

Abstract

This essay explores the status of women and their pursuit of freedom from the control of men in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Faber's story is a part of the neo-Victorian genre, which is discussed in some detail in chapter two. Neo-Victorian writers, unlike their predecessors of the nineteenth century, are free to explore explicit subjects, such as prostitution, without holding back which is exactly what Faber does in his novel. He also brings the lives of women into the spotlight. The neo-Victorian element of *The Crimson Petal and the White* is obvious in his portrayal of Victorian women.

To ensure a deeper understanding of the Victorian world as created by Faber, women's status in nineteenth century England is also touched upon. Furthermore, the idea of the spheres, which separates the genders into the domestic sphere and the public sphere, as well as their education and mental abilities, is examined, which highlights the patriarchal control over women. The discussion on Victorian women ends with a brief examination of the emerging fight for equality which ties in with the fate of Faber's female characters.

The subject of this essay is the female characters of *The Crimson Petal and the White*: Sugar, Agnes and Sophie, and their positions within the male-dominated society of Victorian London. The part of the essay which focuses on the female characters is divided into three chapters, and each highlights aspects the lives of Sugar, Agnes and Sophie and how they escaped Faber's patriarchal society. The essay discusses how Sugar, the novel's female protagonist, is first introduced as a prostitute that by the end of the novel ends up being a feminist heroine and the saviour of both Agnes and Sophie. The fate of Sophie is also discussed, which further accentuates Sugar's feminist legacy.

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1. Introduction

The Victorian era has been a popular topic in both films and literature for a long time. Modern audiences are probably more familiar with the world of the Victorians than with any other period in history. Because of this interest, many authors of the last few decades have turned to the Victorians for inspiration and setting yet have kept the themes of their novels entirely modern at the same time. This genre, popularly known as neo-Victorianism, is still relatively new within literary studies but is steadily gaining ground.

Neo-Victorian novels rewrite original Victorian literature as postmodern stories set in the nineteenth century (Kirchknopf 54). Whilst writers of the time were restricted by society's demure rules, writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are free to explore more explicit topics, such as sexuality and child abuse. Many neo-Victorian novels tend to focus on the people found on the sidelines of Victorian society, which results in a number of novels on women (Bowler and Cox 5), bringing them into the spotlight, and giving them a much clearer voice than the Victorians would have ever allowed.

Nineteenth century women were conditioned from an early age to be submissive to men. The idea of the spheres further established a separation of the genders; women were a part of the domestic sphere whilst the men belonged to the public sphere. The domestic sphere reinforced the role of women as homemakers and the ones who would take care of the house and family, and according to men of the time, as a part of the domestic sphere, women did not have great need for education. In fact, it was thought that they did not have much capacity for serious studies, with their smaller brain and having to use up their energy for the likes of menstruation or child bearing (Paxman 226). The education allotted to women was largely restricted to subjects that would help them reach their goal of finding a suitable husband. The ideal Victorian woman was thus a mother and a wife who could manage the house whilst the husband went out to work (Purvis 3).

Another gender related division, this time exclusively between the female gender itself, is the dichotomy of the angel and the monster within the Victorian woman. As per the male dominated society, women were either an ideal angel in the house or a monstrous, hysterical woman with a mind of her own (Baird 1).

The frustrations with the oppressing rules of society began to show as women started to fight for their rights. Charlotte Brontë, in the voice of her heroine Jane Eyre, wrote:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their gender. (Brontë 129-130)

This patriarchal attitude did not stop women from fighting for their rights, however, as women's rights increased and the so-called New Woman emerged during the Victorian *fin de siècle*. The end of the nineteenth century brought in monumental changes regarding the role of women which culminated in the figure of the New Woman. Yet the patriarchal society of the Victorian era still had a strong hold over women, with *Punch* magazine presenting the New Woman as "an embittered, over-educated spinster perpetually stuck on the shelf" (Buzwell).

The plight of Victorian women is a running theme in Michel Faber's 2002 neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Sugar, the novel's female protagonist and a neo-Victorian heroine, is a born and bred London prostitute with lofty ideas of her own future as a novelist, who fights her way out of the slums by manipulating her client, William Rackham. Her intelligence is on par with men, she understands the inequality of women, and she fights her way up the social ladder at a time when such a thing was barely heard of. Eventually, Sugar becomes the governess to William's daughter Sophie, which allows her to break away from her own mother's legacy by taking care of Sophie in a way Sugar herself was never taken care of. In addition to becoming a changing influence in Sophie's life, Sugar helps William's wife Agnes to avoid a horrible fate as a committed asylum patient. To both Sophie and Agnes, as well as herself, Sugar is a saviour who guides them onto a path free from the rule of men. Thus, with his inherently neo-Victorian novel, Michel Faber broaches the subject of the lives of women in the nineteenth century, exploring both their childhoods and adulthoods. Through the plight of the characters of Sugar, Agnes, and Sophie, Faber highlights women's imprisonment by the patriarchal rules of Victorian society and explores their pursuit of freedom.

