist thought, also express concerns that queer theory's expansive approach to gender and sexuality dilutes the political specificity of gender as a critical lens for examining patriarchal oppression. The broad application of 'queer' risks homogenizing diverse experiences of gender and sexuality, subsuming them under a singular opposition to heterosexuality. As a result, lesbian feminism and queer theory are frequently positioned in tension with one another, contributing to the perceived divide between feminist and queer theoretical frameworks.

The central question, then, is how these complex debates surrounding female subjectivity are reflected in Sarah Waters's novel *Tipping the Velvet*, a text that has been interpreted as both feminist and queer. Rather than adhering to an exclusionary theoretical framework, *Tipping the Velvet* negotiates both queer and feminist paradigms, deconstructing normative gender and sexuality while simultaneously engaging with feminist critiques of heteronormative gender categories. On one level, Waters mobilizes queer theoretical perspectives by destabilizing essentialist and binary constructions of sex and gender, foregrounding the plurality and fluidity of gender through representations of female cross-dressing practices such as male impersonation, gender passing, and butchness. In doing so, the novel disrupts dominant heteronormative conceptions of 'woman'. Simultaneously, Waters engages in a historiographical project, reconstructing lesbian histories that have been systematically erased or marginalized. As Mandy Koolen argues, Waters undertakes "the important work of filling in gaps in the historical record by speculating about past experiences of same-sex desire that have been erased or neglected in many historical studies" (372). By employing cross-dressing and female masculinity as recurring motifs, Waters not only underscores the aesthetic and political significance of these expressions within lesbian identity and historiography but also reconfigures the ontology of lesbian subjectivity in the Victorian period. In doing so, she challenges conventional stereotypes associated with dominant constructs of femininity, including the 'Angel in the House' and the 'New Woman', by reimagining these figures. While Waters' novel ultimately embraces a queer conceptualization of identity that resists singular and stable notions of 'woman', its sustained engagement with cross-dressing and lesbian desire offers a nuanced synthesis of feminist and queer theoretical discourses.

Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* addresses a key concern within lesbian feminism—that queer theory sometimes obscures gender distinctions—by illustrating how gender and sexual norms are enforced through homophobia. In the novel, male impersonation is a source of eroticism for both women, but Kitty remains particularly reserved in expressing her desires. Her caution reinforces the necessity of secrecy in same-sex relationships, as reflected in her warning to Nancy about being discreet in public. Ultimately, Kitty hides her lesbian identity due to societal condemnation, a point she makes clear when she distances herself from other female impersonators by exclaiming, "They're not like us!... They're toms" (131). The novel underscores the regulatory power of heteronormativity by depicting a moment at Deacon's Music Hall, where a hostile audience jeers at the women, spitting and sneering, "You call them girls? Why, they're nothing but a couple of—a couple of toms!" (140). The novel further

challenges traditional gender norms by exploring Nancy's shift from theatrical male impersonation to gender passing on the streets of London. After discovering Kitty's betrayal with Walter—an act Nancy later understands as Kitty succumbing to heterosexist pressures—Nancy seeks anonymity, wishing to disappear from public view. In an effort to escape the male gaze and avoid Kitty, she disguises herself as a man. Waters carefully distinguishes between theatrical cross-dressing and Nancy's new form of passing, highlighting Nancy's moment of self-realization when she modifies her stage costume to enhance its masculinity. She methodically undoes stitches on her jacket until it regains its original masculine shape. Nancy's reflection that even Kitty might not recognize her on the street reinforces queer theory's critique of fixed identity categories, echoing Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative rather than biologically determined.

Although queer aesthetics in the novel challenge rigid gender and sexual norms, Waters also portrays passing as a feminist strategy for Nancy. Freed from the confines of theatrical performance, she experiments with bandages to minimize her chest and even fabricates a faux bulge to enhance the illusion of masculinity. *Tipping the Velvet* addresses this by showing that while passing grants Nancy temporary freedom, she does not identify as male. Her masculine presentation is a survival strategy rather than an indication of male identification. Waters also engages with the feminist critique that queer practices can obscure the misogyny embedded in female embodiment. In the novel, Nancy initially uses her disguise to escape the male gaze but soon realizes that it is inescapable—while she is no longer objectified by heterosexual men, she instead becomes the focus of a male homosexual gaze. Her transformation into a rent-boy connects her experience to historical links between cross-dressing and sex work, as Marjorie Garber observes that cross-dressing has long been an economic survival strategy for both men and women (30). Through Nancy's work as a rent-boy, Waters also draws parallels between lesbian and gay male experiences. Reflecting on the secrecy and intensity of male same-sex relationships, Nancy recognizes a similarity to her own desires: "I knew about that kind of love" and "how it was to… be fearful" (200). In this way, Waters acknowledges the shared struggles of queer communities while maintaining lesbian specificity.

Nancy's relationship with Diana complicates the novel's engagement with both feminism and queer theory. Although their dynamic challenges heteronormativity, it also reflects feminist concerns about power imbalances in relationships. If Nancy's time with Diana critiques the apolitical aspects of queer theory, her eventual relationship with Florence Banner—a socialist feminist—suggests a reinvestment in political activism. This shift does not reject queer identity

but rather integrates it with political engagement. Waters presents a queer feminism that values diversity while maintaining political consciousness. Waters further queers historical gender norms by rewriting the Victorian archetype of "the Angel in the House". Coined by poet Coventry Patmore, this ideal positioned women as devoted wives and mothers, reinforcing their social roles as passive nurturers. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters subverts this trope by replacing the heterosexual wife with a masculine-presenting lesbian in a domestic setting. Nancy assumes domestic responsibilities for Florence and her brother Ralph, taking pride in housework while simultaneously embodying elements of masculinity. Unlike the Victorian angel, whose existence revolved around serving a husband, Nancy channels her care into her relationship with Florence. She also takes on a nurturing role for Florence's foster child, Cyril. However, Waters challenges the traditional gender binary by allowing Nancy to embrace both domesticity and masculinity. She cuts her hair short, describing the act as freeing, "like a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades" (404-405). She also rejects traditionally feminine dress, opting for moleskin trousers and leather boots, and takes pride in being recognized as a "trouser-wearer" in her community (404). By doing so, Nancy exemplifies the notion of female masculinity, challenging the restrictive gender norms of Victorian society. Furthermore, the novel reimagines the "New Woman" of the fin-de-siècle period, a figure who defied traditional gender roles by advocating for women's independence and political rights. Florence embodies this archetype through her socialist-feminist activism, working to support impoverished women and attending political meetings. Nancy, too, becomes politically engaged, assisting with Florence's work, helping organize events, and even coaching Ralph for a speech on socialism. By the end of the novel, Nancy's gender fluidity extends beyond the private sphere, allowing her to navigate both supposedly masculine and feminine roles in public life. Waters' novel critiques essentialist notions of gender while celebrating its fluidity. Nancy's journey demonstrates that gender identity and expression are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Through her portrayal of a 'butch' New Woman, Waters challenges assumptions that butch identity simply mimics heterosexual masculinity. By queering historical femininity while embracing feminist politics, *Tipping the Velvet* offers a complex, intersectional vision of gender and sexuality that resists rigid classification.

In *Affinity*, Margaret experiences the stifling effects of a society that treats home as a place of confinement, where she is constantly monitored and controlled. Her mother, much like the matrons at Millbank Prison, enforces strict discipline, punishing her for the perceived transgressions of intelligence, singleness, and childlessness. She administers increasing doses

of chloral and insists that Margaret's struggles with hysteria and suicidal thoughts stem from her unmarried status. Margaret's rejection of marriage and motherhood is viewed as a pathological condition, particularly in contrast to her younger sister Priscilla's impending wedding. Seeking refuge from the overwhelming wedding preparations, Margaret instead finds herself in an environment of even greater turmoil at Millbank, where an inmate, Phoebe Jacobs, violently rebels. This outburst, described as a form of rage unique to women's prisons, is not just resistance against incarceration itself but also a response to the gendered oppression that amplifies the experience. The prisoner's strength and cunning—qualities traditionally denied to women—suggest a suppressed female anger that could erupt unpredictably. During her visit, Margaret is shown the instruments of restraint used to subdue the inmates: handcuffs, gags, hobbles, straitjackets, and the dreaded isolation cells known as "the darks", where women are left in absolute darkness. These methods underscore the physical and psychological force required to maintain societal control over women. As she leaves the prison, the weather mirrors her internal distress—a heavy fog creeps beneath curtains, filling Margaret with panic as she fears suffocation in its oppressive darkness. This mirrors an earlier experience when she sought solace in the British National Association of Spiritualists' reading room after wandering through the fog, where she learns more about Selina's past. At both moments, the encroaching fog symbolizes the pervasive threat faced by women who defy societal norms, particularly those who deviate from heterosexual expectations, as Margaret's growing attraction to Selina becomes increasingly apparent. For Margaret, recovering from her suicide attempt and resuming her role as a middle-class woman means embracing secrecy and duplicity. So, she adopts the appearance of a respectable lady visitor to mask and explore her forbidden desires. She uses societal expectations of gender presentation to her advantage, engaging in relationships that cross legal and class boundaries. Margaret, as an esteemed visitor to Millbank, gains deeper familiarity with both the prison's labyrinthine structure and the complexities of Selina's identity and past. She provides Selina with the means for private communication by slipping her a notebook and pen, fostering an intimate connection through subterfuge. However, this covert defiance exists under intense scrutiny. Margaret sees herself as a woman who resists the reproductive role assigned to her, an act that disrupts and destabilizes the system. This awareness makes her keenly conscious of being watched—whether by her mother, the prison matrons, or society at large. Her past suicide attempt already marks her as a would-be criminal, and her increasing emotional involvement with Millbank's inmates places her in a precarious position, as both her intimacy with them and her forbidden desires carry the risk of exposure.

This theme of secrecy extends to the way Waters crafts her narratives. The self-awareness of her protagonists mirrors the self-conscious style of the novels themselves. *Affinity* invites readers into a playful yet serious engagement with literary and historical conventions. It highlights its own status as historiographic metafiction, making clear from Margaret's diary entries that history is shaped by those who record it. The novel opens with Margaret acknowledging that any historical account can be transformed into a story, emphasizing the role of the historian's skill and, crucially, their gendered perspective. When Margaret's skirt catches on Millbank's architecture, she perceives the prison through a female lens—an ominous and restrictive space that fuels her empathy for the incarcerated women whose lives she seeks to document. Margaret initially appears to control her own narrative through her diary, yet the novel ultimately undermines this sense of autonomy. The dual-diary structure alerts readers to the novel's self-awareness, highlighting the instability of a singular, reliable narrative. Selina's staged revelation of the word 'Truth' appearing on her arm reminds us to question claims of authenticity in self-writing. It is Vigers' secret letter exchange with Selina that dictates the novel's textual reality, reinforcing its epistolary ambiguity and challenging readers' certainty. Ruth, through her role as Peter Quick, manipulates Margaret's desires, orchestrating an elaborate deception that provides tangible evidence of Selina's love and the spirit world's existence. The act of writing, thus, is deeply intertwined with desire and secrecy. Margaret's mother fears that her journaling will reignite unhealthy thoughts and unresolved grief, particularly concerning Helen. Initially, Margaret's diary serves as a coping mechanism, a structured attempt to control overwhelming emotions. However, as her feelings for Selina deepen, the diary transforms into a space where those desires take form. Writing by dim light, under the influence of chloral, Margaret records her longing. The diary becomes a tangible manifestation of Margaret's desire, culminating in the moment when she allows Selina to inscribe both their names in her notebook. This act, forbidden within Millbank, intensifies Margaret's obsession, driving her to repeatedly write Selina's name, rendering her more real with each stroke of the pen.

Margaret's mother's dismissal of her writing reflects anxieties about women's literary ambitions and their connection to transgressive sexuality. She belittles Margaret's aspirations, reminding her that she is neither Elizabeth Barrett Browning nor anyone's wife—reinforcing the expectation that she remain an unmarried companion to her widowed mother. The novel illustrates how literature can validate non-normative identities, offering both a reflection and a model for queer experiences. Margaret, standing before the Spiritualist's bookshelf, finds

reassurance in knowing how to read books on unconventional topics—just as she intuitively knows how to read queerness in texts. She incorporates *Aurora Leigh* into her own story, shaping her escape plan around Barrett Browning's narrative of solidarity between upper-middle-class women and their working-class sisters. In this way, *Affinity* layers Margaret's identity with literary intertextuality, allowing past works to shape her present understanding. The novel challenges linear, heteronormative timelines, embracing a "queer temporality" where past loves and histories continually resurface. They depict writing as an act of defiance, a means of resurrecting lost desires and creating alternative narratives. As a work of historiographic metafiction, *Affinity* engages with feminist literary strategies to reclaim and reimagine lesbian histories, acknowledging both the joys and difficulties of accessing women's past experiences. Waters' evolving approach to history reflects ongoing debates in lesbian historiography, shifting from a playful interrogation of historical recovery in her early work to a more politicized reclamation of obscured narratives. Her use of metafiction transitions from highlighting the artificiality of historical accounts to fostering deeper emotional engagement with marginalized voices, demonstrating how literature can serve as both an archive and an act of resistance. Waters seems to suggest that literature not only preserves queer histories but also disrupts traditional modes of storytelling, forging new ways of understanding and articulating desire. They reveal the transformative power of writing—not just as a record of experience, but as a means of shaping and affirming queer existence.

Scholars engaged in debates on historical sexuality are divided into two major camps. One perspective, influenced by Foucault, asserts that contemporary understandings of homosexuality cannot be directly mapped onto historical contexts, emphasizing the distinctiveness of past sexual identities. Conversely, proponents of the "continuity" approach, including Lillian Faderman and Bernadette Brooten, argue that historical patterns of same-sex desire exhibit discernible connections to modern conceptions of homosexuality. Some scholars, such as Carla Freccero and Louise Fradenburg, navigate an intermediate position, critiquing the dominant preoccupation with historical alterity in queer studies. They advocate for a nuanced perspective that acknowledges historical continuities while resisting anachronistic or universalizing claims. Valerie Traub's scholarship provides a critical intervention into this discourse by examining how historical fiction mediates the relationship between past and present, circumventing the binary opposition between continuity and alterity. She conceptualizes the pursuit of lesbian historical narratives as driven by a collective psychological response to the erasure of queer histories. Drawing on Freud's theory of

melancholia, Traub contends that the search for lesbian antecedents is not simply an act of historical recovery but rather a symptom of a larger unresolved cultural trauma. When historians attempt to reconstruct a lineage of lesbian existence—such as interpreting the burial of two women together without definitive knowledge of their relationship—they are engaging in a broader melancholic project. Freud theorized that melancholia arises when loss is internalized rather than acknowledged, leading to a fusion of self and lost object. By extension, Traub suggests that efforts to reclaim lesbian history often collapse historical difference in a bid for recognition, reinforcing a mirror-like identification that obscures historical specificity. Traub proposes an alternative approach to queer historical engagement—one that recognizes the necessity of remembrance and transmission without reducing the past to a mere reflection of contemporary identities. Instead of assimilating history into a fixed narrative, she advocates for a model of engagement that allows for imaginative continuity while preserving historical distinctiveness. In this context, historiographic metafiction, particularly as exemplified in the works of Sarah Waters, serves as a compelling methodological strategy. Waters' historical novels explore the dynamics of lesbian identification while simultaneously resisting historical conflation, thereby enacting the kind of queer historiography Traub envisions. By foregrounding the longing for identification rather than seeking direct identification itself, such fiction provides a means of reckoning with historical loss without erasing temporal and cultural differences. This literary mode reclaims the traditions of homoerotic elegy and lament, engaging in an active process of mourning lesbian history while preserving its complexities. Rather than positioning history as a static subject for retrieval, this approach recognizes the fluidity of historical memory and the potential for queer narratives to operate within a space of both loss and imaginative reclamation.

Chapter 4

Graham Swift and Neo-Victorian Anxiety

This chapter on Graham Swift's *Ever After* delineates how the novel offers a literary treatment of the existential trauma that Darwinism has brought about in the nineteenth century. Further as part of the neo-Victorian sub-genre, Swift's work intertwines this trauma with the anxieties characterising the twentieth century present of the novel. Swift charts two journeys which ultimately fail to culminate in a "happily ever after", due to the impact of Darwinism in one case and the struggle against postmodern existential anxiety in the other. The novel juxtaposes the predicaments of two fictional characters and renders one's apostasy in the past as a possible means for the protagonist's attempt to cathartically release his pent-up feelings in the present. The chapter explores how the comparative equation between the two persons belonging to different eras in the novel corresponds to Emmanuel Levinas' conception of the "other" as a significant factor in the assertion of the "self".