2. *The Crimson Petal and the White* and the Neo-Victorian Novel

The Victorian period, although long since passed, is kept alive in modern culture with a myriad of novels still being read and adapted into films. Whereas the modernists of the early twentieth century disliked and mocked their predecessors, including figures like Ezra Pound commenting that “For most of us, the odour of defunct Victoriana is so unpleasant and the personal benefits to be derived from a study of the period so small that we are content to leave the past where we find it” (Enciu 193), people of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries are highly interested and influenced by the Victorians. A trend beginning in the 1960s shows the production of a number of novels critically engaging with the Victorian era (Kirchknopf 53). Many writers have set their novels in the nineteenth century, bringing the Victorian age to life yet again and creating a new postmodern literary genre. These works have been given numerous different names, ranging from historiographic to pseudo-Victorianism, but the most recent term, coined in 2007, and most widely used, however, is neo-Victorianism (Enciu 193).

The neo-Victorian novel takes inspiration from nineteenth-century fiction without being an imitation of the Victorian literary tradition, and anchors itself in the time it was written, so that the readers are aware of their own time whilst diving into the Victorian era. Despite not being a mere imitation of Victorian novels, neo-Victorian fiction borrows quite a few elements from its predecessor. According to Kirchknopf, the structure of the neo-Victorian novel correlates with the triple decker of the nineteenth century. Averaging at 500 pages, they are divided into chapters or books, with some having chapter summaries or epigraphs (Kirchknopf 54). The narrative design is kept in line with nineteenth-century novels, by using a narrator in the first person or an omniscient third-person narrative perspective. The popular genres of Victorian literature are rediscovered within the neo-Victorian tradition, bringing back the social, industrial and sensation novels of the nineteenth century (Kirchknopf 54). The themes explored in these novels are typical of original Victorian novels, evoking controversies “such as the definition and status of science, religion, morals, nationhood, and identity, and the (re)evaluations of the aims and scope of cultural discourses and products” (Kirchknopf 54). The cultural discourses Kirchknopf highlights are literary, political, and social histories, something that is still prevalent in the cultural thought of the twenty-first century (Kirchknopf 54). By setting the novels in the Victorian age, writers are able to discuss social problems of the nineteenth century whilst examining modern themes such as sexuality, material culture, and bad parenting, as well as

focusing on the underworlds of Victorian society (Enciu 194). These genres and themes bring up many social issues relevant to the nineteenth century and are given a new focus within both neo-Victorian literature and the study of it.

Although neo-Victorian literature has been gaining ground as a separate genre since the 1960s, neo-Victorian studies are relatively new (Bowler and Cox 5, 6, 13). A popular discussion within the subject is on gender criticism and feminism. Many writers within the genre, most prominently Sarah Waters, bring women from their Victorian roles on the sidelines into the spotlight of the postmodern woman (Bowler and Cox 5). By doing so, these writers are bringing twentieth and twenty-first century thinking back to the Victorian era. As Gutleben writes: “the fascination with Victorianism seems inevitably to come with a temptation to denounce the injustice towards some of its ill-used or forgotten representatives such as women, the lower classes or homosexuals” (cited by Bowler and Cox 5). By writing about marginalized groups in Victorian society, the neo-Victorian writer calls attention to social injustices relevant to their readers.

Another part of neo-Victorian fiction, correlating with the aforementioned topic, is that of historical trauma. The nineteenth century was a time filled with trauma. As Kohlke writes: “[T]he period is configured as a temporal convergence of multiple historical traumas [...] These include both the pervasive traumas of social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation, and the more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest, international conflicts, and trade wars that punctuated the nineteenth century” (cited by Bowler and Cox 11). The traumas Kohlke mentions not only show the dark sides of the nineteenth century but are also mirrored in the social problems of the current era (Bowler and Cox 11). By taking on these subjects, neo-Victorian writers actively raise awareness of many of the problems affecting their readers, as well as making Victorian history more accessible, topical, and appealing to modern people (Kohlke 9, 11). Since today’s society does not have the social boundaries of the Victorian era, many neo-Victorian writers “demonstrate[] a prurient penchant for revelling in indecency and salaciousness, as well as exposing past iniquities” (Kohlke 5), a practice that would have never been accepted during the nineteenth century.

In 2002, Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* was published. This novel firmly belongs in the neo-Victorian literary genre. It has been likened to the works of Charles Dickens in numerous ways, with its sheer size rivalling that of the Victorian triple decker, and Faber’s “panoramic, all-encompassing perspective of Victorian life in London” (Rees 104) serving as a direct link to Dickens’ body of work. The difference between Faber and

Dickens, however, clearly lies in their readership. Whereas Dickens wrote as a Victorian for the Victorians, Faber is writing for his contemporaries of the twenty-first century.