Neo-Victorian literature is often concerned with revisiting and interrogating the Victorian era to address contemporary anxieties and crises. *Ever After* exemplifies this tendency through its dual narrative structure, which juxtaposes the twentieth-century experiences of Bill Unwin with the Victorian world of his ancestor, Matthew Pearce. The novel does not merely reconstruct the past but problematizes it, revealing the ways in which historical narratives are shaped by personal and ideological biases. Matthew Pearce's struggles with Darwinism and religious doubt reflect the broader epistemological anxieties of the Victorian period, yet they also serve as a mirror for Bill Unwin's existential dilemmas in the twentieth century. The novel suggests that while the specific contexts of these crises differ, the underlying human concerns—faith, identity, purpose—remain persistent across time. This temporal mirroring is a hallmark of neo-Victorian fiction, which often uses the past to question and contextualize present uncertainties. Graham Swift, a distinguished contemporary British novelist, is often associated with the neo-Victorian literary tradition due to his thematic preoccupations, narrative structures, and engagement with history. His novels, while modern in setting and execution, frequently revisit and reinterpret Victorian themes, concerns, and narrative techniques. We have explored Swift's position as a Neo-Victorian novelist, examining his engagement with Victorian legacies, his narrative style, and his contribution to the broader field of contemporary historical fiction.

Swift's novels frequently engage with Victorian themes and sensibilities, though they do so in a manner that reflects contemporary concerns. His most famous work, *Waterland* (1983),

exemplifies this engagement, blending history, memory, and storytelling in a manner reminiscent of Victorian historiography. The novel's protagonist, Tom Crick, serves as both a historian and a storyteller, weaving together personal, familial, and regional histories that reflect broader Victorian anxieties about progress, empire, and social change. One of the defining features of neo-Victorian literature is its engagement with historical trauma and the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present. In Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), the landscape of the Fenlands serves as both a literal and metaphorical space where history is sedimented, resurfacing in uncanny and often violent ways. The novel embodies what critics have termed the 'neo-Victorian sublime', a mode of representation that evokes the lingering presence of unresolved historical trauma through gothic tropes, cyclical time, and the destabilization of narrative authority. Swift's portrayal of the Fenlands in *Waterland* is deeply intertwined with the notion of historical trauma. The landscape, described as an ever-shifting, waterlogged terrain, becomes a site of historical palimpsest, where past events never truly disappear but instead seep into the present. The marshes, with their "secrets beneath the water", function as an extended metaphor for the way trauma is buried yet inevitably resurfaces. This treatment of landscape resonates with the work of Pierre Nora on "lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory), where geographical spaces act as repositories of collective memory. In *Waterland*, the Fens are a physical manifestation of England's hidden histories—both personal and national. The novel repeatedly gestures toward the idea that history is not linear but cyclical, a notion that aligns with both Victorian determinism (as seen in the works of Thomas Hardy) and postmodern skepticism toward historical progress.

Swift's engagement with trauma in *Waterland* is further reinforced through its use of Gothic conventions, particularly the themes of haunting, madness, and the spectral return of the past. Freud's concept of the "uncanny" (das Unheimliche)—the strange recurrence of something once familiar but now alien—pervades the novel. The central traumatic events of *Waterland*—the drowning of Freddie Parr, Mary Metcalf's subsequent descent into madness, and her later abduction of a child—are narrated in fragmented, recursive ways, reflecting the inability to contain or repress trauma fully. Mary's madness, in particular, is a classic neo-Victorian trope: a woman's psychological disintegration as a result of sexual repression, guilt, and societal constraints. Her abduction of the baby mirrors Victorian anxieties surrounding motherhood, female agency, and the consequences of transgression. Additionally, Tom Crick's obsessive historiography can be read as a response to trauma—a compulsive need to reconstruct and narrativize the past in an attempt to make sense of it. However, the novel ultimately suggests

that history resists stable meaning, reinforcing the postmodern idea that the past is always a site of competing narratives rather than a fixed truth.

The neo-Victorian sublime, as discussed by critics such as Judith R. Walkowitz and Lucie Armitt, often involves the eerie repetition of past traumas, creating an affective sense of historical entrapment. In *Waterland*, this is evident in the way personal histories mirror larger historical patterns: the individual tragedies of Tom's family are inextricably linked to the broader socio-historical changes in England, from the rise and decline of the Atkinson brewing empire to the impact of the World Wars. Swift draws a parallel between the personal and the national by suggesting that just as individuals are haunted by their past, so too is England haunted by its unresolved historical legacies. This aligns with the neo-Victorian fascination with the spectral residues of empire, industrialization, and social upheaval—themes that underlie much of Swift's work. Unlike traditional Victorian novels, which often uphold a teleological view of history (one of linear progress and moral resolution), *Waterland* disrupts this narrative by collapsing past and present into a continuous cycle. The novel's structure reflects this disintegration of time, moving fluidly between historical periods, as if the past is never truly past. This temporal fluidity aligns with the postmodern crisis of historicity, as theorized by Fredric Jameson, where the boundaries between history and fiction become blurred. This lack of temporal stability generates a sense of the sublime, not in the Romantic sense of awe and grandeur, but in the neo-Victorian sense of overwhelming historical weight and inescapability. The characters are caught in a historical loop, where past mistakes are doomed to be repeated—a theme that resonates with both Hardy's fatalism and modern anxieties about historical reckoning. Swift's *Waterland* exemplifies the neo-Victorian sublime by transforming history into a spectral presence that continually resurfaces, challenging notions of historical closure. The novel's engagement with trauma, the uncanny, and cyclical time reveals the ways in which the past continues to shape contemporary identities, mirroring broader neo-Victorian concerns with historical re-evaluation and ethical memory. In this sense, *Waterland* does not simply reconstruct the Victorian past; it interrogates its ongoing influence, positioning history as an active, unsettling force that refuses to be contained. This aligns with the broader neo-Victorian project of revisiting the past not as nostalgia, but as a means of critically engaging with historical silences, traumas, and unfinished narratives.

In *Waterland*, Swift employs a layered narrative that mirrors the intricate storytelling techniques of Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot. The novel's exploration of industrialization, the decline of rural England, and the tension between science

and superstition echoes concerns central to the Victorian era. Moreover, its engagement with the role of history and storytelling aligns with the self-reflexive nature of much Neo-Victorian fiction, which often interrogates the act of historical reconstruction itself. Swift also borrows from the Victorian framed narrative tradition, in which stories are embedded within other stories, creating a complex interplay of voices and perspectives. This technique was frequently employed in Victorian fiction, as seen in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859), where nested narratives create a sense of historical depth and ambiguity. In *Waterland*, Tom Crick's history lessons serve as a framing device, within which he recounts personal and regional histories, moving fluidly between different time periods. His storytelling technique mimics the structure of Victorian novels that employed multiple narrators to blur the boundaries between history, fiction, and memory. However, unlike Victorian framed narratives, which often worked toward uncovering a singular "truth", Swift's use of the technique undermines historical certainty. The proliferation of stories does not lead to clarity but instead reinforces the novel's central theme: history is an unstable construct, constantly rewritten through subjective memory.

Victorian novels frequently employed omniscient narrators who guided readers with authoritative commentary on characters and events. Dickens, for instance, utilized this technique in *Bleak House* (1853) to provide a panoramic view of society. However, Swift subverts the omniscient narrative model by introducing an unreliable narrator, Tom Crick, who oscillates between authority and doubt. Tom's role as both a historian and a narrator is riddled with contradictions—he insists on the importance of history while simultaneously questioning its legitimacy. His repeated assertion that "history is a yarn" challenges the Victorian faith in historical objectivity. By blending first-person introspection with historical discourse, Swift creates a narrative voice that is both expansive and deeply subjective, reinforcing the idea that history is not a fixed entity but a constantly shifting interpretation. Graham Swift's engagement with Victorian narrative techniques reflects a conscious dialogue with the past, reworking traditional literary forms to question history's authority and narrative stability. While borrowing from the Bildungsroman, framed narrative, omniscient narration, social realism, and the Gothic, Swift ultimately undermines their traditional functions, exposing their ideological assumptions. His fiction aligns with neo-Victorian concerns of historical revisionism, using Victorian forms not as sites of nostalgia but as frameworks for interrogating the limits of knowledge, memory, and storytelling itself. Thus, Swift's *Waterland* exemplifies the neo-Victorian reinvention of the nineteenth-century novel, retaining its aesthetic and structural

complexity while simultaneously dismantling its certainties, making history itself an unresolved and ever-evolving narrative.

One of the central concerns of neo-Victorian literature is the subversion of dominant Victorian ideologies, particularly those related to science, religion, and gender. In *Ever After*, Pearce's confrontation with Darwinism challenges the rigid religious structures of his time, illustrating the intellectual upheaval brought about by evolutionary theory. This crisis is paralleled in Unwin's own struggles with meaning and belief in the twentieth century, suggesting that scientific advancements do not necessarily resolve existential uncertainties but rather transform them. Furthermore, the novel engages with issues of gender and power in its portrayal of women's roles across time. While Pearce's wife and other Victorian women are often confined within traditional expectations, their voices and experiences still emerge through the gaps in his narrative. Unwin's relationships with women in the twentieth century similarly reflect shifting gender dynamics, revealing continuities and ruptures in societal attitudes toward femininity and agency.

Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992) is a novel deeply engaged with questions of history, identity, and narrative authority. This novel, like much of Swift's oeuvre, grapples with the interplay of past and present, using intertextual references and metafictional strategies to explore the complexities of human experience. It is frequently categorized within the Neo-Victorian literary tradition, a genre that re-imagines and reinterprets the nineteenth century through contemporary lenses. We analyze *Ever After* within the framework of Neo-Victorianism while incorporating Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy to interrogate the novel's treatment of selfhood, responsibility, and the burden of historical memory. *Ever After* is a quintessentially neo-Victorian text that, through its layered storytelling, engages with ethical concerns reminiscent of Levinas's philosophy, particularly his ideas on the responsibility for the Other and the impossibility of escaping ethical relationality. A defining characteristic of neo-Victorian literature is its interrogation of historical truth and the recognition of history as a constructed narrative. In *Ever After*, Bill Unwin's engagement with Pearce's journal reflects the postmodern skepticism of historical objectivity. His attempts to piece together his ancestor's life reveal the inherent gaps and silences in historical records, reinforcing the idea that history is never a fixed entity but rather a fluid and contested space. The novel also explores the role of fiction in shaping our understanding of the past. By blending historical documents with personal reflections, Swift blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, demonstrating how memory and storytelling influence the ways in which we relate to history. This metafictional awareness

is a key feature of neo-Victorian narratives, which often highlight the constructed nature of historical knowledge and challenge the reader to question official histories.

Graham Swift's novel *Ever After* (1992) concentrates on three noteworthy events of the past two centuries: the Darwinian challenge to the characteristic values of the Victorian era, the mayhem resulting from World War II, and the contemporary academic engagement with the nuances of history in attempts to foreground its significance to the present world order. Accordingly, the twentieth century protagonist Bill Unwin's preoccupation with the diaries of his Victorian ancestor Matthew Pearce has as much to do with the anxieties of his own age as with the War-induced dubiety surrounding his paternity that he desperately seeks to resolve. Triggered by an impulse to obtain spiritual respite from his academic predicaments along with a desire to confirm his own origins, Bill begins to delve into the seemingly tranquil Victorian period of Matthew. The novel opens shortly after Bill has tried to take his own life and the plot dramatises his endeavour to weave a stable identity using threads available from his ancestry. This is evident in Bill's proclamation in the novel: "[M]aybe it's not posterity I seek at all … . Maybe for me it is the other way round. Maybe it's anteriority (if such a thing exists) I'm looking for. To know who I was". Such dramatic assertions from Bill serve to underscore the problems involved in the kind of identity formation that seeks historical anchorage. We argue that this uncertainty which forms the crux of the novel also paradoxically enables Swift, as a neo-Victorian author, to foreground the significance of fiction, imagination, and innovation, while simultaneously subverting the metaphysical values associated with them.

Ever After, much like other neo-Victorian novels including Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), employs the postmodernist strategy of assimilating reimagined historical narratives into attempts to capture the complexities endemic to living in the present era. The novel, thus, tries to juxtapose two philosophically tumultuous periods: the Victorian and the contemporary. With such a premise, Swift incorporates in his novel an ethical dimension that supplements the predominantly formal experiments characterising early postmodernism. The ethical stance of Swift's novel places the other in a position where it remains incomprehensible and unrepresentable for the self. Emmanuel Levinas defines the other as an "enigma" outside the bounds of phenomenological discourse so much so that if visibility is the feature of every phenomenon, the other then can be construed as invisible. As Adriaan Peperzak, drawing on Levinas' thoughts, explains, "the other's visage causes an earthquake in my [the self's] existence". The other in Levinasian ethics resists the categorizations specific to the self's worldview.

As a concept, the "other" connotes the difference between two persons in an interpersonal encounter. Conventionally, the term "other" has come to be used to refer to people who are distanced from the centre/self. As Simone de Beauvoir elucidates in *The Second Sex*: "The category of *Other* is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies . . . . alterity is the fundamental category of human thought". Against the backdrop of interwar Europe, Levinas introduced the relationship between the self and the other as one that not only involves a sense of connectedness but also a nonreciprocal responsibility toward the other on the self's part. In Swift's novel, Bill wishes to forge identificatory bonds with both Hamlet and Matthew but falls short in his attempts because he approaches the others only to allay his inner traumas, paradoxically rendering any ethical resolution impossible in this postmodernist work. Levinas conceptualises transcendence as a phenomenon of movement in the upward direction, "of crossing over" and also "of ascent". Traditionally, this attitude toward the beyond would naturally be connected with the sacred. Levinas rejects this "magic mentality" that humans generally tend to espouse when confronted with the mysteries of the world. According to him, western philosophy has eventually liberated humankind from the preoccupation with a world beyond the physical and called into question such "false and cruel transcendence". Nevertheless, Levinas does not divest "transcendence" of all meaning but rather defines it as a kind of "trans-ascendence" between the self and the other in social situations. The self has to associate itself with the other, while ultimately remaining external to it. Despite positing the other as a transcendent entity, Levinas claims that the encounter between the self and the other is "not enacted outside of the world" and is very much a part of history. Even though the Levinasian other stands beyond the self's reach, the connection between Bill and his nineteenth century ancestor across this seemingly unbridgeable distance is a dominant motif in the neo-Victorianization of Swift's novel.

Ever After centers on the life of a middle-aged academic named Bill Unwin, whose commentaries on his own emotional crises intermingle with the private "Notebooks" of the Oxford-educated mining surveyor Matthew Pearce from the nineteenth century. As part of the Ellison Fellowship of which he happens to be a recipient, Bill is tasked with introducing a scholarly edition of these Notebooks, popularly known as Pearce manuscripts in the academic world of the novel. At the same time, several personal issues keep haunting Bill and whatever he does. Within the span of a few months, he has mourned the losses of his wife, mother, and stepfather. Additionally, when he was a child, he has suffered through the suicide

of Colonel Philip Unwin whom he has believed to be his biological father. When Bill's existential angst gradually envelops both his personal and professional lives, he seeks to materialise this symbolic death through a suicide attempt and subsequently begins to call his "real" existence into question. Compared to the alternative identities he stumbles upon in the world of literature, particularly the character of Hamlet, his own being seems flimsy to him. Daniel Lea ascribes Bill's misfortune to "two connected dislocations in his life: his uncertain parentage and his disconnection from the historical continuum, both of which he tries to remedy through the recuperation of Matthew Pearce's biography." Viewing the fictional universe as more real, stable, and visible than the one he physically inhabits, Bill wishes to be part of "a more reliable world in so far as it does not hide that its premise is illusion." After his brush with death, he finds himself in a world where he is like "a *tabula rasa*" and "could be *any*body". The fictionalised world for him becomes, what Thomas Pavel in his work on the theory of fiction calls, an "ontologically self-sufficient" one.

The novel as presented to the reader comprises the "ramblings" Bill sets down after having been overwhelmed by what he calls "the jotting urge." Significantly, he has two fascinating tales to document: one comprises his own personal as well as intellectual engagements with events ranging from post-WWII Paris to the contemporary academic scenario in Britain, while the other story is about his Victorian ancestor Matthew. The latter's Darwin-influenced stance against the Church has led to his banishment from the community and his pitiable life story recorded in the Notebooks creates quite a stir in academia when Bill's colleagues come to know that the Pearce manuscripts are in his possession. Uncannily enough, several of Bill's forefathers have suffered downfalls from immeasurable eminence to shocking disgrace. Matthew's life in Victorian England also turns upside down as his beliefs shift from the Biblical to the Darwinian, taking the generational tragic pattern ahead. While Bill possesses a robust faith in the power of stories, Matthew ultimately fails to achieve ontological stability anywhere as the Biblical "truths" of his belief system collapse under the influence of the radical evolutionary theories. Still an atmosphere of uncertainty seems to connect the worlds of both Matthew and Bill, leading to the existential crises that emerge from the interplays between what are considered "truth" and "fiction" in the two different epochs.