Another link to the Victorian novel is the publication of the first instalment of the book which was serialised and put up on the *Guardian's* website a few weeks before its publication. This modernised version of the Victorian serialisation of stories, written by the likes of Dickens gives the reader a sense of the neo-Victorian story Faber has written. Set in 1870s London, *The Crimson Petal and the White* catapults the reader straight into the Victorian era. The fact that this story is a part of the neo-Victorian genre is established quickly and the reader is immediately aware that he or she is not a part of the Victorian era but merely a visitor from the twenty-first century. Right from the start, the narrator tells the reader that the place they have landed in is nothing like that which other stories have described, “but those stories flattered you, welcomed you as a friend, treating you as you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether” (Faber 3). With this statement, the narrator pulls the reader out of the story itself and makes them a self-conscious spectator of the unfolding events.

The events following the reader's introduction to the story bring up yet another aspect of neo-Victorianism. Whereas Victorian writers were coy about everything relating to indecent behaviour such as sex, neo-Victorian writers are not. They explore the underbelly of Victorian society just as they would explore the moral and innocent parts of it. *The Crimson Petal and the White* does this by bringing the reader under the surface of the typical Victorian novel and into a world teeming with dirt, sex, and crime. As well as exploring areas forbidden to Victorian writers, Faber's story is “utterly modern [...] in its social, political and psychological perspective [...] [and] a lot of its insights are based on what we've learned since then, about feminism, child abuse and so on” (Faber, Interview by Julie Hale). But despite having a vastly modern perspective, *The Crimson Petal and the White* is a detailed description of Victorian life. Faber's meticulous research, ranging from lavender harvesting to treatments for hysteria (Faber, Interview by Claire Sawers), helps to bring the reader even deeper into the world of Victorian life.

The Crimson Petal and the White follows Sugar, a London prostitute, during her journey from the slums of St. Giles to a position of a governess in the house of William Rackham. As the story progresses, we meet a myriad of characters who all have a story of their own. Ranging from Sugar's fellow prostitutes, and William's invalid wife Agnes and their daughter Sophie, to the vile Doctor Curlew and his deeply feminist daughter Emmeline

Fox, Faber's use of different characters lends the novel a deeper connection to the Victorian era, and allows the reader to explore different aspects of nineteenth-century society. The characters that bring most to the plot are women, with their lives and status being the driving force of the narrative. Although these women function as independent characters, they are all interwoven into the plot by their connections to the protagonists of the story; Sugar and William.

Establishing the female focus of the story, the first character introduced is Caroline, one of Sugar's prostitute friends. Caroline serves as a guide to the reader, leading them into the reality of the slums of London and showing how so many women ended up in prostitution. She also brings the reader to Sugar. Sugar is a peculiar prostitute with the body of a young boy and a mind rivalling the smartest of men, and her life is turned upside down when William Rackham enters the scene. Being an unpublished writer who resists his future as the heir of Rackham Perfumery, William is constantly aware of his lack of wealth and his failure of meeting the standards of society. It is not until he meets Sugar and becomes infatuated with her that he finally buckles down and embraces his future role as the head of the Rackham Empire. The meeting of William and Sugar also puts into motion the introduction of William's wife Agnes, and their daughter Sophie.

Agnes, an invalid who according to the slimy Doctor Curlew should be in an asylum for the mentally insane, is the product of Victorian patriarchal upbringing. Her sole reason for regaining her health is so that she can return to the social scene. Her mental illness, which the reader knows is caused by a brain tumour, leads to obsessions ranging from her physical appearance to the imaginary Convent of Health, which she visits in her dreams. Whilst William and Agnes are busy in their own little worlds, their daughter Sophie is brought up by her nurse, Beatrice Cleave. She is largely ignored by her father and completely forgotten by her mother. Agnes and William represent the way upper-class people in Victorian London aspired to live their lives, in a society where appearances meant everything.

Although the main storyline of *The Crimson Petal and the White* revolves around Sugar and William's relationship, the link between Sugar, Agnes and Sophie enforces the novel's feminist approach and the fight against the patriarchal society of the time.

3. The Status of Women in Victorian Society

In order to fully understand the world Michel Faber created in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the status of women in Victorian England must be examined. England in the

nineteenth century was ruled by a patriarchal government controlling the law, economy, politics, education, and every other aspect of society (Purvis 2). The gender roles of the Victorian era became more defined than ever before. In the nineteenth century commuting to work became more and more common, and that left wives, daughters, and sisters at home to manage the household (Hughes).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the idea of the gendered spheres took hold in middle class society. These spheres separated into the public sphere and the domestic sphere. Men belonged to the former, the public sphere, since their role was to take part in public life (including paid work and politics, for example). The role of caring for their family both economically and legally also fell under the public sphere distinction. The women's sphere, on the other hand, was purely domestic. They belonged at home as wives and mothers (Purvis 2). Whilst the sexes were clearly divided, a division between women was also evident.

The idea of women as being either good or evil had been around for centuries but became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century. According to this idea, women could be seen as either angels or monsters, or both (Baird 1). The Victorian lady was supposed to strive to become "the angel in the house", an almost unearthly being who is selfless, knows no anger, and is always anxious to help her husband to be his best self (Kühl 173). Whilst the "angel" was an ideal hard to reach, the "monster" could easily take over in an instant. The "monstrosity" Victorian men feared most commonly came in the form of insanity and hysteria. This could be caused by different aspects of what was seen as unfeminine behaviour, such as feeling sexual desire, failing to submit to male dominance, as well as rejecting marriage and motherhood. Another common "symptom" of the monster within the Victorian woman was intellectual ambition (Baird 3).