The plot of the novel vacillates between Bill's psychological condition after his attempt at suicide and his Victorian predecessor's turbulent life experiences. Besides, there are constant parallels drawn between the upheavals in Bill's life arising out of vexed paternity issues and his literary hero Hamlet's ambivalent attitude toward father figures. Bill has had to endure the

loss of paternal love not just once but three times: Colonel Unwin's suicide during the War, his step-father Sam Ellison succumbing to a heart attack, and the death of his elusive biological father, an engine driver about whom the protagonist has learned from Sam's delayed confession to him. Like Hamlet, "the doleful but charismatic Renaissance protagonist", Bill tends to ascribe his suffering to others' designs. He feels that he has been excluded from the centre stage and instead relegated to the soliloquising margins. However, as Lea claims,

> If he [Bill] is a Hamlet manqué, he is an etiolated and waspish imitation, even less capable of self-determined action than the original … . [H]e fails to believe in his own potential for tragedy, and he cannot as a consequence turn his life into the stuff of epic.

Additionally, his surname *Unwin* evokes the inadequacies masked by his grandiose fantasy of identifying with Hamlet: "I am Bill Unwin (there, I declare myself!). I am Hamlet the Dane." Bill's irreconcilable dilemmas in the academic world keep depriving him of any tragic attribute. The losses of father figures in Bill's life, therefore, could only be a trope that helps Swift generate sympathy for the protagonist whose character otherwise lacks a heroic dimension.

Philip Unwin's suicide during WWII would have given Bill a chance to fulfil his long-held wish to become another Hamlet by avenging the death of his cuckolded father. He is unswerving in his belief that his mother Sylvia's affair with the plastics entrepreneur Sam Ellison has been the cause of Sr. Unwin's suicide. When he eventually comes across *Hamlet* in his adolescence, the urge for retribution sharpens in Bill: "I stood in his [Philip's] vacant place. And out of this ghostly identification I began to summon a father I had never really known: noble, virtuous, *wronged*." Bill begins his vengeance with the dramatic gesture of setting ablaze the gift that his step-father has presented him with—a plastic fighter plane, a replica of the one that has crashed and caused the death of Sam's younger brother Ed in the War. Nonetheless, he soon realises the futility of his rebellion: "How could I take my feelings on Sam, how could I unleash on him all the venom … when he neatly reminded me that we were companions in the same grim business of bereavement?" Bill really has to struggle with his own conscience to build any resentment against Sam because this stepfather, unlike the emotionally distant Philip, is now the benefactor, nurturer, and provider for both Bill and his mother. As Bill reflects in the novel's present: "For forty years of my life I have conducted a theoretical vendetta against Sam, though I do not think real killing was ever on the cards. And

the odd thing is I have always liked him. I have never been able to help liking him." So, in spite of his struggles to fashion a Claudius-Hamlet antagonism in his relationship with Sam, Bill sees in him a fellow sufferer who too has lost a loved one to the War.

As a contemporary scholar, Bill is well aware of the existential angst surrounding his personal and professional lives. This postmodern anxiety distinguishes his condition from that of his Renaissance idol. Elaborating on John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," Kathleen Fitzpatrick comments on the concept of postmodern anxiety: "The dead end is intellectual, but somehow connected to dehumanization; it is not merely the novelist that faces the spectre of obsolescence, but the entire category of the human." This kind of anxiety exacerbates Bill's mental agony and, as a result, makes his brush with the other possible. Yet it does not lead to fruition as it fails to alleviate the anxiety of the self that Bill carries with him. Bill's exasperation continues to prevail especially when he fails to discover a hermeneutical haven even in his cherished Shakespearean drama. The illusion of being one with his literary icon is completely shattered as Bill's postmodern anxiety exposes the inherent incongruity of his assumed tragic mask.

Bill is subsequently compelled to turn to his own familial ancestry to satisfy his desire for emotional succour. So he turns to the past through his rigorous engagement with Matthew's Notebooks, looking for a remedy for all his troubles. The characters of neo-Victorian novels often go on ethical quests toward the other and this drive to gain meaning in the other could also be seen as a way to assuage their own existential anxieties. For instance, in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*, the protagonist Margaret embarks on a journey to write the history of Millbank Prison using the journal entries of another character Selina. This historical exercise, however, makes Margaret realise her almost subservient imitation of her deceased father's historiographical approaches which heavily rely on the written word. Similarly, in A.N. Wilson's *Who Was Oswald Fish?*, Fanny and Fred's sense of emptiness is influenced by the guilt-ridden Victorian ancestor Oswald who has renounced his faith to become a hedonistic pagan after his brush with Darwinian theory. Nevertheless, the self's ethical impulse can transform existential anxiety into a form of courage which may ignite the life-affirming potential of an individual. Notably, Bill's urge to identify with Matthew is, as Adrian Poole asserts, "a real act of the imagination, in deliberate contrast to the feverish fictions about playing Hamlet." Moreover, the textual traces of his Victorian ancestor's life are reintroduced in Bill's twentieth century narrative, consequently establishing what Ina Ferris considers an "active cognitive space" to build connections with the past. Although Bill's endeavour to merge with

the Victorian other leads to what Louisa Hadley calls an "unhealthy prioritization of the past", it is the protagonist's contemporary act of reading that ensures the survival of this Victorian text even after a century.

Ferris also distinguishes between a text and a document in the context of historiography. In a text, what is valued is "the message, moving readily across historical time and hence available for translation", whereas documents see texts as "the trace of another time requiring presentation rather than translation". A document derives its relevance from the intergenerational message that a text carries, thereby prioritising the act of reading over that of writing. A text transforms into the category of a document when its reception becomes privileged over its production, that is, when it succeeds in satisfying any particular curiosity in the reader. In imaginatively reconstructing the past, *Ever After* turns texts into documents which inhabit neither the past nor the present, rather an intersection of the two in the world of fiction. Ansgar Nünning observes that Swift's postmodernist historical fiction does not entail "mimetic representations of past events but retrospective constructions […] fore-grounded by a question that serves as one of the more prominent leitmotifs of the novel: 'How do I know … ?'" In exploring the textual archive that Matthew's diaries represent, Swift does not privilege antiquarianism at the cost of neglecting the present. Bill's fascination with the Notebooks in the novel distinguishes itself from the "all-consuming form" of antiquarianism that his great-uncle Uncle Ratty has represented while duplicitously tracing his lineage to Sir Walter Raleigh. Uncle Ratty has always preoccupied himself with his family archives in a way that, as per the Nietzschean repudiation of antiquarian history, "is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present." For Nietzsche, such a historiographical method would end up "reducing even a more creative disposition, a nobler desire, to an insati- able thirst for … the dust of bibliographical minutiae … . it [antiquarian history] knows only how to *preserve* life, not how to engender it". Contrastingly, in Bill's case, Swift builds a positive non-hierarchical connection between the past and the present. Lorna Sage in her review views the novel "as a palimpsest—the present's nightmare of bereavement intercut with that of Swift's imaginary Victorian". In the experimentalist narrative of *Ever After*, therefore, the past lives alongside the present as part of the modern textual reproductions of the nineteenth century.

Bill's engagement with the Victorian past and particularly with his ancestor's Notebooks could be seen as a way of resolving the dubiety of his own lineage. Bill's character may ostensibly strike the reader as someone who displays a certain dissociation from the present

as, in Hadley's words, "[his] concern with the past overtakes his present concerns." The novel's epigraph also apparently hints at one's detachment from the present: "et mentem mortalia tangent" [hearts touched by human transience]. The epigraph is borrowed from Virgil's *The Aeneid* and it helps to set the tone of the plot. Before his journey to the underworld to meet his father, Aeneas comes across a mural about the Trojan War, an instance which elicits from him the famous cry, part of which becomes the novel's epigraph too:

> Oh, Achates, is there anywhere,
>
> Any place left on earth unhaunted by our sorrows? …
>
> Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human transience.

The epigraph of *Ever After* presents what Virgil perceives to be the general human condition. The first sentence of the novel also seemingly notes a similar hopelessness on Bill's part: "These are, I should warn you, the words of a dead man." Even so, these initial words of the novel need not be construed as Swift's judgment on Bill's frustration with life, because shortly after the cryptic incipit which serves to baffle the reader about the narrator's corporeality, he remarks: "Or they [these words] are at least – the warning stands – nothing more than the ramblings of a prematurely aged one." This second sentence of the novel reignites the narrative as Bill has already failed in his suicide attempt, a detail revealed later in the first chapter. The impact of the first sentence becomes nullified as Bill admits that he is suffering from a certain senility induced incoherence. Regardless, the change in his personality after his attempted suicide proves to be the chief driving force behind his creative endeavours, especially his imaginative engagement with the otherness of Hamlet and Matthew. Although Bill at first appears to be an escapist, he exhibits a persistent need to belong to the present and this impulse permeates even his fervent interest in the past and its archives. Bill reimagines the excerpts from Matthew's diary and rewrites them in a way he "like[s] to see it" and how he "wish [es] it to have happened." He proposes: "Let's read between the lines. Let's be brutal and modern and take apart these precious Notebooks – this precious marriage of Matthew and his Lizzie." Bill's interest in Matthew's Notebooks stems from his dismal experiences in the present and he reimagines the world of Matthew in his own unique ways.

Bill tries to bring to these documents a relevance which is beyond the Victorian struggles around evolution. In the beginning of the novel, Bill concedes that the emergence of Darwinism brought with it a disquietude in the nineteenth century:

> We are, of course, an endangered and thus protected species. If natural selection had had its nasty way, we should have been wiped out long ago, a fragile, etiolated experiment … . the world is falling apart; its social fabric is in tatters, its eco-system is near collapse.

Yet in embracing the influx of newer ideas, he aligns this knowledge with the present matters in order to maintain a sense of continuity with it. While Bill acknowledges the difficulty inherent in the reconstruction of the past, he confesses that he "owe[s] Matthew nothing less." The character of Matthew that Bill conjures up in the novelistic present is a "hybrid being" who not only inhabits the Victorian age but also exhibits the anxiety and trauma characterising the period of the narrator. Being an Ellison Fellow, Bill is supposed to present Matthew's Notebooks in the form of an academic anthology with an "editorial preface, introduction, notes". This exercise in expanding the knowledge about Victorian England, however, comes at the cost of aggravating his own anxiety. Using *Ecclesiastes* (1:18), Levinas attests to this inherent paradox associated with knowledge: "'He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow'… suffering appears at the very least as the price of reason and of spiritual refinement. It would also temper the individual's character." In the Levinasian worldview, a troubled self would be able to expunge the meaninglessness of suffering if it opens its mind toward a similar other. This leads to a new ground for ethics whereby Levinas glorifies compassion and sympathy as the attributes that draw the self's "attention to the Other which, across the cruelties of our century … can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle". Such emotional affinity between the self and the other pervades Swift's entire moral universe. Bill's tendency to reach out to his Victorian "other" Matthew represents an inter-generational connection on a common ground of suffering. Interestingly, Swift even hints at it in an interview with Catherine Bernard: "empathy is the beginning of sympathy, sympathy is the beginning of compassion, and compassion is where morality really accrues … . If as a novelist you are not in the business of empathy, then what are you doing?" The self's presumed control over "being" proves to be unstable and it is the motif of suffering that helps open the self's horizons toward the other.

Strangely, Bill's desire to forge a complete identification with the Victorian other manifests itself even at the level of non-being. Nonetheless, the self fails to merge with the other because "The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not." The gradual realisation of the disparity between the tragic nature of Matthew's death and Bill's own carefully planned but botched suicide awakens the protagonist to the radical alterity of the

other. Noticeably, after his disgraced banishment from Launceston, Matthew travels to Plymouth with his Notebooks and the Bible. As he prepares to leave the Old World for the New by crossing the Atlantic, he reserves the Bible for himself and sends the Notebooks to his ex-wife Elizabeth. But he fails in his endeavour to start a new life because a shipwreck claims his life. In the novel's present, Bill is driven by an urge to build a cross-generational association with Matthew, while being aware of the inconclusiveness involved in the consolation that ensues from such a connection. The ambivalent aspect of this historical reconstruction makes Bill prone to experiencing the postmodern anxiety which the novel's title also suggests, despite its seemingly fairy tale overtones. The title instead invokes the character of Bill's anxiety which has an "ever-afterness" immanent in it. Any spiritual crisis is a consequence of the social changes that mark a particular age. Yet what sets apart Bill's anxiety from other historically prevalent ones is the proliferation of knowledge in his epoch, while he being aware of its inadequacy with respect to the "truth" of the matter. This becomes clearer in Swift's other novel *Waterland* when the history teacher Tom Crick explains:

> it's all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It's all a struggle to make things not seem meaning- less … I don't care what you call it – explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales – it helps to eliminate fear.

In such novels, the anxiety associated with the postmodernist reconstruction of historical narratives is a result of the ample amount of knowledge, on the one hand, as well as its unreliability, on the other. Neo-Victorian fiction stresses on the very implausibility of an ending with a "happily ever after", considering the disquietude and instability issuing from the abundance of information available to everyone in the present day. As Cora Kaplan puts it in her interpretation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "Banishing the Victorian happy ending is one effective narrative strategy for dispersing the long shadow that the imperial imagination cast on colonisers and colonised." Swift's novel also undermines the spiritual stability typically associated with the Victorian period and paints this era in equally tragic shades, riddled with ideological crises which are roughly comparable with the anxieties characterising the postmodern age.

Bill's recourse to literary and historical personages does not end with the completion and assertion of his subjectivity in the novelistic present. His exploration of "being" instead

becomes a foray into "nonbeing" as well. The threat of nonbeing leads to the displacement of self-affirmation in the face of, what Paul Tillich in his *The Courage to Be* calls, a certain "basic", "naked" anxiety. The anxiety about this threat can never be wiped out as it is a necessary condition of human existence. Bill's troubles force him to confront this anxiety that in turn invokes a sentiment of meaninglessness in his life and triggers his subsequent journey into the past, with a sentiment that can be regarded as ontological anxiety. As Tillich notes in his commentary on existential dilemmas:

> Anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing. "Existential" in this sentence means that it is not the abstract knowledge of nonbeing which produces anxiety but the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being. It is not the realization of universal transitoriness, not even the experience of the death of others, but the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety. Anxiety is finitude, experienced as one's own finitude. This is the natural anxiety of man as man.

Anxiety, as Bill endures it, is something that is typically human. Tillich locates three different ways in which nonbeing threatens being: the anxiety of death, the anxiety of meaninglessness, and the anxiety of guilt. He argues that only a single form of anxiety can gain dominance in any historical epoch even when all three may be present in some form. Interestingly, since Swift's is a complex novel which explores the multi-layered similarities and differences among three periods including the Victorian era, the 1940s, and the fictional present of 1990s, one could see the manifestation of all three forms of existential anxiety in Bill's character.

The threat of nonbeing proves to have consistent ramifications for Bill's self-affirmation, and the anxiety of death marks his numerous intellectual and fanciful voyages to literature and history. Tillich observes that this ontological anxiety manifests to a much lesser degree in people belonging to "collectivistic cultures". The sturdy bond of courage that persists in these communes is known to suppress the anxiety of death. The courage needed to withstand the anxious awareness of nonbeing is often available in collectivistic cultures that privilege cohesiveness, solidarity, and social harmony rather than individualistic goals. In the novel, the losses of three family members in eighteen months make Bill aware of his own mortality. The impact of these deaths not only intensifies his proclivity for living an emotionally sequestered life but also triggers the self-destructive drive in him.

Clearly, the pride that Bill feels for having defeated death after his suicide attempt is an ill-fitted

mask to hide his feelings of worthlessness in a larger scheme of things. As Bill muses:

> The deaths of others have lately punctuated—shattered, overturned—my life. No less than three—I shall come to them all—in eighteen months. But only very recently, despite this forced familiarity, have I looked the beast itself hard in the face. Not just looked it in the face but wanted it to devour me. I am talking of that experience, given to few, of being returned to life from almost-death. I am talking, in my case, of attempted self-slaughter.

However, whenever the fear arising out of this ontological anxiety seeks expression, Bill's previous bravado begins to wither away: "It's wrong, of course. Suicide … . We don't have the right. To take ourselves from ourselves. And from other people. It's cowardly. It's selfish … . It's vain: a last bid for posthumous limelight; a staged exit." In another instance, Bill again agonises over this anxiety and his conflict with the idea of death becomes more evident:

> Life goes on. It doesn't go on. Yes, yes, I know, all we want in the end, we living, breathing creatures (am I still one of them?), is life. All we want to believe in is the persistence and vitality of life. Faced with the choice between death and the merest hint of life, what scrap, what token wouldn't we cling to in order to keep that belief?

Thus, considering Bill as a pathetic individual without any worldly sway, as he outwardly appears, would amount to belittling the anxiety of fate and death which is an inevitable aspect of the human condition.

At the same time, when the threat of nonbeing interferes with the life-affirming potential in Bill, clouds of emptiness and meaninglessness begin to enshroud his self. For Tillich, nonbeing obliviates both the ontological and the spiritual, and the anxiety of meaninglessness causes the loss "of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings." This explains Bill's distress when, grappling with the indeterminacy about life, he loses track of the existential substance he has been chasing in the Hamletian world. So the intertextual component of the novel ends up putting him in a deadlock, reemphasizing his estrangement from his literary idol. While undergoing several struggles in the literary, social, and intellectual realms, Bill fails to come across anyone who could lend meaning to his life. Remarkably, Tillich argues that in the absence of a universal consensus in tackling the moral anxiety concerning the value of life, one might try "to identify himself with something transindividual, to surrender his separation and self-relatedness." Bill anyhow is not able to evade all that threatens his spiritual being as he finds himself incapable of engaging in participatory life. His personal losses contribute to

rendering his life entirely meaningless and even in academia he is doomed to struggle along the margins. At various points in the narrative, Bill questions the value of his own existence and also what it means to stay deserted:

> There are three things which have complicated my presence in this place and made me the object of prying attention as well as recrimination among my fellow collegiates—setting aside, that is, the principal fact that my presence here is a joke.

He further muses:

> it was about that time … that my special privileges fell away from me like some ineffective disguise, and I began to be scrutinized for my real credentials. It was then that the general view took hold that my academic qualifications, though not entirely absent, were way below the college standard, and that, Ellison Fellowship or no Ellison Fellowship, I was an impostor.

In addition, Bill's entry into academia has been marked as the introduction of "pep and lustre" to the hitherto solemn ambience of his department. Being the former husband of the late Ruth Vaughan, who has been a well-known actress in British film and theatre industries, the principal chance for Bill to gain any foothold in academia might have rested in an opportunistic contribution to the already widespread chatter surrounding the details of his outwardly fascinating married life. His thoughts on literature, particularly on Renaissance prosody, fail to attract the interest of his colleagues as well as his students who find in them nothing but "crude, sentimental and unschooled tosh." Furthermore, when his step-father Sam dies and Bill becomes the sole heir of Ellison Plastics, he becomes a target of resentment for his colleagues, especially for his rival Michael Potter who keeps questioning the relevance of his very existence in academia. As Michael inquires about Bill's progress with respect to editing the Notebooks:

> "And how's it coming along?" I shrugged.
>
> "You can't do it, Bill. You can't fucking do it!"
>
> "I can't?"
>
> "You don't have the background."

The discussion gradually transitions into a heated argument:

> "It's my subject, Bill." The voice took on a more frenzied note. "The spiritual crisis of the mid- nineteenth century is *my subject*!". . . .
>
> "You have a monopoly?"
>
> "You have credentials?!". . . .
>
> "Why don't you stick to poetry, Bill?"
>
> "The terms of the Ellison Fellowship," I jabbered, "clearly allow me—"
>
> "Fuck the Ellison Fellowship. The Ellison Fellowship's a fucking joke. You know that."

Bill also sounds sceptical about his own research capabilities:

> What was really under review was not my teaching but my whole contribution to scholarship … It looked very much to them … that my line of research, apart from a little desultory and random browsing, was doing nothing at all.

Bill, thus, single-handedly stays compelled to bear all the despair that seems to envelop his entire academic life. In his case, therefore, the death wish remains intertwined with a spiritual condition that epitomises what Tillich calls the "anxiety of meaninglessness". For Tillich, the third dimension to the threat of nonbeing is moralistic in nature. In the endeavour to bring any moral self-affirmation to fruition, one needs to steadily progress toward the actualisation of one's potential. The presence of the threat of nonbeing can, regardless, lead a person to question the fundamental being and also the prospects of life. This awareness leads to acting against one's own well laid-out plans, and consequently brings about feelings of "guilt" for having been unable to realise these goals. The guilt emanating from the anxiety of nonbeing can act as a catalyst in engendering in such humans a certain self-rejection, despair, and a feeling of being condemned. In *Ever After*, thus, Bill is full of remorse for not having mourned the loss of Sr. Unwin in his adolescence: "a nagging, self-pitying, self-accusing emotion born of the guilt at not feeling grief (how could I sigh over young sylphs in tutus when my own father was dead?) … ". Bill's guilt stems from his inability to empathise with what Levinas calls "the faults or the misfortune of others". Crucially, the appearance of multiple others in Bill's later life increases his urge to feel responsible for them. In his aspiration to contact another, Bill is also compelled to be in front of what Perpich in her essay on Levinas deems a "third party", the other of the lost other. This third party happens to redirect his attention from the wish to avenge the death of his presumed father to feeling guilt

for having disregarded the plight of another "other", his stepfather Sam. The realisation of the threat of nonbeing motivates Bill's psyche to quest for others. During each encounter, however, the other turns out to be vulnerable, and to use Peperzak's words, "the most naked". After Philip's death in Paris, a rather peculiar incident occurs over one of the weekends after Bill's family has moved to England:

> A sultry summer's night; I get up to fetch a glass of water: Sam on the landing, stark naked, caught between bedroom and bathroom … . He says, 'Oh hi, Billy,' with a kind of strangulated nonchalance, as if we have met on some street corner. Never thereafter is the encounter mentioned by either of us.

For Bill, the otherness of Sam becomes "naked", quite literally too. After Sam's death, Bill further strives to establish connections with various others in the hope of having some respite from the complications of nonbeing that he has been undergoing.

The clash between the urgency and inadequacy of fiction lies at the heart of the anxiety that Swift depicts in this novel. Bill possesses a death drive, a trait which he has perhaps partly imbibed from the character Hamlet. As Ernest Jones points out in his *Hamlet and Oedipus*:

> In him [Hamlet], … the Will to Death is fundamentally stronger than the Will of Life, and his struggle is at heart one long despairing fight against suicide, the least intolerable solution of the problem. He is caught by fate in a dilemma so tragically poignant that death becomes preferable to life.

Notwithstanding the apparent affinities between him and Hamlet, Bill's attempts to locate a paternal anchorage repeatedly fail to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Such a move, in Bill's case, ends up in the guilt for not having embraced the paternal authority of Philip, leading to the ever-present motif of self-slaughter in the novel. As Tillich puts it: "Suicide can liberate one from the anxiety of fate and death … But it cannot liberate from the anxiety of guilt and condemnation". Therefore, soon after realising the futility of suicide in the face of despair, Bill falls back upon the character of Matthew and begins rewriting the Notebooks using his own imagination.

In the absence of theological and paternal authorities in their lives, Bill as well as Matthew resort to the powers of imagination to toy with the possibility of attaining a modified perception of "reality". In a radio interview with Kim Hill, Swift remarks: "The imagination is there to get you out of yourself, beyond yourself and into worlds and experiences which are not your own.

That really is the whole point of fiction". The unexpected deaths of close relatives that these characters have suffered in their lives heighten their awareness of mortality. The novel, accordingly, draws our attention to the urgency behind their desires to reimagine and rewrite various existential situations in order to preserve their legacies for posterity. This could be seen as the reason behind the autobiographical journeys of Matthew and Bill, after the former has woken to the shock of his two-year old son's death and the latter to the loss of three loved ones. They begin recording their experiences as exemplified by Matthew's Notebooks and Bill's venture at writing what the readers would eventually receive as the novel *Ever After*. Memories, rather than inert entities stuck in the past, act as sources for preserving legacies as they become documented. The crippling uncertainties that have characterised the "vanishing age" of Matthew give way to assertions of hope in Bill's interpretation of that past. Swift underlines the necessity of fiction, storytelling, and romance in the face of identity crises, while simultaneously acknowledging the illusory features these exhibit.

The journey from trauma to memory and then to narrative is what generates the two documents of identity creation in the novel. Bill starts writing after the trail of personal losses that have triggered his attempted suicide, and Matthew resorts to confiding in his Notebooks after the premature death of his child Felix in 1854. Matthew's narrative is presented in an unconventional mode, and the contents of his diary appear in an arbitrary and disrupted manner in the novel. This provides the scope for the readers to presume that the contents of the Notebooks may have become transformed at the hands of Bill. Later in the narrative, Bill admits:

> I invent. I imagine. I want them [Matthew and his wife Elizabeth] to have been happy. How do I know they were ever happy? I make them fall in love at the very first meeting on a day full of radiant summer sunshine. How do I know it was ever like that? How do I know that the Notebooks, while they offer ample evidence for the collapse of Matthew's marriage, were not also a desperate attempt to keep alive its myth . . .

The novel is avant-garde not just in its experiments with the plot's linearity but also in its focus on the meandering routes that human memories can take. As Bill realises later in the narrative: "It's funny how the memory blurs." He also acknowledges that Matthews's Notebooks may have been written under the influence of some form of "narrative licence" and "invention." Ian Tan argues that the (re)construction of narratives in Swift's novels "is as much predicated upon the repression of memory as it is upon the production of knowledge". Even though the

mind may inhibit the recollection of deep trauma, memory is nonetheless integral to the production and reception of fiction that has tragic components. Through the inclusion of the Victorian plotline in his postmodernist project, Swift underscores similar traumas characterising both the periods. Noteworthily, the disjointed way in which the narrative progresses in the novel is characteristic of "trauma fiction" in which, as Michael Newman argues, "the traumatic event exceeds any possibility of description, as literally unrepresentable". One cannot ascertain the reality or fictionality of such an event by the measure of its translatability into representation, since its central feature remains untranslatable. This also explains the choice of Bill as a narrator who, as David Malcolm remarks, "knows less and less, the more he examines his, or [Matthew] Pearce's, past." The presence of complex traumas stretching between two timelines justifies the inclusion of a fragmentary and elusive plot as an important part of this postmodernist novel.

Ever After distinguishes itself through its experimental narrative form, which not only disrupts linearity but also reflects the psychological complexities of memory and trauma. This dynamic is evident in *Ever After*, where the novel's fragmented structure mirrors the way trauma resists coherent representation. Trauma fiction often presents events in a disjointed manner, as traumatic experiences are inherently difficult to articulate. In *Ever After*, the rupture between past and present narratives serves not only as a stylistic choice but also as a thematic necessity. The traumatic event—whether Darwinian or postmodern—remains fundamentally indescribable, eluding straightforward representation. This inability to translate trauma into a coherent narrative is what marks *Ever After* as a significant contribution to trauma fiction. The novel challenges traditional storytelling conventions by foregrounding the elusive and fragmentary nature of both memory and history.

In *Ever After*, Swift constructs a neo-Victorian narrative that is not merely a nostalgic return to the past but a critical engagement with its complexities. By weaving together the existential dilemmas of two temporally distinct individuals, the novel highlights the ways in which history continues to shape the present. Through its metafictional approach, its interrogation of historical truth, and its subversion of Victorian ideologies, *Ever After* exemplifies the neo-Victorian tradition of revisiting the nineteenth century to illuminate the uncertainties of contemporary life. Ultimately, *Ever After* positions history not as a closed chapter but as an ongoing dialogue—a space where past and present converge to redefine notions of self, belief, and knowledge. In doing so, Swift's novel contributes to the ever-expanding discourse of neo-Victorian fiction, reminding us that the past is never truly behind us but remains an integral part of our evolving identities.

Ever After subverts the concept of stability with regard to the human existential condition that extends beyond the contemporary times. It is ironic that Swift achieves this end partly through Matthew who as a surveyor has been preoccupied with lasting foundations which have "everything to do with stability and trust." Matthew comes across the fossil of an ichthyosaur for the first time in Lyme Regis in 1844, almost a decade before the death of his son in 1854 and the subsequent "collapse of [his] spiritual certainty." The memory of his brush with the fossil of the ichthyosaur, with "[t]he long, toothed jaw; the massive eye that stares through millions of years", sows the seed for his gradual apostasy. In one of his diary entries, he notes: "what followed was not a moment of unreasoned panic and confusion but a moment of acute *perspicacity*." He also calls it "the moment of my unbelief. The beginning of my make-belief". The year 1844 does not just mark the curious incident with regard to the fossil but also the beginning of a relationship which leads to his short but blissful married life, "the ten happiest and most fragile years of my life". Accordingly, in 1845 he marries Elizabeth, daughter of Rector Gilbert Hunt, and sincerely hopes that conjugal bliss will repress his dissenting views because "happiness quells thought." It is only after his son Felix dies of scarlet fever that he explicitly pronounces his disillusionment with religion before his father-in-law. In a later diary entry, Matthew notes down the kernel of his unbelief: "And if the world existed so long without Man upon it, why should we suppose that futurity holds for us any guaranteed estate and that we occupy any special and permanent place in Creation?" And in 1859, when he comes across the theory of evolution, he experiences an epiphanic moment. This episode forces Matthew to completely reject the fundamental doctrines of his faith which regards humans as divinely created beings. His Notebooks gradually register an incessant questioning of religious values. When his spiritual crises come into contact with Darwinian thought, Matthew turns into "an almost confirmed non-believer". Once his opinions become incompatible with the Christian faith, he finds himself banished from the parish and ostracised by his commune, intensifying his alienation from the religion. Paradoxically for Matthew, while the early childhood trauma of his mother Susan's death has brought him closer to his faith, which has served to offer a possible explanation for the grievous incident, his son Felix's death leads to his disillusionment with the teachings of the Church.

Matthew's character is rife with inconsistencies and uncertainties so much so that one would find it difficult to penetrate his subjectivity. In addition, according to Stef Craps, Swift seems to promote in his novels a "non-dominative subjectivity willing to suspend itself in defamiliarisation or doubt." Similarly, Bill's crisis also appears irresolvable and it serves to strengthen Swift's treatment of subjectivity as an open-ended and fluctuating entity. As Bill

himself affirms with respect to his reconstruction of Matthew's Notebooks:

> I am not in the business of strict historiography. It is a prodigious, a presumptuous task: to take the skeletal remains of a single life and attempt to breathe into them their former actuality … . And if I conjure out of the Notebooks a complete yet hybrid being, part truth, part fiction, is that so false? I only concur, surely, with the mind of the man himself, who must have asked, many a time: So what is real and what is not? And who am I? Am I this, or am I that?

Bill ventures to reimagine Matthew's world with the intention of laying bare every aspect of the life of his Victorian ancestor in a bid to identify with him. He, however, makes the mistake of attempting to reduce what Levinas calls the "surplus" existence of the other into a reflection of his own. Nevertheless, Bill does seem to realize the unfathomability of the other in some instances: "I don't understand him. I never sought him out, I could do without him." Yet he instantly determines: "But there he is, washed up before me: I have to revive him." Bill's psyche remains an enigma even at the end of the novel. When he finally agrees to surrender Matthew's Notebooks to Katherine, wife of his academic competitor Michael, he does not specify the precise reason for this act. Has he finally abandoned the quest for his literary and historical roots as he is faced with the impenetrability characterizing Matthew's subjectivity? Or has the indecipherability of his Victorian other liberated him from his obsessive quest for cathartic identifications? Bill's act could be the result of a new understanding of the necessity and yet the futility of these imaginative efforts to identify with an other, a realization that marks the crux of his postmodern anxiety.