Women's education was vastly inferior to the education of men. In order to prepare them for their role in the domestic sphere, girls were educated in "accomplishments", normally at a boarding school or by a governess in the home (Hughes). This included music, dancing, deportment and drawing, but also foreign languages, English, and history (Purvis 69). These subjects fitted with the opinion many men had on women's purpose in life. One of them was John Ruskin, the writer and art critic, who in 1865 said that women should be given knowledge that would allow them to understand and help men with their work (Purvis 3).

The likes of Ruskin were not the only ones to chime in on the issue of women's education. The medical field held similar opinions. It was well known that women had smaller skulls and, therefore, smaller brains. Many doctors also believed that women only had a certain amount of energy and that this energy was depleted by menstruation, growing breasts and bearing children. This would inevitably leave little energy for learning (Paxman 226). As late as the 1880s, doctors thought mental work could affect women's chances of having children. Doctors even reported that too much study could damage the ovaries and turn young women into dried-up prunes (Hughes). The education afforded to women set them on a path firmly laid out to them by society.

Women's lives were controlled by men from the moment they were born. Going from their father's care as the head of the family to their husband's care, women rarely got the opportunity to be independent. Once they were married, all the property and income they might have had were transferred over to their husbands (Purvis 1). Even a woman's body stopped belonging to her alone the moment she was married. A law, not abolished until 1884, stated that if a woman denied her husband in bed, she could be arrested (Purvis 2). Whilst a woman was supposed to be submissive to her husband in every aspect of their marriage, it was frowned upon if she showed too much interest in sex. It was assumed that women only desired marriage to become mothers and not for sexual or emotional satisfaction, with Doctor William Acton declaring: "The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" (Hughes).

Despite the Victorian obsession with morality, the profession of prostitution flourished. By the 1860s, London was "the whoreshop of the world" and prostitution was regarded as the "Great Social Evil." The estimated number of prostitutes in London, according to Mayhew, was around eighty thousand, and the brothels known to the police in 1859 numbered just under three thousand (Paxman 123-124). Their work was a dangerous one, putting them at risk at the hands of their clients as well as disease. The risky and immoral lives of prostitutes, as well as the rising obsession with "crimes of morality," including sexual crimes, prostitution, and drunkenness (Zedner 30-31), lead to the founding of a number of charitable organisations, including the Rescue Society which reformed prostitutes and helped them get back on their feet. By reforming prostitutes, these charities contributed to the patriarchal society's aim for women to find a suitable husband, have children and take care of the home.

Nearing the end of the nineteenth century great changes started to take place for women and the concept of the New Woman emerged. Following two articles by the novelists Sarah Grand and 'Ouida' (the pseudonym of Maria Louise Ramé) in 1894, the term "New Woman" popularly described the new breed of independent and educated women (Buzwell). Although the term did not emerge until the end of the century, the characteristics of the New Woman had appeared earlier (Buzwell). New opportunities became available, with education and employment prospects improving, whilst marriage became more optional than it ever had before. The New Woman herself "was a feminist and a social reformer; a poet or a playwright who addressed female suffrage" (Buzwell). The figure of the New Woman, well and truly emerged by the end of the nineteenth century, was a prototype for the following feminist movements helping to fight the ghost of the Victorian patriarchal society (Buzwell).

4. The Childhood Conditioning of Agnes, Sophie, and Sugar

Throughout *The Crimson Petal and the White*, children and the childhoods of the adult characters are a vital part of the plot. Faber's take on the lives of Victorian children is somewhat reminiscent of Charles Dickens who, like Faber, shone a light on the destitute children of London. Although Dickens had the advantage of being a part of the Victorian era, Faber is not controlled by the restrictions of nineteenth-century morals, and this gives his treatment an important edge. Since Faber is able to write about the brutalities of Victorian London without needing to lessen the impact, *The Crimson Petal and the White* can be seen as more real than Dickens' works, "by sharing lurid yet historically based details no reputable Victorian novel could ever include" (Rees 106). These lurid details, although primarily in regards to the adult characters, enable Faber to call into question both Victorian and contemporary ideologies of children (Rees 106).

The fact that Faber is a neo-Victorian writer, as opposed to a Victorian one, opens up a different discussion for his readership than it would for Dickens' readership. As mentioned earlier, one of the modern themes explored by neo-Victorian writers is bad parenting and, consequently, child neglect. Dickens was no stranger to depicting neglected children but leavened his portrayal with sentimentality and humour (Rees 105). Faber, however, writes about this topic without holding back, depicting child neglect across all classes. In the hands

of Faber, the great social evil is not Victorian prostitution but the neo-Victorian neglect of a child (Kohlke and Gutleben 114).

In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, children are not wanted by their parents and every notable character shows this in some shape or form, either as a perpetrator or as a victim. The children of the story, most notably Sophie, the prostitute Amy Howlett's son Christopher, and Sugar and Agnes as children, are all shown to be both unwanted and unloved (Rees 107). The children in the background, not mentioned specifically but alluded to as a part of a broken society, further highlight the theme of child neglect permeating Faber's world, "where people wake up when the opium in their babies' sugar-water ceases to keep the little wretches under" (Faber 6). The adult characters continuously show negligence and little interest in their children, even during pregnancy, which is just as unwanted as the children themselves. The prostitutes are shown numerous times using a concoction of water, alum, and sulphate of zinc to wash away any possibility of an unwanted pregnancy. Sugar even goes as far as throwing herself down the stairs in a desperate bid to miscarry William's baby. Sugar herself is not wanted by her mother, who only sees her as a commodity. The same can be said about Agnes and Sophie, whose purpose in life is to act appropriately in order to "reflect positively upon [their fathers] as a head of a distinguished household" (Rees 123).

In Faber's Victorian world, the childhood experiences of his characters play an important role in underlining the way the patriarchal Victorian society enforced its ideals on both women and children. The most prominent examples are seen in the three main female characters of Agnes, Sophie, and Sugar. Despite their differences in age, class, and upbringing, these three women are all under the same patriarchal roof and their childhoods are under the control of men in various ways. Whilst Agnes and Sophie's childhoods revolve around the proper upbringing and behaviour in order to meet the social expectations of the men in their lives, Sugar's only expectation as a child was to become a competent prostitute.

Sugar's childhood is not as frequently discussed compared to Agnes and Sophie's because there is none to speak of. Sugar, being born and bred in the world of prostitution, represents the children of the underclass whose childhood is ripped away before it even begins. Faber's depiction of child prostitutes highlights both the class differences and the patriarchal thinking of the time. For the male characters in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the idea of an underage prostitute is more of an attraction than a deterrent. William, along with his college friends Ashwell and Bodley, all seek out pubescent girl prostitutes which

they see as sexual objects. At the same time, they see upper class girls of the same age as children. Sugar herself was initiated into the profession at the age of thirteen. At the age of nineteen when the story begins, men still seek her out for her childlike qualities:

What makes Sugar a rarity is that she'll do anything the most desperate alley-slut will do, but do it with a smile of childlike innocence. There is no rarer treasure in Sugar's profession than a virginal-looking girl who can surrender to a deluge of ordure and rise up smelling like roses, her eyes friendly as a spaniel's, her smile white as absolution. (Faber 35)

These childlike qualities are what save Sugar from being just another common whore. Her role in life was set from the moment she was told by her mother, Mrs. Castaway, in the middle of the night that "she needn't shiver anymore: a kind gentleman had come to keep her warm" (Faber 228).

As a child raised in a brothel, Sugar grows up knowing what the future has in store for her. Living in a female orientated environment, without the presence of a father, Sugar's childhood experience of the patriarchy is vastly different to that of Agnes and Sophie. Whereas both Agnes and Sophie are raised in a household with a ruling male presence, Sugar's patriarchal ruler comes in the form of her mother, the brothel-keeper Mrs. Castaway. Throughout Sugar's childhood, her mother does not see her as a child, let alone her own child (Rees 115). In the eyes of Mrs. Castaway, Sugar only becomes valuable and worth the trouble of the pregnancy once she reaches the right age to be sold off to the highest bidder. From then on, Sugar is forced by her mother to play the role of an adult when she is still only a child (Rees 116). The irony of this situation is that Sugar, being a child, puts on the role of an adult woman who entices men with her childlike qualities. Sugar's only chance of being a child is when she is acting the part to please her clients.

Whilst Sugar's childhood is virtually nonexistent, Agnes never leaves hers behind. Of all the three female characters discussed in this essay, Agnes is in the most adult position, being both a wife and a mother. She is also the most child-like and innocent of all, even when compared to her young daughter. Having been sent away to boarding school at a young age and losing her mother during her teenage years, Agnes holds onto the only thing she knows: being a child.

Agnes' childhood is told through her diaries, and secretly read by Sugar. These diaries provide the reader with the information needed to establish her as a rounded character and show how her formative years were controlled by her stepfather, Lord Unwin. Agnes' first diary entry highlights the ruling force her new father becomes in her life, and the changes he brings (the biggest being the banning of Catholicism in the home). Underlining the importance of religion to her, Agnes addresses Saint Theresa in her diary entry and asks her: "Why do You not speak to me any more [*sic*]? Are the walls of this unhappy new house a shield against Your voice? I cannot believe he is stronger than You" (Faber 529). Later in the entry, she asks: "And, How much longer is this evil man to have Mama and me in his power?" (Faber 529). This hint of rebellion does not translate into Agnes' real life at that time, as Lord Unwin keeps his control on Agnes' future.