With the advent of postmodernism, the concepts of order and stability have given way to an individualistic sense of scepticism, unlike the one engendered by Darwin's discovery. The inherent unknowability of the world has become more apparent, and yet there is no decrease in the efforts to narrativize events. Such a development leads to the rejection of history as a grand narrative and rather resorts to a reconstruction of historical narratives as part of the postmodernist project of remembering and revising the past. The late- century anxiety resulting from the obsession with experimentalism, the new novel form, and metafiction is also alluded to in novels like Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Winterson's *Boating for Beginners*, and Swift's *Out of this World*. Evidently, Bill's anxiety is not just personal but characteristic of the age he inhabits. As Levinas puts it in the inter-World War context: "it is world-weariness, the disorder of our time". This demands the being's release from the limits of the self— "not

only a matter of getting out, but also of going somewhere." Similarly, Bill seeks shelter in the familiar and seemingly fulfilling existence associated with the Victorian era. However, the novel does not seek to privilege any value as sublime, irrespective of the era. Patricia Waugh writes of the postmodernist novel as something "which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized." Although the title "Ever After" may seem to evoke a sense of magic and romance innate to fairy tales, Swift manages to defy conventional patterns of representations and definitions in a postmodernist manner. The novel unveils the fragility of Victorian values through the character of Matthew and his life journey. John Pearce, Matthew's father and a clockmaker in Victorian England, has gifted a rosewood clock engraved with an image of Cupid to his son on the day of his marriage with Elizabeth. On a brass plate of the clock is etched "M. & E. 4th April 1845" and above it the words "Amor Vincit Omnia", Latin for "love conquers all". This clock has become an heirloom for the family and is finally passed down to Bill and his wife Ruth. The expression recurs in the novel and a particularly striking instance of it occurs when Bill, after Ruth's demise, comes to suspect her fidelity: "Romantic love. A made-up thing. A concoction of the poets. Jack shall have Jill. *Amor Vincit Omnia*." Bill observes:

> It is a moot point why this little clock which presided not only over Matthew's marriage but over his scandalous divorce, and seems to have presided since over a good many marred marriages, including my mother's to my father, should have become such a token of nuptial good will.

Moreover, the clock also becomes, like the Pearce manuscripts, a remnant of the past that Bill's ancestors have inhabited and, therefore, forms a part of the historical narrative bequeathed to the descendants of Matthew and Elizabeth. It bestows a new life upon its dead possessors by reintroducing them into the story of the present-day protagonist. The ambivalence implicit in this emblem of conjugal harmony hints at the discrepancy between what Bill has hoped for and what ultimately materializes in his life. Any transcendental value accorded to "love" is repeatedly undercut in the novel. Swift's rejection of accepted norms through Bill constitutes what Anne Whitehead calls "a broader shift in contemporary fiction … to negotiate the aftermaths of war and modernity." The inter-personal connection with the Victorian other offers Bill a path to come to terms with his own existential dilemmas; but this affinitive engagement simultaneously evades closure— the closure of a "happily ever after". Regardless, the process becomes the premise for him to deal with the psychologically debilitating

awareness of the unreliability inherent in his compulsive recourse to historical and fictional characters in the postmodern world.

A key theme in *Ever After* is the haunting presence of history. Bill Unwin is haunted not only by Matthew Pearce's diaries but also by his late wife Ruth, whose absence shapes much of his melancholic introspection. This motif of haunting is central to Neo-Victorian fiction, which often explores how the unresolved traumas of the nineteenth century continue to shape contemporary identities. Derridean hauntology provides a useful lens through which to view *Ever After*'s engagement with history, but Levinas's ethical framework adds another dimension to this discussion. For Levinas, the past is never fully past; it persists in the ethical demands it places upon us. Bill's inability to move beyond the deaths of his wife and mother mirrors his entrapment in the unresolved ethical obligations of history. His melancholia is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader historical burden—a struggle to reconcile with a past that refuses to be neatly archived. Derrida's concept of hauntology suggests that the past never fully disappears; instead, it lingers like a ghost, disrupting any stable sense of time. This is central to *Ever After*, where history is not a distant, fixed entity but a spectral presence that intrudes upon the present. The protagonist, Bill Unwin, becomes deeply entangled in the Victorian past through his grandfather Matthew Pearce's diaries. These documents act as both a connection to history and an uncanny reminder that the past is never fully knowable. Pearce's written words are spectral—recording events long gone, yet still shaping Bill's perception of himself and his place in time. Just as Derrida argues that language itself is haunted by absence and deferral (*différance*), the diaries create an illusion of historical truth while simultaneously exposing its instability. Bill, as an unreliable narrator, struggles to construct a coherent historical and personal identity. His own life—marked by loss, the suicide of his wife Ruth, and his estranged sense of belonging—is mirrored in his attempt to understand his grandfather's experiences. This inability to fully grasp the past aligns with hauntology, which rejects the idea of history as something fixed and retrievable. Instead, history always arrives as a ghostly echo, shaped by the present moment's interpretations and distortions. As a neo-Victorian novel, *Ever After* itself is haunted by the 19th century. It does not merely recreate Victorian history but actively questions how the past is remembered, rewritten, and appropriated. The novel engages with Victorian concerns—scientific progress, faith versus reason, the reliability of personal testimony—while simultaneously exposing their continued relevance in the late 20th century. This echoes Derrida's idea that the past is never truly "past"; it always returns to trouble the present. While hauntology emphasizes the persistence of

history, Emmanuel Levinas's ethics shifts the discussion to responsibility and the self's encounter with the Other. Levinas argues that true ethical subjectivity emerges when one recognizes the Other—someone irreducible to one's own frameworks—and responds to them ethically. Bill's life is marked by a sense of disconnection—he is haunted by his dead wife Ruth, his mother's affairs, and his father's absence. His obsessive engagement with his ancestor's past can be seen as an attempt to define himself through history, rather than through direct ethical encounters in the present. However, Levinas would argue that true meaning is not found in introspective self-construction but in responsibility toward others. Bill's failures in his relationships suggest his inability to fully embrace this ethical openness. Levinas's concept of responsibility can be applied to historical engagement. Instead of seeing history as something to be possessed, one must acknowledge its alterity—its status as Other. Matthew Pearce's diaries offer Bill a chance to "possess" history, yet they ultimately resist full comprehension. The ethical demand of history, in a Levinasian sense, is not to dominate it but to respond to it with humility and openness. Bill's inability to fully confront his wife Ruth's suicide is one of the novel's central ethical tensions. Rather than facing her suffering or acknowledging the weight of her absence, Bill remains trapped in his own perspective, avoiding an ethical reckoning. Levinasian ethics would suggest that Bill's failure lies in his inability to truly encounter Ruth as Other—to see her suffering beyond his own loss. The novel, then, can be read as an exploration of ethical failure and the consequences of refusing responsibility.

Ever After is a neo-Victorian novel that involves the characters and the readers in an exploratory project of understanding the socio-cultural otherness of the Victorians. While the Hamletian other in the novel opens up the space for Bill to channel his anxieties for a time, he later seeks to imaginatively bring back Matthew from oblivion through a rewriting of the thoughts that this Victorian other has penned in his diaries. The Notebooks, in their reconstructed and reappropriated version at the hands of Bill, become an important historical and cultural document that not only dismantles the notion of a self-contained past but also portrays the past flowing into the present. Yet the historical project that Bill undertakes in the novel proves to be insufficient and partly fictional. His hope to identify with Hamlet for deriving cathartic solace fails, as does his historically oriented connection with the life of Matthew. Both the "fictional" and the "real" others turn out to be insufficient in alleviating the protagonist's miseries. This constitutes the crux of the postmodern anxiety that looms large in Bill's narrative which evinces sorrow and irony in equal degrees. The nineteenth century

inspires the neo-Victorian novelist to carve a new puzzle out of the old crises, and in doing so, the quests of the author and the protagonist to subversively create and innovate are laden with the anxiety of an overdependence on their antecedents. Bill's desire to become Pearces' literary scion who resurrects his ancestor's memory is not just an endeavour to become "ontologically compatible" with Matthew, instead he is chasing a "substitoot" for his mother's love and the quashed dream of a near-Victorian home with Sylvia and Philip. The inefficacious encounter with the other leads to furthering his internal conflicts and culminates in destabilising the sacrality of values such as love and truth. The complete renunciation of being so as to become indistinguishable from the other, thus, does not seem to represent the leitmotif of the novel. *Ever After* instead focuses on one's need to escape the boundaries of the self as a result of personal and collective traumas, and the movement toward the (un)familiar other becomes necessary but ultimately inadequate in the postmodern context.

Chapter 5

Rethinking Victorianism through Peter Carey and Emma Tennant

Nostalgia is a complex phenomenon that involves recalling the past in the present while also carrying the potential to shape one's expectations of the future. Although it is commonly perceived as merely a reflection on the past, nostalgia is, in reality, far more intricate, cyclical, and layered. While it is often associated primarily with time, nostalgia is also deeply rooted in space. Historically, nostalgia was initially regarded as an illness. The origins of the term itself suggest a strong connection to physical space, as nostalgia was initially understood as an intense form of homesickness. It was believed that the soldiers suffered from a deep longing for their homeland in the Swiss Alps, to the extent that it made them physically unwell. Over time, the idea of nostalgia as a disease or psychiatric disorder has evolved, giving way to a more nuanced perspective that views it as a bittersweet emotion with potentially positive effects.

Fred Davis was a pioneer in the study of nostalgia, particularly in his 1979 book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. Davis argues that nostalgia, while often experienced on a personal level, also serves an important social function by shaping both individual and group identities. He differentiated between personal nostalgia, which is tied to one's own life experiences, and collective nostalgia, which arises from shared memories within a group, often linked to generational experiences. Davis emphasized nostalgia's role in preserving identity continuity, particularly during times of change. Building on this perspective, Svetlana Boym proposed a related classification. She distinguished between "restorative nostalgia," which expresses a longing to return to or reconstruct an idealized past, and "reflective nostalgia," which involves contemplating past experiences to find meaning in the present. Nostalgia, she suggested, often prompts individuals to question the accuracy of their memories, evaluate past events critically, and compare them to both the present and future. This modern understanding of nostalgia departs from its historical association with illness or psychological distress. Instead, nostalgia is seen as an active and potentially transformative force that not only reconnects people with the past but also helps shape their visions of the future.

The contemporary literary landscape has seen a proliferation of neo-Victorian novels that engage with, reinterpret, and often subvert canonical works from the nineteenth century. This chapter critically examines the novelistic reworkings of two such classics—*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy—through the lens of their

neo-Victorian counterparts, *Jack Maggs* by Peter Carey and *Tess* by Emma Tennant. These texts engage in a dynamic intertextual dialogue with their predecessors, revisiting the Victorian past with a complex interplay of nostalgia and subversion. Prominent neo-Victorian critics, including Christian Gutleben, Kate Mitchell, and Marie-Luise Kohlke, have emphasized the apparent polarity between nostalgic reverence for the Victorian era and its postmodern deconstruction. However, this chapter challenges that binary, drawing upon Svetlana Boym's theories on nostalgia as a "historical emotion" to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the function of nostalgia in neo-Victorian fiction.

Boym's conceptualization of nostalgia is critical in dismantling the rigid opposition between nostalgia and postmodernism. Rather than being an anachronistic yearning for a lost past, nostalgia operates as an intrinsic feature of postmodern sensibilities, where history is neither entirely rejected nor wholly idealized. In neo-Victorian fiction, this translates into a dual impulse—an affective engagement with the past combined with a knowing critique of its limitations. Carey's *Jack Maggs* and Tennant's *Tess* exemplify this approach by both embracing and rewriting their source texts in ways that challenge conventional readings of the Victorian canon. Carey's *Jack Maggs* reimagines the character of Magwitch from *Great Expectations*, shifting the focus from Dickens's portrayal of the benevolent yet marginalized convict to a more intricate exploration of his psyche and agency. By relocating Maggs' narrative from the periphery to the center, Carey questions the imperialist assumptions and class biases embedded in Dickens's original work. This shift, however, is not a straightforward act of subversion; rather, it incorporates a nostalgic engagement with Dickensian London, rich in its atmospheric details and linguistic textures. Carey's novel thus exemplifies Boym's argument that nostalgia does not necessarily entail an uncritical longing for the past but can instead function as a means of interrogating historical narratives.

Similarly, Tennant's *Tess* revisits Hardy's tragic heroine with a postmodern sensibility that foregrounds gender politics and agency. Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is frequently read as a critique of Victorian morality, yet Tennant's adaptation intensifies this critique by infusing it with contemporary feminist concerns. Tennant reimagines Tess's fate in a way that disrupts Hardy's deterministic vision, offering alternative possibilities for her survival. The novel thus oscillates between homage and revision, embodying what Boym terms "reflective nostalgia"—a mode of engagement that acknowledges the irretrievability of the past while actively reworking its meanings. A central tenet of Boym's theory is that nostalgia often involves an erasure of historical specificity, transforming the past into a shared or personal myth. This

process is evident in both *Jack Maggs* and *Tess*, where history is reshaped through the subjective lens of the present. In *Jack Maggs*, Carey constructs an alternative narrative of colonial displacement, rewriting the history of transportation and penal servitude in ways that challenge traditional historical accounts. Maggs' journey from Australia to England becomes a symbolic inversion of the colonial gaze, positioning him as both an outsider and a claimant to the imperial center. This act of rewriting history aligns with Boym's assertion that nostalgia disrupts linear conceptions of time and progress, offering instead a cyclical or mythic understanding of historical experience.

In *Tess*, Tennant engages in a similar act of mythologization, but with a focus on gendered histories. By reimagining Tess's story through a contemporary feminist lens, Tennant revises the historical constraints that shaped Hardy's narrative, suggesting alternative trajectories for female agency. This process reflects Boym's insight that nostalgia can function as a form of resistance to dominant historical narratives, transforming personal and collective memories into counter-histories that challenge established truths. Boym's distinction between retrospective and prospective nostalgia is particularly relevant to neo-Victorian fiction. Retrospective nostalgia involves a longing for a lost past, often accompanied by an idealization of historical continuity. Prospective nostalgia, on the other hand, entails an imaginative engagement with the past that informs visions of the future. *Jack Maggs* and *Tess* embody both forms of nostalgia in their engagement with the Victorian canon.

In *Jack Maggs*, retrospective nostalgia is evident in Carey's meticulous reconstruction of Dickensian London, complete with its labyrinthine streets, eccentric characters, and moral ambiguities. However, this nostalgia is counterbalanced by a prospective impulse that reconfigures the narrative possibilities of Dickens's original text. By granting Maggs a more complex and autonomous voice, Carey not only revisits the past but also reimagines the future of its marginalized figures. *Tess*, likewise, navigates between retrospective and prospective nostalgia. Tennant's novel acknowledges the emotional and aesthetic appeal of Hardy's work, yet it refuses to be bound by its tragic determinism. By rewriting Tess's fate, Tennant engages in a prospective nostalgia that envisions alternative futures for historical subjects. This approach aligns with Boym's argument that nostalgia is not merely a regressive sentiment but can also serve as a generative force, opening up new possibilities for historical imagination. The neo-Victorian reconstructions of *Great Expectations* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in *Jack Maggs* and *Tess* illustrate the complexity of nostalgia as a literary and historical phenomenon. Rather than adhering to a binary opposition between nostalgia and subversion, these novels

exemplify Boym's theory that nostalgia can be both critical and creative, retrospective and prospective. By engaging with the Victorian past in ways that both honor and challenge its literary heritage, Carey and Tennant demonstrate the enduring relevance of nineteenth-century narratives while simultaneously reshaping them to address contemporary concerns. In doing so, they affirm the potential of neo-Victorian fiction to function as a site of both historical reflection and imaginative reinvention.

Nostalgia has been believed to distort memory, reshaping past experiences through a lens of longing rather than objective reality—a notion echoed by both Freud and Marx. Freud attributes nostalgia to an irretrievable loss, whether of childhood, home, or mother, interpreting it as a form of mourning that can be constructive, helping individuals process loss. However, he warns against obsessive nostalgia, which, when taken to an extreme, fosters a narcissistic attachment to the lost object, resulting in a conflicted melancholia that simultaneously venerates and rejects what is gone. Marx, on the other hand, is more critical of nostalgia, regarding it as a hindrance to progress—an outdated sentiment that must be abandoned in favor of forward-looking political change, urging society to leave the past behind. Yet, paradoxically, Marx admired ancient Greek civilization, describing it as a period of childlike innocence and clarity, qualities that modernity aspires to reclaim. This perspective suggests that, for Marx, the Greeks symbolized not the emergence of individual identity but of historical consciousness. His view aligns personal development, as analyzed by Freud, with the evolution of historical identity, forging a conceptual link between psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism. This synthesis of historical and personal dimensions has long been a subject of theoretical inquiry. Svetlana Boym, whose work is frequently cited in discussions on nostalgia, dissolves rigid boundaries between the nostalgia rooted in personal memories and that tied to historical events. She explores nostalgia's dual nature, weaving together the secular and the sacred. Boym argues that nostalgia represents a longing for a lost, enchanted world—one with clear moral and spatial boundaries—offering a secularized form of spiritual yearning for an unattainable absolute, an ideal home that transcends both time and space. The idea that nostalgia is inherently backward-looking, whether in a personal or political sense, stems from what has been termed the "hermeneutics of suspicion." However, theorist Marcos Natali challenges the assumption that nostalgia is necessarily reactionary, rejecting the teleological narrative that underlies such critiques. He argues that Marxist objections to nostalgia are based on a linear view of history as inevitably progressing toward rational emancipation, while simultaneously treating the past as irretrievably lost. Natali also disputes the psychoanalytic characterization of nostalgia as

irrational or fictive, observing that historical materialist critiques frame nostalgia within oppositions such as reaction versus progress, while psychoanalysis defines it through dichotomies like illusion versus reality and irrationality versus reason. Drawing on Kristeva, he points to the melancholic's paradoxical memory, which insists that although the past is gone, an emotional fidelity to it remains. Natali ultimately suggests that if one does not accept that the past is entirely lost, and if one resists a secular, disenchanted perspective, a new conceptual framework emerges—one beyond nostalgia, melancholia, or mourning. His argument resonates with the idea that nostalgia is, first and foremost, an individual experience, distinct from a collective history, and does not necessarily presuppose a shared past.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that nostalgia is not solely about longing for what has been lost, imagining its recovery as a return to an original state of completeness. Instead, nostalgia can also involve recalling something we have deliberately abandoned—invoking not what has disappeared, but what we have consciously set aside. This perspective invites a reconsideration of Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, not as a mere counterpoint to restorative nostalgia but as something that emerges in the space between an attempt at restoration and its ultimate rejection. This notion aligns with the essence of irony, which does not resolve contradictions but instead sustains them, embodying the complexities of a given condition rather than offering a solution.