When she is ten years old, Lord Unwin sends Agnes to *Abbots Langley School for Girls*, where she is to become a lady. Faber's use of the diary entries showing Agnes' school years highlights how the lives of Agnes and her upper class contemporaries are governed by society. Their education focuses mainly on subjects needed for them to become ladies, and this effectively leaves them helplessly in need of a husband in order to survive. As Agnes admits: "It's true that from birth she has been groomed to do nothing especially well except appear in public looking beautiful" (Faber 158). This sentence perfectly represents Faber's take on the roles of Victorian women and also shows how the novel's upper class characters are portrayed, leading their frivolous, childish lives.

Agnes, along with the other social peers, represents adults who cling tenaciously to their childhood, "a pervasive social trend Faber locates in the well-to-do classes of Victorian society" (Rees 117). For the upper classes, being a child is a privileged position, with girls being treated as children until they marry (Rees 117). Agnes, who is treated like a child even after marriage, has no intention of leaving the safety of her childhood. In the Victorian society Faber creates, the upper class ladies are not expected to become adults, and keep their childlike ways even after marriage, as Sugar realises whilst reading the fourteen-year-old Agnes' diary:

[...] this muddle-headed, minuetting adolescent *is* a lady, as fully adult as she'll ever be. Yes, and all the ladies Sugar has ever seen, all those patrician damsels dismounting imperiously from their carriages, or promenading under parasols in Hyde Park, or parading in to the opera: they are children. Essentially unchanged from

when they played with dolls and coloured pencils, they grow taller and gain a few “accomplishments” until, at fifteen or sixteen, still accustomed to being made to sit in a corner for failing to conjugate a verb or refusing to eat their pudding, they go home to their suitors. (Faber 553)

These suitors are the controlling factor. Once they are finished travelling the world and enjoying their youth, “they turn their attention to the enterprise of marriage and, casting their eye over the new season’s bloom of elaborately dressed children, they pick themselves a little wife” (Faber 553). Through Sugar’s neo-Victorian thinking and Agnes’ blind following, Faber’s novel shows the complete control the portrayed patriarchal society has over women their whole lives, starting from childhood.

Despite the fact that the adult characters of *The Crimson Petal and the White* are obsessed with childhood, the children of the story are all neglected in one way or another. Sophie, the daughter of Agnes and William, is the only child character belonging to the upper class but is essentially in the same shoes regarding neglect as Christopher, the prostitute’s son in St. Giles. Although Sophie has vastly better social standing than Christopher (having everything she needs to live a comfortable life), they are both unwanted children ignored by their parents.

As an upper class child with parents who act like children themselves, Sophie is raised in an isolated environment, confined to her room and given an impractical education (Rees 122). She is to be neither seen nor heard, particularly by Agnes, and she rarely sees her father. The narrator describes Sophie as having “the air of a domestic pet bought for a child who has since died; an obsolete pet that is given food, lodging, and even the occasional pat of affection, but no reason for living” (Faber 147). She is completely ignored by her mother, who has, due to her illness, no recollection of her daughter, and her father “fails to value a girl child who cannot inherit his business, cannot maintain the family name, and may not even be marriageable” (Rees 123). William’s view of Sophie and her very existence shows in a nutshell Faber’s Victorian society where men are in charge over a woman’s future.

As the youngest female character of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Sophie shines a light on how repressed women truly were from a very young age. Sophie, who is six years old at the beginning of the story, has already formed the opinion that girls and women are not equal to men. It is not until Sugar enters her life as a governess that the patriarchal

brainwashing of Sophie starts to slightly break down: “Suddenly serious, she looks up at Sugar and says, ‘Do you think I could be an explorer, Miss?’ ‘An explorer?’ ‘When I’m older, Miss.’ ‘I... I don’t see why not.’ [...] ‘It mightn’t be permitted, Miss,’ reflects the child, wrinkling her brow. ‘A lady explorer?’” (Faber 635). Sophie’s stance clearly shows her deep belief in the superiority of men, a stance Sugar tries to break:

“These are modern times, Sophie dear,” sighs Sugar. “Women can do all sorts of things nowadays.” Sophie’s forehead wrinkles deeper still, as the irreconcilable faiths of her nurse and her governess collide in her over-taxed brain. “Perhaps,” she muses, “I could explore places the gentlemen explorers don’t wish to explore.” (Faber 635)

Even after Sugar assures her that times are changing and that anything is possible, Sophie still holds on to the role she has been conditioned to play: a female who, as a member of the weaker sex, is destined to fall under the shadow of men.

5. Agnes’ Prison

In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michel Faber explores the Victorian world of women with a modern eye that allows him to tell their story without the restrictions of nineteenth-century societal thinking. In his novel, Faber focuses on the different family lives of his female characters, who are either prostitutes or a part of the middle class family dynamic. Faber does not change the traditional Victorian family unit in the way many neo-Victorian novels do (for example the lesbian “family of choice” in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (Yates 93)). At the same time, his novel does not show marriage in the romantic light that readers of Victorian novels have come to expect. Marriage in Faber’s narrative is a broken institution with the union of William and Agnes as a prime example. As a family, William, Agnes, and Sophie live separate lives under one roof. Agnes is confined to her bedroom most of the time, Sophie stays in the nursery, and William resides in the study or spends his time outside of the home (Yates 108). There is hardly any contact between these three family members who spend more time with the servants than with each other. Agnes, for example, relies on her maid, Clara, to take care of her as a mother would: “Give me your hands, Mrs

Rackham.' Agnes shuffles to obey, but not like an old woman – more like a child being taken back to bed after a nightmare” (Faber 156).

Agnes is a perpetual child thrust into the world of adults by her marriage to William. A combination of her upper class upbringing and mental illness has effectively rendered her incapable of any responsibilities, eventually breaking down her relationship with William. Despite her diary entries showing her growing fondness for William during their courting, Agnes has little to no say in their impending marriage. Her step-father, Lord Unwin, and William decide on Agnes' future without consulting her:

[William] remembers being invited to see the pickled old aristocrat in his smoking room, and there, over port, being read the terms of the marriage of Agnes Unwin to William Rackham, Esquire. The legalities were, he recalls, quite beyond him, so when Lord Unwin had finished and archly asked something like “Well, how does that suit?” he'd not known what to say. “It means you've *got* her, God help you.” (Faber 167)

The contract effectively transfers the control over Agnes from Lord Unwin to William. Later William realizes that the contract also “wash[es] [Lord Unwin's] hands of her – no doubt [knowing] what poison was eating away at [her] sanity” (Faber 169).

The marriage of William and Agnes is overshadowed by her illness, which becomes the focal point of their lives. Thought to be a bad case of hysteria, the poison William refers to, in reality, is a brain tumour. The existence of the tumour is not known by anyone other than the narrator and the reader: “No one will ever find it. Roentgen photography is twenty years in the future, and Doctor Curlew, whatever parts of Agnes Rackham he may examine, is not about to go digging in her eye-socket with a scalpel” (Faber 219). The narrator further reinforces the novel's neo-Victorian status by connecting with the reader through their modern medical knowledge: “Only you and I know of this tumour's existence. It is our little secret” (Faber 219).

Agnes herself has little to no understanding of her own bodily functions, or dysfunctions. She has never been told about menstruation and in her mind “bleeding from the belly is a terrifying and unnatural thing” (Faber 236). Agnes connects bleeding with being ill and dying since both of her parents bled on their deathbeds. Her ignorance of the female anatomy along with her religious fervour are intensely heightened by her mental state

with her belief in demons infesting the house: “They chuckle in the rafters. They wisper [*sic*] behind the skirting-boards. They wait to have their way with me” (Faber 558). Agnes’ total lack of comprehension and insanity taking hold of her mind is clearly noticeable in her next diary entry: “Here you see my own blood [...] Blood from deep within me, flowing from a hidden wound. Whatever killed my Mama, now kills me. But why? Why, when I am Innocent?” (Faber 558).

Agnes’ lack of physical knowledge inevitably extends to her marital life. Losing her mother at a young age, as well as her Victorian upbringing, results in a complete absence of sexual education, leaving her utterly unprepared for her first night with William (Sulmicki 52). That first night is recounted later during a scene where William takes advantage of Agnes whilst she is under sedation: “‘I never meant to hurt you, on that first night,’ he assures her, stroking her tenderly. ‘I was...made hasty by urgency. The urgency of love’” (Faber 614). William’s justification of his treatment of Agnes underlines the power men had over women. Agnes’ insanity gets worse after falling pregnant with Sophie. Agnes does not realise she is expecting a baby and worries about getting fatter: “Riddle: I eat less than ever I did before I came to this wretched house, yet I grow fat. Explanation: I am fed by force in my sleep [...] [A] demon sits on my breast, spooning gruel into my mouth” (Faber 617). Agnes’ sense of losing control is palpable and she desperately tries to stop her bleeding and stay thin by fasting. Faber thus uses Agnes’ illness and Doctor Curlew’s and William’s actions to emphasise the lack of control women had over their own lives.

As aforementioned, Doctor Curlew’s character shows, in a nutshell, the ways in which the patriarchal society enforces its power over women. Simultaneously, his daughter, Emmeline, represents the fight against the patriarchal thinking of the time. Emmeline and Doctor Curlew are on two different sides of the nineteenth century. Emmeline believes in the future of women, confidently stating: “we are on a fast train to the twentieth century. The past cannot be restored” (Faber 181). Doctor Curlew, however, is a man firmly set in his belief in the continued status quo of the dominance of men, controlling Agnes’ life through his status as a medical professional. His medical knowledge mirrors what the medical profession thought to be true at the time. According to Victorian psychiatrists, women were more sensitive to insanity than men because the instability of women’s reproductive systems affected their sexual, emotional and rational control (Showalter 55). George Man Burrows even stated that “the functions of the brain are so intimately connected with the uterine system, that the interruption of any one process which the latter has to perform in the human

economy may implicate the former” (cited by Showalter 56). In a true Victorian convention, Doctor Curlew believes that the source of Agnes’ insanity lies in the womb: “You [William] and I have no womb that can be taken out if things get beyond a joke – for God’s sake remember that” (Faber 81).