Nostalgia, once a personal and private experience, increasingly became publicly influenced by the imagery crafted by journalism, advertising, and politics. Over time, these portrayals of history shaped how individuals incorporated past events into their own memories. As modernity progressed, the distinction between personal recollections and collective representations blurred, intertwining private experiences with shared cultural narratives. To illustrate this, Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979) references the concept of "generational memory", wherein people who came of age in different decades—such as the 1950s versus the 1960s—collectively recall defining moments or beloved songs. By the early 2000s, scholars had begun to contextualize Davis's theories on nostalgia within broader historical frameworks. One of the most significant contributions to this discussion, particularly regarding nostalgia in modern France, comes from historian Peter Fritzsche. Fritzsche in *Stranded in the Present* (2005) argues that nostalgia played a central role in shaping modern historical awareness. He suggests that for Europeans who entered adulthood from the late eighteenth century onward, nostalgia emerged as a counterbalance to the dominant ideology of progress. Within this framework, nostalgia is understood as a modern sentiment—one that,

though personally felt, reflected an acute consciousness of the unpredictable and often unsettling nature of historical transformation in an era that predominantly championed optimism about the future. Fritzsche pinpoints the French Revolution as a crucial turning point, as its upheavals profoundly altered society and disrupted lives across Europe. Despite the promises of reform made by revolutionary leaders, the period's civil strife led to widespread violence, including the Reign of Terror. Fritzsche argues that as the future became increasingly uncertain due to revolutionary turmoil, the past gained greater significance, fostering a culture that idealized lost traditions and stability.

According to Fritzsche, rapid societal changes led people to yearn for the perceived stability of the pre-revolutionary period. Paradoxically, he explains, this nostalgic sentiment contributed to the development of historical consciousness—not in the scholarly sense, but as an instinctive recognition of history's impact on ordinary lives. This perspective underscores how major historical disruptions break continuity between past and present, often altering personal trajectories in unexpected ways. The unpredictability of these transformations heightened awareness of history's influence, reinforcing a perception that time itself was accelerating. He presents an ironic conclusion: nostalgia, once considered a psychological affliction, became a means through which displaced individuals gained a deeper understanding of historical change. The personal stories of migration and upheaval that emerged in response to these events evolved into a form of popular historical reflection in the nineteenth century. Unlike Fritzsche, who associates nostalgia with historical upheavals, Boym reframes it as an attempt to reclaim lost opportunities for progress that were abandoned over time. Having emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States, she became a novelist and a Harvard professor. Part of a wave of Russian intellectuals who left during the 1970s and 1980s, Boym critically examines nostalgia as both a burden and a source of creative renewal. She argues that nostalgia, like other forms of collective memory, constantly evolves—sometimes by reconstructing or reimagining the past to align with present realities. As she puts it, nostalgia is not a desire for history as it was, but for an idealized version of what it could have been, a longing to fulfill past aspirations in the future. Boym differentiates between two distinct forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. The first clings to an imagined golden age, attempting to preserve an idealized past indefinitely. Those who embrace it often resist change and maintain illusions about a bygone era's perfection. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, acknowledges history's complexities, embracing its contradictions and uncertainties. Rather than seeking to restore a lost world, this form of nostalgia invites contemplation on how past aspirations can be adapted for

contemporary contexts. It values history not for what was, but for the possibilities it once held—unrealized ideas that might still be relevant today. She applies this perspective to Soviet history, arguing that suppressed or overlooked ideas from that era could be revisited and reinterpreted in new ways.

Rather than outright defiance, subtle cultural resistance often shapes expressions of nostalgia. Over time, the way nostalgia is understood has transformed, leading to what has been termed postmodern nostalgia. Unlike traditional nostalgia, this version does not hold the past in a sacred light. Linda Hutcheon explores how irony has become a central component of modern nostalgia. She argues that contemporary nostalgia exists in a dynamic relationship with irony, allowing people to view the past from a detached, analytical stance while still engaging emotionally with it in creative ways. She highlights a shift in how nostalgia is perceived, distinguishing modern interpretations from earlier conceptions. According to her, nostalgia today reflects the uncertainty of a society caught between its relationship with both history and the future. In literature, irony and nostalgia serve different roles—irony dispels sentimentality, while nostalgia embraces it. Neither perspective directly recreates the past but instead exists in the subjective interpretations of individuals. Nonetheless, Hutcheon concludes that in an era focused on the present, nostalgia inevitably carries an ironic undertone. Davis also examines how nostalgia has been redefined in a postmodern context, arguing that mass media has taken control of how the past is represented. He attributes this transformation to consumerism, which has commodified nostalgia for commercial gain. Increasingly, media corporations repackage images of the past in a way that encourages collective nostalgia, manipulating personal emotions for profit. Rather than individuals shaping their own memories, advertising industries craft an idealized version of history, simplifying and sanitizing it to fuel a culture of materialism. Here, nostalgia is no longer about personal reflection but about selling a lifestyle, with consumers willingly embracing this manufactured vision of the past. This perspective aligns with literary critic Fredric Jameson's analysis of postmodern nostalgia. Jameson, a key figure in shaping the definition of postmodernism in the late twentieth century, introduced the notion of "nostalgia for the present". He connects this idea to late-stage capitalism, where consumer desire takes precedence over basic needs. Within this economic model, nostalgia is repurposed as a marketing strategy, constructing idealized images of the past that resonate with contemporary audiences. According to Jameson, this approach reduces the cultural complexity of the era to exaggerated, artificial representations. In this version of nostalgia, irony does not function as critique but rather as amused detachment, offering a longing not for historical

reality but for an aesthetically refined, consumer-friendly reconstruction of it. The rise of this shallow, commercially driven nostalgia may explain why historians have recently become interested in nostalgia from the modern era, which carried a different emotional weight. Unlike its postmodern counterpart, modern nostalgia reflected an earnest longing to preserve past memories. Although idealized, these memories still conveyed genuine feelings of loss and regret tied to the passage of time.

Peter Carey's 1997 novel *Jack Maggs* draws inspiration from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, particularly borrowing the character of Abel Magwitch. However, rather than merely revisiting Dickens's narrative, *Jack Maggs* reinterprets and transforms it, moving away from the social structures and settings entrenched in Dickens's depiction of London. Instead of simply resurrecting the past or suppressed elements from *Great Expectations*, Carey's work seeks to realize aspects of the story that remained unexplored or unfulfilled in Dickens's original text. In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch represents a burdensome past that the protagonist, Pip, is eager to escape. Yet, paradoxically, this past is deeply interconnected with Pip's present and ultimately enables his journey toward self-discovery. Dickens originally intended for the novel's central focus to be the bond between Pip and Magwitch, and structurally, this remains true. Miss Havisham's existence is defined by an obsessive fixation on the past, symbolized by her decaying estate and halted clocks, while Magwitch, in contrast, embodies a cyclical regeneration that sustains the novel's deeper themes. His initial encounter with Pip in the graveyard is pivotal, marking the protagonist's first profound realization of the world's realities—a moment of origin tied to both loss and discovery. Edward Said notes that Pip's identity as a fictional character is rooted in death, with Magwitch acting as the catalyst for his development. Magwitch's dramatic return in later chapters bridges the past with Pip's anticipated future, linking notions of social class, crime, and personal transformation. His presence triggers a series of revelations that redefine Pip's understanding of himself and others—revealing his role as Pip's secret benefactor, his relationship with Molly, his connection to Estella, and his past with Compeyson, Miss Havisham's former fiancé.

Pip's own name, which he shortens from Philip Pirrip to Pip, highlights his attempt to control and reinterpret his origins. Peter Brooks argues that Pip's journey is one of misinterpretation, unstable self-perception, and a problematic search for identity. His aspirations are shaped by illusions, particularly the belief that Satis House—Miss Havisham's decayed mansion—is the key to his fortune and destiny. Pip envisions himself as a heroic figure who will restore life to the crumbling estate and win Estella's love. Yet, this dream is built on false assumptions, as

Miss Havisham merely uses him for her own amusement. Throughout the novel, Pip oscillates between desire and fear, particularly in his complex feelings toward Miss Havisham. His subconscious anxieties manifest in disturbing visions, including hallucinations of Miss Havisham hanging by the neck. Eventually, in a dramatic fire scene, Pip plays a role in both Miss Havisham's symbolic redemption and her literal destruction. As the flames consume her wedding dress and rotting surroundings, Pip experiences a cathartic release, though she ultimately dies from emotional shock rather than physical burns. Pip's emotional entanglement with Estella reaches its climax in his declaration that she has been an inseparable part of his existence. He sees her not as an independent person but as a reflection of his own experiences and aspirations. In discovering her true parentage, Pip gains a sense of control over her narrative, though Estella herself remains passive in the face of this revelation. Dickens's revised ending suggests a form of closure for Pip, implying that he and Estella may never be separated again—though the ambiguity leaves room for interpretation.

Magwitch is the first link in Pip's journey, representing a past that cannot be neatly confined to memory but instead resurfaces repeatedly. Pip's encounters with Magwitch provoke unsettling emotions and associations—his discomfort in Newgate Prison, his linking of Estella to the world of crime, and his fixation on death and punishment, as seen in his reaction to the hanging masks in Jaggers's office. Over time, Pip undergoes a process of disillusionment, leading to his ultimate reconciliation with Magwitch. This transformation allows him to move beyond his narrow self-perceptions and take on a more generous, outward-looking role, mirroring Magwitch's own acts of kindness. In doing so, Pip reclaims his painful past and channels it into the very story he narrates. Peter Ackroyd suggests that *Great Expectations* is a deeply introspective novel in which Dickens critically examines themes of passion, hypocrisy, and moral shortcomings. Magwitch, in this sense, can be seen as a representation of Dickens's fascination with the underbelly of society, his experiences with crime and poverty, and his tireless pursuit of truth through storytelling.

Peter Carey's novel *Jack Maggs* opens with the protagonist, Jack Maggs, making a clandestine return to London. He has secretly funded the aspirations of his adoptive English "son" using wealth accumulated in Australia. However, upon arriving at Henry Phipps's residence at 27 Great Queen Street, he finds it abandoned, save for the presence of mice and drafts. In need of work, Maggs takes up employment as a footman in the neighboring home of Percy Buckle, a grocer from Clerkenwell who has recently come into wealth. Buckle indulges in the luxuries of his newfound fortune, including a complete collection of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of*

the Roman Empire, high-society gatherings, and an affair with the spirited kitchen maid, Mercy Larkin. It is within this household that Maggs encounters Tobias Oates, a rising literary figure known for his humorous stories and the creation of the characters Captain Crumley and Mrs. Morefallen. Oates, who lives with his wife and her younger sister (for whom he harbors deep feelings), spends his days exploring the city's vast contrasts—its opulence and its squalor. His fascination with crime leads him to collect macabre artifacts, such as a severed thief's hand and the death mask of the notorious John Sheppard, hanged in 1724. When Oates crosses paths with Maggs, he recognizes his past—an escapee from New South Wales—and strikes a deal: Oates will assist Maggs in locating Henry Phipps in exchange for the opportunity to study his subconscious through mesmerism. While Oates extracts Maggs's deepest memories through hypnosis to weave into stories, Maggs embarks on his own form of storytelling—penning deeply personal letters to his estranged protégé, recounting his painful and impoverished youth. Carey's novel features grotesque and psychologically unhinged characters—Ma Britten, a seller of pills; Captain Constable, a man battling self-destructive urges; and Percy Buckle, who transforms from a harmless bibliophile into a murderous madman. The novel's setting brings together elements reminiscent of scavenger-filled riverbanks, complex inheritance disputes, child prostitution, and the grim specter of public executions. Against this bleak backdrop, Maggs embarks on his quest for redemption. Unlike Dickens's Abel Magwitch, who is ultimately forgiven by Pip and recognized as a loyal and generous benefactor, Maggs's journey ends in violence—shot by the selfish and ungrateful Phipps, only to be saved by Mercy Larkin. He eventually returns to Australia, where he dies in old age, surrounded by his family. Years after his passing, a serialized account titled *The Death of Maggs* begins publication.

In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch serves as what Joseph A. Hynes terms a "Magwitch motif", a device shaping Pip's growth and self-awareness. In contrast, *Jack Maggs* dismantles the expected father-son dynamic. Phipps remains absent, haunting Maggs's dreams rather than offering closure, leaving no opportunity for the traditional psychological resolution through literature or myth. Instead, Carey directs attention to the brutalized body of Maggs, a relic of trauma, displayed in a hypnotic session at Oates's home. His back, covered in scars from years of brutal punishment, tells a story of suffering that Oates clinically dissects, treating it as raw material for literary exploitation rather than an account of genuine human pain. The mesmerism experiment is meant to exorcise Maggs's inner torment, yet it becomes an invasive act of control. Oates sees himself as a detective unraveling the convict's secrets, but Maggs resists being turned into a mere subject of study. Oates's approach lacks empathy, treating Maggs as

an object of analysis rather than a person. As the hypnotic sessions intensify, Maggs feels stripped of his autonomy and manipulated into revealing his past against his will. The novel critiques the idea that suffering can be neatly packaged into stories. Maggs's letters, written in invisible ink, remain unread by their intended recipient. Instead, it is Mercy Larkin who ensures their survival and eventual publication. The true audience of Maggs's story becomes the reader, invited to engage with his untold pain with care and skepticism.

Carey's reworking of Dickens is both homage and critique. He portrays Oates—a clear parallel to Dickens—as a morally ambiguous figure whose creative genius is fueled by an unethical appropriation of other people's suffering. The novel questions the literary marketplace's tendency to commodify pain. Oates's artistic process is likened to a pawnbroker's evaluation of goods; he sees a lucrative opportunity in Maggs's life story before he has even written a single word. Moreover, Carey explores the anxieties surrounding serialized fiction and the difficulty of crafting a satisfying ending. Oates grows increasingly desperate, turning to mesmerism as a substitute for genuine creative inspiration. His wife, Mary, is the first to sense his artistic decline, reminding him that he once created characters purely through imagination, without resorting to hypnotic manipulation. Historically, Dickens himself practiced hypnosis and attended séances, drawn to the possibilities of accessing hidden parts of the mind. In *Jack Maggs*, Carey exposes the dangers of this practice—how it can serve as a means of control rather than revelation. Oates believes he can step into Maggs's memories at will, but the deeper he digs, the more he loses his grip on reality. Maggs's past remains elusive, resisting easy categorization. Oates is initially thrilled by his ability to extract these hidden traumas, but he soon realizes that he has unleashed something uncontrollable. Language fails to fully capture Maggs's suffering, and Oates ultimately finds himself overwhelmed by the consequences of his own manipulations. By the novel's conclusion, Oates's life is in ruins. His obsession with uncovering Maggs's past leads to disastrous consequences: a man dies under his hypnotic influence, his illicit love affair results in an unwanted pregnancy and a fatal abortion, and worst of all, he can no longer stomach the thought of writing about crime. Overcome by despair, he burns his unfinished manuscript, along with the bloodstained linens from his lover's deathbed. Yet even as the flames consume his work, he plots his next novel, turning Maggs's story into fiction once more. In the end, Carey's novel challenges the ethics of storytelling itself. He exposes the fine line between artistic inspiration and exploitation, warning of the dangers of treating real pain as mere material for entertainment. Oates, like Dickens before him, is both a

creator and a thief—stealing stories, shaping them for mass consumption, and leaving behind a trail of destruction in his wake.

Carey takes great pleasure in challenging the legacy of the renowned Victorian novelist. In interviews, he openly discusses his rivalry with Dickens, explaining that as his interest in the convict character deepened, he began to imagine that a real-life inspiration for Magwitch had existed—one whose true story Dickens had deliberately concealed. This idea led Carey to craft a narrative about a writer who knows the truth but chooses not to reveal it. Through his novel, Carey uncovers the suppressed history of nineteenth-century Australia. A pivotal moment occurs when Oates hypnotizes Jack Maggs and instructs him to remove his shirt, revealing the scars left by his brutal punishment in the penal colony. His back, marked by torn and damaged skin, serves as a literal record of his past. By exposing these hidden wounds, Carey strips away the layers of Victorian decorum that once masked the brutal realities of British colonialism. However, the novel also cautions against the power of fiction to both reveal and obscure the truth. While Maggs clings to the illusion that London is his true home and Phipps his devoted son, he comes to realize that his idealized vision of England was shaped by fleeting glimpses rather than lived experiences—reinforced by authors who perpetuate such comforting yet misleading myths. During a brutal flogging at Moreton Bay, as flies swarm his bloodied back and his fingers are severed by the lash, his mind retreats into the imagined warmth of the home where he first opened his eyes. This home, located in Kensington, later comes to represent for him the England described in literature—a vision of Englishness that he attempts in vain to reconstruct. Upon receiving a conditional pardon, Maggs is granted a small plot of land, though it is unsuitable for farming. Undeterred, he makes bricks from the solid clay, producing materials as fine as those in London. His successful brickworks provide the wealth that allows him to build a mansion in Sydney and purchase Phipps's London home. However, Maggs's subconscious struggles with memories of his dead son and his suffering in the penal colony. These haunting recollections manifest as barriers—walls, moats, and bridges—that Oates must cross to access the "castle of the Criminal Mind". When Oates suggests that a brick has been removed from this psychological wall, revealing Maggs's deepest fears, the convict releases a long, harrowing wail. In this moment, the writer listening to him bows his head and shuts his eyes, recognizing the stark divide between the privileged colonizer and the suffering of the colonized. Ultimately, Maggs lets go of his dream of an English home and son. Abandoning his efforts to recreate the idealized London houses of his imagination, he sells his brickworks in Sydney and shifts his focus to a sawmill instead.

Jack Maggs serves as a counter-discursive response, engaging with a well-established literary work to expose and challenge the imperialist assumptions inherent in the original text. Described as a pure and perfect example of the writing-back paradigm, the novel draws extensively from both Charles Dickens's life and his novel *Great Expectations*. Given its deep thematic and historical engagement with Dickens, many scholars have examined *Jack Maggs* through a postcolonial lens. Within this body of scholarship, the novel's dialogue with its suppressed past is frequently analyzed through counter-discursive postcolonial frameworks, as if the book primarily functions as a literary manifestation of postcolonial theory, reaffirming retrospective critical perspectives. Kathleen J. Renk explores how *Jack Maggs*, as a "Post-Imperial Gothic novel," exposes the ways in which Victorian authors exploited marginalized perspectives to create literary works (62). Similarly, Peter Widdowson contends that counter-discursive novels, including *Jack Maggs*, typically maintain a distinct cultural and political agenda. The figures in the novel belong to literary spheres that are not only embedded within the fictional world of the novel but also parallel historical literary networks in England and Australia. This ongoing contest determines how literary figures position themselves within or outside national literary traditions. *Jack Maggs* explores this dual positioning of literary creators by highlighting Carey's interest in the tensions between national literature and global literary traditions. The characters in *Jack Maggs* exist within two interconnected literary realms: the imagined world within the novel and the historical literary landscape beyond it. The majority of the novel's events take place in 1837 London. The narrative reveals that by this year, Tobias Oates, a central figure in *Jack Maggs*, had already gained literary recognition with his debut novel, *Captain Crumley*. Over the course of the story, Oates embarks on writing his next book, also titled *Jack Maggs*, which he envisions as an extraordinary literary achievement; as Carey describes, "in all of English literature there was nothing like the dark journey he now planned to take inside the Criminal Mind" (214). These literary parallels encourage the reader to anticipate a trajectory for Oates akin to that of Dickens—a level of fame and literary significance that transcends time and cultural boundaries. By embedding a fictionalized counterpart to Dickens in the novel, *Jack Maggs* places its protagonist in both a precarious and empowering position. This dynamic speaks to both the dominance of the established English literary canon and the evolving recognition of Australian literature. The novel underscores this relationship in its concluding scene, set in 1861, within the archives of the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Here, Oates's completed novel—now titled *Death of Maggs*—rests alongside Maggs's letters to Henry Phipps. The chronological gap between the novel's opening and its final

moments mirrors the growth of Australian literature, both in terms of thematic focus and available resources.

Similarly, Emma Tennant explores the blurred boundary between Hardy's life and his fiction, arguing that his personal experiences shaped the creation of Tess. While different scholars have proposed various real-life inspirations for the character, Tennant highlights Augusta Way, a milkmaid Hardy encountered in 1888. She argues that Hardy's fascination with Augusta stemmed from her humble position within a grand estate—something that resonated with his own family's decline from imagined aristocratic roots. Through Augusta, Hardy crafted Tess, and in doing so, Tennant suggests, he became infatuated with his own creation. The fictional Tess, for him, was more compelling than any real woman, embodying the idealized beauty he longed for. This desire for an unattainable figure did not remain fixed; instead, it transferred to Augusta's daughter, Gertrude Bugler, an actress who later portrayed Tess on stage. Tennant highlights an incident in which Hardy symbolically marries Gertrude during a performance by placing a forgotten wedding ring on her finger, reinforcing the idea that Hardy's creative passion was deeply intertwined with his personal desires. His ongoing search for inspiration, Tennant argues, carried an almost vampiric quality, consuming and discarding muses to fuel his imagination. Tennant further complicates this analysis by suggesting that Hardy's portrayal of Tess's execution serves as both an act of destruction and an expression of love. Hardy's well-documented interest in public executions, particularly those of women, informs this reading. Tennant suggests that for Hardy, Tess's death is both a form of punishment and a means of preserving her idealized image. The final words Tess speaks to Angel before her arrest-"Now I shall not live for you to despise me"-can be seen as directed not only at her husband but also at Hardy himself. In this view, Hardy's creative energy flourished in response to loss, as evidenced by the outpouring of poetry following his wife Emma's death. The narrator of Tennant's novel aligns with Florence Hardy, who, while alive, could never inspire the same depth of feeling. In this way, Tennant argues that for Hardy, love in its purest form can only exist when death removes the imperfections of reality.

Beyond direct critiques of Hardy's treatment of women, Tennant's novel *Tess* also reinterprets his work through a modern lens. Although her story unfolds in the 1950s and 1960s, the protagonist's experiences mirror those of Hardy's Tess, demonstrating that societal attitudes toward female sexuality remain largely unchanged despite the supposed liberation of women. The protagonist, like Tess, becomes pregnant at a young age, and this event fractures her relationship with her true love, a musician named Gabriel. However, in Tennant's version, it is

not the loss of virginity that brings about her downfall but rather the presence of her illegitimate child. Another tragic parallel emerges in the character of Retty Priddle, who, as in Hardy's novel, drowns herself in despair over unrequited love. The narrative continually foreshadows its grim resolution, creating a sense of fatalism akin to that in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. However, Tennant introduces a dramatic deviation from Hardy's plot. While readers assume that Tess's seducer is Alec, the true perpetrator is revealed to be her own father. The story, therefore, shifts from one of seduction and social disgrace to one of incest and profound betrayal. This horrifying revelation casts the novel's depiction of revenge in a new light: rather than punishing Alec, Tess and her mother conspire to murder her father. Liza Lu, who in Hardy's novel is a figure of innocence, is recast as complicit in the cycle of abuse, failing to protect Tess's child from further harm. Through this shift, Tennant moves beyond the traditional nineteenth-century narrative of fallen women, confronting an even darker reality of sexual violence within families. This reinterpretation extends to Tennant's critique of Hardy himself. She draws a parallel between Hardy, as the creator of Tess, and the abusive father in her novel. His relentless control over his character mirrors the oppressive authority of her father, making Hardy's relationship with his own literary creation deeply troubling. Critics have long noted the novel's preoccupation with themes of dominance and submission, and Tennant takes this further by equating Hardy's artistic process with an act of violation. Just as her modern Tess suffers at the hands of her father, Hardy's real-life muses were subjected to a different form of exploitation, transformed into his fictional fantasies.

Despite the novel's strong criticism of Hardy, Tennant's argument is not without contradictions. On one hand, she condemns Hardy for reinforcing a narrative of female suffering as inevitable, yet on the other, her own retelling suggests that this cycle is unbreakable. This aligns with early feminist critiques of Hardy, which argue that while he may expose the injustices faced by women, he also perpetuates their victimization by repeatedly depicting their suffering. Hardy, in Tennant's view, is not merely an observer of oppression but an active participant in its perpetuation. However, this overlooks the nature of Hardy's literary style. As a realist writer, his novel presents itself as a truthful depiction of society, not necessarily an endorsement of its injustices. It remains open to interpretation whether Hardy's portrayal of Tess is a condemnation of her fate or an implicit acceptance of the status quo. Tennant's own narrator is similarly constrained by the need to retell a familiar tale. The novel functions as a warning passed down through generations, with Liza Lu recounting Tess's story to her granddaughter in the hope that future women can escape the same fate. Unlike Tennant's earlier work, which

approached feminist themes with humor, this novel is marked by a more somber tone. The repetition of events risks turning the narrative into an overtly didactic critique rather than a nuanced exploration of history's patterns. However, Tennant employs a postmodern approach, blurring the lines between history, biography, and fiction. By weaving together different forms of storytelling, she invites readers to question the way narratives—both literary and historical—are constructed and whose voices they privilege. Tennant's novel aligns with feminist readings of Hardy's work that seek to untangle the complexities of his portrayal of women. Her retelling challenges readers to reconsider Hardy's legacy—not only in terms of his characters but also in his treatment of the real women who inspired them. By drawing attention to the connections between art and life, Tennant suggests that the act of storytelling itself can either reinforce oppression or serve as an act of resistance. In rewriting Tess's story, she attempts to break the cycle of suffering and, in doing so, reclaims a voice for the women silenced by both history and fiction.

Furthermore, Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London*, published in 1989, emerged against the backdrop of a decade of Margaret Thatcher's leadership, during which Thatcherism had reshaped British society. The Conservative government had steered the nation away from the ideals of "one-nation" Toryism toward an increasingly fractured social and economic landscape. In Tennant's novel (a retelling of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), this same theme of deep-seated social division manifests through the characters of Eliza and Mrs. Hyde. The narrator explicitly notes that these two women symbolize the broader societal rifts afflicting Britain. The economic disparities reinforced by Thatcher's policies were particularly severe. Lynne Segal underscores the particularly harsh impact of Thatcherite policies on working-class women. While Thatcherism paid lip service to the traditional family structure and women's role within it, government policies actively devalued the unpaid labor of women, especially in caregiving roles, while simultaneously dismantling welfare systems that many relied upon. Tennant contrasts this economic reality through her two main characters. Mrs. Hyde embodies the lowest tier of poverty, wholly dependent on a welfare system that was rapidly eroding. Meanwhile, Eliza represents another facet of Thatcher-era economics—one rooted in the ethos of self-sufficiency and private enterprise. Well-educated and ambitious, she seems poised for success, buoyed by her relationship with the wealthy Sir James. His substantial income allows her to enroll her children in an expensive private nursery, and she contemplates purchasing her own home. However, her financial security is illusory. When her landlord—a former rock star—demands steep contributions for building renovations, her financial stability is shaken.

The collapse of her relationship with Sir James and the closure of the gallery she depends on expose her vulnerability within an economy shaped by deregulation, job insecurity, and the dominance of male economic power. Tennant weaves these economic struggles into a larger tapestry of contemporary social and cultural references, lending her novel a historically grounded and overtly political dimension. While Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*—the Victorian novel that inspired Tennant's work—touches on issues such as criminal behavior, medical advancements, and psychological repression, it largely avoids detailed depictions of contemporary society. Stevenson's setting, though anchored in London, remains largely impressionistic, with only brief references to Soho or Scotland Yard. Tennant, by contrast, densely layers her novel with specific markers of the late twentieth century, from financial trends and environmental investments to political shifts. Tennant's acute awareness of the political and cultural shifts of her time allows her to craft a novel that not only reinterprets Stevenson's classic but also serves as a commentary on the defining social transformations of the Thatcherite era.

Tennant begins her novel *Tess* with a quote from Marguerite Yourcenar's *Two Lives and a Dream* (1982), which emphasizes the recurring nature of history: "Everything has already been experienced by those who have passed, whose presence we still carry within us, just as we also bear within us the lives of those who will come after us." In *Tess*, set in the 1950s and 60s, Tess and her sister Liza-Lu's mother (Mary Hewitt) belongs to a long line of "Ruined Maids," a cycle that she too is now a part of, passing the legacy onto her own daughter. Throughout the story, Tess is painfully aware that she has become the next in a long succession of women marked by betrayal, suffering, and exploitation. This endless cycle tragically continues with the abuse of Tess's daughter, Mary, who, it is feared, will follow in her mother's footsteps and suffer the same fate. The pattern of victimized young women appears repeatedly in nineteenth-century literature. These girls, usually around sixteen, either have no parents or ones who neglect them, and they end up seeking work outside the home, where they fall prey to older men of higher social or economic status, who exploit them both sexually and economically. In Hardy's *Tess*, for instance, Tess is sixteen, and while the word "seduction" is used to describe her assault, it could easily be considered rape by modern legal standards. These stories reflect the harsh realities faced by young women in a society that both condoned and neglected their exploitation.

The neo-Victorian genre has come to represent a fascinating literary endeavor that blends historical recollection with postmodern critical interrogation. The intersection of nostalgia and

subversion in these narratives allows authors to navigate the paradoxical relationship between the past and the present. In our analysis of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* and Emma Tennant's *Tess*, we propose that nostalgia in these works functions in a dual capacity: both restorative and reflective. This dynamic, which we have coined as "**neo-nostalgia**", offers a way to engage with the Victorian past that is neither a mere replication nor a detached critique, but rather a nuanced negotiation between memory, temporality, and contemporary discourse. The concept of nostalgia has been a subject of intense scholarly debate, particularly in relation to historical fiction. Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is particularly useful in understanding the mechanisms of recollection in neo-Victorian fiction. Restorative nostalgia, according to Boym, seeks to reconstruct the past in an idealized manner, whereas reflective nostalgia acknowledges the impossibility of true return and instead engages with the past in a self-aware, critical fashion. Neo-Victorian fiction complicates this binary by incorporating elements of both, thus fostering what we call **"neo-nostalgia"—**a term that encapsulates the simultaneous homage to and interrogation of the Victorian era.

In *Jack Maggs*, Carey reimagines Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* through the eyes of its forgotten and criminalized character, Magwitch, who is refigured as the eponymous Jack Maggs. This shift in perspective challenges the traditional narratives of criminality, social mobility, and colonialism that shaped Victorian literature. By revisiting the past through Maggs's experiences, Carey enacts a form of **neo-nostalgia** that does not simply recreate the Victorian world but interrogates its ideological constructs. The novel's engagement with nostalgia is evident in its treatment of memory and historical consciousness. Maggs's return to England is not merely a personal quest; it is emblematic of a broader historical return that exposes the fractures within the Victorian imperialist project. Carey's narrative structure further underscores the complexities of **neo-nostalgia**. While the novel invokes Dickensian tropes, it does not replicate them uncritically. Instead, it highlights the constructed nature of historical memory. The character of Tobias Oates, a stand-in for Dickens himself, serves as a metatextual commentary on the act of storytelling. Oates's fascination with Maggs's past reflects the Victorian penchant for sensationalist storytelling, but his exploitative tendencies also critique the ethical implications of such narratives. Thus, the novel's engagement with nostalgia is deeply interrogative—this form of **neo-nostalgia** recognizes its own artifice and questions the moral frameworks that underpin historical recollection. Similarly, *Tess*, a modern reworking of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, engages with the Victorian past in a manner that is both reverential and revisionist. Tennant's adaptation brings to the fore the gendered

dimensions of nostalgia, particularly in its depiction of female agency and historical oppression. The novel does not simply romanticize Hardy's Tess but rather recontextualizes her struggles within a contemporary feminist framework. This interplay between past and present exemplifies **neo-nostalgia's** dual function: it acknowledges the enduring relevance of the Victorian era while subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

Henri Bergson's theories on memory provide a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. Bergson posits that memory is not a mere regression to the past but a progression from the past to the present (269). This implies that our recollections are not passive reproductions of prior experiences, but active reconstructions shaped by our current perceptions, emotions, and intellectual frameworks. This concept challenges traditional notions of nostalgia, which often assume a longing for an immutable and idealized past. Instead, Bergson suggests that memory operates through a process of constant reinterpretation, where past experiences are filtered through the lens of present concerns, desires, and understandings. In the context of neo-Victorian fiction, this Bergsonian approach to memory helps illuminate how the Victorian past is not simply revived but actively reshaped to engage with contemporary discourses. In *Jack Maggs*, for instance, Carey does not merely recreate Dickens's Victorian London; he reconstructs it through a modern, critical perspective that interrogates issues of class, criminality, and imperialism. Maggs's memories of his exile and suffering are not presented as static recollections but as evolving narratives that gain new meaning as he attempts to navigate his return to England. Similarly, in *Tess*, Tennant's reinterpretation of Hardy's protagonist reflects a progressive movement from past to present, where the struggles of Tess are reframed through contemporary feminist perspectives. This aligns with Bergson's view that memory is a living, fluid entity that is constantly interacting with the present, rather than a fixed repository of historical facts. Furthermore, Bergson's idea of "duration"—the continuous flow of time in which past and present are inseparable—offers another dimension to understanding **neo-nostalgia**. In both *Jack Maggs* and *Tess*, the past is not presented as a distinct, distant realm but as an active force that permeates the present. The characters' struggles are informed by historical realities, yet their narratives unfold with an awareness that the past itself is subject to reinterpretation. This interplay between past and present exemplifies the transformative power of **neo-nostalgia**, demonstrating that engagement with history is not about passive longing but about critical dialogue and reconfiguration. Bergson's notions have been central to constructing our idea of **neo-nostalgia**, as it suggests that our engagement with history is always mediated by contemporary concerns. In *Tess*, this is evident in the way

Tennant revises Hardy's narrative to highlight the constructedness of gender roles and social expectations. By doing so, she not only resurrects the Victorian past but also reshapes it to align with modern sensibilities.

The interplay between the marginal and the dominant in both novels further underscores the elasticity of memory. In *Jack Maggs*, the subaltern perspective of Maggs disrupts the dominant Victorian narrative of respectability and class mobility. His presence in London unsettles the established social order, forcing characters—and readers—to confront the hidden underbelly of Victorian progress. Similarly, in *Tess*, the eponymous character's fate is reframed to challenge the deterministic narratives that governed female sexuality and morality in Hardy's time. These textual interventions serve as a critique of the nostalgic tendency to idealize the past while simultaneously demonstrating the power of **neo-nostalgia** to offer alternative readings of history. The question of historical authenticity is central to the neo-Victorian project. As Fredric Jameson argues, postmodernism often exhibits an "omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions" (286). However, the **neo-nostalgic** approach in *Jack Maggs* and *Tess* resists this superficial engagement with history. Instead of merely resurrecting Victorian aesthetics, these novels use the past as a lens through which to examine contemporary issues. This is particularly evident in their treatment of social justice, as both works highlight the historical roots of modern inequalities. Furthermore, the concept of "nostalgic dissidence" as described by Boym (354) is crucial to understanding the subversive potential of neo-nostalgia. By engaging with the past in a manner that is both affectionate and critical, *Jack Maggs* and *Tess* exemplify a form of nostalgia that is not escapist but transformative. This dissident nostalgia functions as a "poison and a cure"—it acknowledges the allure of the past while simultaneously dismantling its oppressive structures (Boym 354). In this sense, **neo-nostalgia** becomes a tool for historical revision, allowing contemporary readers to engage with the Victorian era in a way that is both emotionally resonant and intellectually rigorous.

To further explore these concepts, it is important to consider how Victorian literary themes have been reimagined in contemporary neo-Victorian texts beyond *Jack Maggs* and *Tess*. Works such as Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* offer additional insights into the ways neo-Victorian fiction negotiates the tension between homage and critique. In *Fingersmith*, Waters revisits the Victorian sensation novel through a queer lens, subverting traditional gender roles and narrative expectations. Similarly, *The Crimson Petal and the White* reexamines the position of women in Victorian society, using

a contemporary narrative voice to expose the limitations imposed on female agency. The socio-political context in which these novels emerge also plays a crucial role in shaping their engagement with nostalgia. The resurgence of interest in the Victorian era can be linked to broader cultural anxieties about identity, heritage, and modernity. As societies grapple with issues of inequality, empire, and gender politics, neo-Victorian fiction provides a space to revisit these historical concerns through a critical, self-reflexive lens. By employing **neo-nostalgia**, these texts allow for a reexamination of history that is neither wholly condemning nor uncritically celebratory, but rather dynamically engaged with the complexities of the past.

In conclusion, the nostalgic recollection of the Victorian era in *Jack Maggs* and *Tess* is both restorative and reflective. Through the lens of **neo-nostalgia**, these novels engage with the past in a manner that is neither purely sentimental nor wholly deconstructive. By drawing on Bergson's theories of memory and Boym's notion of nostalgic dissidence, we see that neo-Victorian fiction operates within a temporal dialectic that bridges the Victorian and the neo-Victorian. This interplay allows for a deeper exploration of historical consciousness, demonstrating that nostalgia and critical inquiry are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary forces in the ongoing dialogue between past and present, so that we gain a fuller understanding of how literature continues to reimagine, revise, and challenge our perceptions of history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we reaffirm that neo-Victorian fiction is far from being merely an exercise in pastiche or an escapist indulgence in 'nostalgic' imagery. Rather, it is a dynamic and multifaceted literary phenomenon that actively interrogates the very nature of historical authenticity, memory, and cultural discourse. The study of neo-Victorian novels reveals a sustained engagement with the past that is not bound by Jamesonian notions of nostalgia as a mere pastiche but rather represents a self-aware critique of both the Victorian era and the contemporary moment that seeks to appropriate it. These novels shape and influence our awareness of history, using their depictions of the Victorian era to highlight and reinforce the significance of remembering the past as an essential part of human existence. Throughout this thesis, we have explored the interwoven relationships between history, fiction, and memory in analyzing the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism. This genre has always functioned as both a complement and a challenge to official history, questioning the notions of objectivity and factual representation. By positioning these novels within their literary tradition, it has been demonstrated how contemporary interpretations of the Victorian period expand upon established theoretical perspectives on historical fiction, perspectives that remain influential today.

The novels examined in the thesis complicate Linda Hutcheon's distinction between nostalgic restoration and critical reflection. While their reimagining of the Victorian era is deeply rooted in nostalgia, this does not diminish their ability to engage critically with the past. In fact, countering Christian Gutleben's claim that nostalgia and subversion are mutually exclusive, these novels suggest that nostalgia can, paradoxically, serve as a vehicle for subversive historical inquiry. The urge to dismiss nostalgia as merely reactionary and politically problematic overlooks the postmodern complexities of history. This perspective assumes the existence of a definitive historical reality that nostalgia either distorts or erases. In these novels, the act of recalling and depicting the Victorians does not seek to revive the past as an objective truth. Instead, the Victorian era appears as a spectral presence—elusive, ever-shifting, and insubstantial. History in these texts is both omnipresent and elusive, existing nowhere and everywhere at once. The ghostly presence of the past signifies absence; it lacks independent existence and derives meaning only through our present interpretations. In fact, the ghostly figure functions as a central metaphor in these narratives, symbolizing both the persistence of history and our evolving relationship with it. Unlike traditional ghost stories, where spirits reach out to haunt the living, these texts suggest that it is we who summon the ghosts of the

past. Our need to remember fuels the creation of both original Victorian texts and modern fictional recreations of the period. By tracing how these novels employ spectral imagery, we delve into the role of ghostliness in neo-Victorian fiction. In Victorian fiction, the supernatural often provided a means to address taboo subjects—does it still serve this function in modern reinterpretations of the era? In an era where historical narratives are both widely produced and widely questioned, it is not just history itself that takes on a ghostly form. Rather, the ongoing tension between fascination with and scepticism toward history raises a larger question about what exactly qualifies as history.

Historical fiction can be seen as one of the many competing interpretations that, according to Hayden White, collectively construct intellectually rigorous accounts of the past. White's analysis of narrative structures in traditional histories highlights how the way an event is told—whether as tragedy, comedy, or epic—shapes its meaning. He also notes that while certain genres are conventionally deemed more appropriate for serious historical subjects, alternative approaches can be equally effective. White's argument, while primarily about academic history, also underscores the significance of historical fiction and even counterfactual histories in shaping meaningful narratives of the past. The resurgence of Victorian-era fiction over the past few decades, when considered alongside interpretations from historians, politicians, and cultural critics, constructs a rich, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory vision of the period. These varied accounts challenge and revise one another, ensuring that our understanding of the Victorian era remains fluid and ever-evolving. Like a palimpsest, history is continually rewritten, its meaning never fixed. As Graham Swift's *Waterland* suggests, the process of revisiting and reconstructing the past ensures that our collective memory of history is constantly resurfaced and reexamined. These novels remind us that all historical representations—whether fictional or scholarly—are ultimately constructed narratives rather than transparent reflections of reality. Thus, the question of what constitutes history remains unresolved. Because contemporary thought has questioned the reliability of narrative as a tool for representing historical reality, the distinction between history and fiction has become increasingly blurred. In some ways, this recalls the eighteenth-century perspective, when both history and fiction were regarded as rhetorical forms used to make sense of the past. And in a time when all historical and fictional narratives are viewed with ideological suspicion, the actual question is whether anything can even qualify as history. As Fredric Jameson argues, does contemporary culture still possess the ability to think historically at all? Instead of serving as competing paths to uncover historical truth, both history and fiction now engage with the

broader challenge of how the past can be meaningfully constructed in an era that has problematized the very concept of historical reference.

Neo-Victorian fiction—exemplified by the works of Swift, Byatt, Waters, Carey, and Tennant—both reflects and fuels the enduring cultural preoccupation with historical memory. These novels acknowledge that a definitive, comprehensive account of the past is unattainable and even undesirable. Rather than striving for historical accuracy, they shift the focus toward the ongoing process of remembering. In doing so, they contribute to what Jerome de Groot terms the 'historical imaginary'—a space where history is creatively reconstructed in ways that engage with contemporary cultural and social dynamics. Through their imaginative engagement with the Victorian past, these novels reaffirm the literary text's power as a medium of remembrance. By reimagining the Victorian era, these novels seek to incorporate it into our shared cultural memory. They explore both the continuities and discontinuities between the nineteenth century and our present moment, reinforcing the idea that historical recollection is as much about the meanings we ascribe to the past as it is about the past itself. Returning to Victorian-era discourses on history, memory, and loss, these novels frame historical inquiry as an act of desire—an acknowledgment of the persistent need to remember. The sheer abundance of contemporary historical fiction attests to this enduring desire, highlighting the crucial role literature plays in shaping our understanding of the past.

The findings of this thesis challenge the traditional perception of neo-Victorian fiction as a conservative replication of the past and instead position it as a space where history and fiction intermingle in ways that are both subversive and transformative. A.S. Byatt's works, as analyzed in the first chapter, reveal the inherent unreliability of language and history by deploying metafiction as a means to problematize any claims to objective historical truth. Through an extensive reading of *Possession: A Romance* and *Angels and Insects*, this study has demonstrated that Byatt's fiction deconstructs the assumed hierarchy between creative and critical interpretation, ultimately exposing the constructed nature of both. This aspect of neo-Victorian fiction aligns with postmodernist discourses that question the stability of historical narratives and reaffirm the significance of narrative subjectivity in the representation of the past. Such a position leads to the emergence of what we have called a "**meta-metafiction**", that is, the kind of metafiction which is also untethered from its very author.

In the second chapter, our examination of Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* illustrates how the neo-Victorian sensation novel becomes a vehicle for subverting traditional

images of the heteronormative family unit and, more broadly, the rigid moral structures associated with the Victorian era. Waters' engagement with the past is deeply political, as her fiction revisits Victorian conventions to challenge and destabilize Thatcherite-era ideologies regarding gender and sexuality. By offering a space for marginalized voices and alternative histories, Waters' novels underscore the ability of neo-Victorian fiction to critique both the historical period it recreates and the contemporary society that seeks to claim its legacy. In this regard, neo-Victorian fiction operates as a site of resistance that unearths suppressed narratives and expands the historical imagination beyond dominant discourses.

The third chapter's discussion of Graham Swift's *Ever After* further solidifies the thesis' argument that neo-Victorian fiction does not merely reproduce the Victorian past but rather engages with it in ways that reflect contemporary anxieties. In contrast to what has been described as Victorian Darwinian anxiety, Swift's protagonist, Bill Unwin, experiences a postmodern form of existential dread that arises from his fraught encounters with Victorian 'Others.' Utilizing Levinasian philosophy, this study has identified how neo-Victorian fiction foregrounds the ethical and philosophical challenges of historical engagement. Swift's work, like many others within the neo-Victorian genre, reveals a preoccupation with the instability of historical meaning and the consequences of attempting to fix the past in definitive terms.

The final chapter's examination of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* and Emma Tennant's *Tess* brings to light the complex interplay between nostalgia and revisionism in neo-Victorian fiction. This thesis has argued that the nostalgic recollection of the Victorian past in these novels is neither purely restorative nor purely reflective but instead operates as a dialectical movement between the two. By coining the term "**neo-nostalgia**", this research has sought to capture the paradoxical nature of neo-Victorian engagement with history—one that both reveres and subverts the past simultaneously. In this process, the Victorian era is reimagined through the lens of twenty-first-century concerns, reinforcing the idea that the past remains in constant dialogue with the present.

A key insight of this thesis is that neo-Victorian fiction challenges and ultimately redefines the concept of historical authenticity. By deliberately embracing anachronisms, intertextual play, and metafictional strategies, these novels refuse to offer a seamless or linear reconstruction of the past. Instead, they expose the artificiality of historical narratives and compel readers to interrogate the mechanisms through which history is constructed, remembered, and appropriated. In doing so, neo-Victorian fiction problematizes the very notion of 'truth' in

historical representation, thereby aligning itself with broader postmodern critiques of historiography. Moreover, this study has sought to contribute to ongoing academic debates about the role of nostalgia in neo-Victorian fiction. While nostalgia has often been dismissed as a regressive or conservative impulse, this thesis argues for a more nuanced understanding of its function in historical fiction. Rather than viewing nostalgia as a mere longing for an irretrievable past, we propose that it can serve as a critical lens through which contemporary concerns are refracted. The novels analyzed in this thesis illustrate that nostalgia, when critically engaged, can facilitate a deeper interrogation of historical injustices and unresolved traumas, rather than merely idealizing or mythologizing the past.

While we have tried to contribute to the study of neo-Victorian fiction, it is important to acknowledge this thesis' limitations and the scope for future research in this field. Our study has primarily focused on British and Australian authors, thereby excluding a broader international perspective on neo-Victorianism. Future research could explore how neo-Victorian themes manifest in the works of non-UK authors, particularly in postcolonial contexts where the Victorian past has left a lasting and complex legacy. Additionally, while this thesis has concentrated on late twentieth-century novels (more precisely the last two decades of the previous century), there is ample scope for examining more recent works that continue to expand and redefine the subgenre in the twenty-first century. Another potential avenue for further study lies in the exploration of neo-Victorianism beyond literature. As contemporary culture continues to engage with the Victorian past through television series, films, visual arts, and even digital media, it would be valuable to analyze how these different forms of representation contribute to the ongoing reimagining of the Victorian era. The proliferation of neo-Victorian aesthetics in popular culture suggests that the impulse to revisit and reframe the nineteenth century remains strong, offering fresh opportunities for interdisciplinary research.

In conclusion, this thesis has sought to illuminate the multifaceted nature of neo-Victorian fiction and its role in reshaping our understanding of the Victorian past. Far from being a passive replication of historical narratives, neo-Victorian novels serve as critical interventions that challenge, complicate, and redefine the past in light of contemporary concerns. Through metafictional strategies, subversive rewritings, and critically engaged nostalgia, these novels disrupt conventional historiography and invite readers to reconsider the ways in which history, memory, and fiction intersect. As the field of neo-Victorian studies continues to evolve, it remains imperative to explore how these engagements with the past influence our present and shape our collective imagination for the future.

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