The doctor’s many examinations of Agnes are nothing short of bullying. Doctor Curlew constantly hints at her madness and uses it to his own advantage: “I’m not a madwoman! ‘Of course not. That is why I’m asking your permission [to be examined], rather than ignoring your wishes as I would ignore those of an asylum inmate” (Faber 161). The methods he uses to treat Agnes’ insanity consist of feeling the womb with his own fingers and using leeches. It is evident that Doctor Curlew has examined Agnes on a number of occasions: “He is trying to find Agnes’s womb, which to his knowledge ought to be exactly four inches from the external aperture. His middle finger being exactly four inches long (for he has measured it), he is perplexed to be having no success” (Faber 165). Doctor Curlew is the epitome of Faber’s portrayal of Victorian patriarchal ideas, where women are seen as weak and the cause of trouble: “He wipes his fingers with a white handkerchief, pockets it, bends down to try a second time. She makes him work hard, does Mrs Rackham, for his fee” (Faber 164).

Doctor Curlew’s attitude towards women’s ailments and his horrendous treatment of Agnes are predominantly shown from the women’s perspective. William, however, being a man who longs for social acceptance, sees the doctor as “an impressive figure [...] a more distinguished-looking specimen than Rackham” (Faber 80). For Agnes, on the other hand, Doctor Curlew is a monster and the atmosphere during her appointments with the doctor is full of dread. “A long shadow flows into the room [...] the perfumed air of this female sanctum is tainted by his unmistakable smell, displaced by his powerful bulk [...] the trap is shut” (Faber 160). The changing of the air in Agnes’ female sanctum, from delicate perfume to the powerful smell of a man, establishes the level of dominance Doctor Curlew has over Agnes. Furthermore, Faber’s likening of the doctor’s examination to a “trap” indicates to the twenty-first-century reader how the women in Faber’s Victorian society do not have any control over their own bodies.

6. The Reinvention of Sugar as a Saviour

In stark contrast to Agnes, a prisoner of convention, Sugar strives to be different and uses her abilities of reading and writing to reach her goal. The narrator ironically states: “A pity,

really, that Sugar's brain was not born into a man's head, and instead squirms, constricted and cramped, in the dainty skull of a girl. What a contribution she might have made to the British Empire!" (Faber 36). Sugar herself is aware of the limits put on her by gender roles. In the semi-autobiography she has been writing for years, for example, she imagines herself as ferociously attacking and murdering her clients. Sugar's anger at the closed mindedness of the men in charge is further established in her reaction to a pamphlet stating:

No woman can be a serious thinker, without injury to her function as the conceiver and mother of children. Too often, the female "intellectual" is a youthful invalid or virtual hermaphrodite, who might otherwise have been a healthy wife.

Let us close our ears, then, to siren voices offering us a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny, enfeebled and sickly race. Healthy serviceable wombs are of more use to the Future than any amount of feminine scribbling. (Faber 171)

Sugar's written objections to this pamphlet emphasises her status as a modern woman in Faber's neo-Victorian world, where women are more than ready to take control of their own minds: "We'll see about that, you poxy old fool! There's a new century coming soon, and you and your kind will be DEAD!" (Faber 172). Although Sugar's reaction may be a little overzealous, her attitude further focuses the story towards women's fight for freedom during the Victorian era.

The transformation Sugar goes through in *The Crimson Petal and the White* reaches its peak once William appoints Sugar as his daughter's governess. With Sugar's jump up the social ladder, the neo-Victorian aspect of Faber's story becomes clearer, especially because a novel about a prostitute becoming a governess in a prominent household would have been impossible in the Victorian literary scene. As the readership Faber writes for is that of the twenty-first century, readers are more likely to have sympathy for Sugar and "permit her not only to reject her status of 'fallen woman' but to completely reinvent herself as a respectable woman, granting her a degree of agency that Dickens's fallen women were never permitted" (Rees 116).

Sugar's reinvention rests firmly on Agnes and Sophie's need for salvation, as well as on her own desire to break away from a life of prostitution. Upon entering the Rackham house as a governess, Sugar starts to experience the rules and restrictions of life in the upper

class. The intimacy William and Sugar have shared at Mrs. Castaway's and in Marylebone disappears when Sugar becomes his employee and they have to follow the proper protocol of a master and his servant. Enconced in a small attic room where the window is painted shut, Sugar's plan to free herself from her former life and further her relationship with William seems to have completely backfired. In the house of William, Sugar, who once was free from the strict conventions of society, becomes a hostage of a world where women are truly imprisoned by Faber's male dominated society.

Unintentionally, Sugar becomes Agnes' guardian angel who, in Agnes' frail mind, has come to take her away from her sickness and bring her to the Convent of Health. By playing the role of the angel, Sugar saves Agnes from William's dominance and Doctor Curlew, who is planning to send her to an asylum, as well as liberating Agnes from the cage her mental illness has built around her. Sugar saves Agnes by telling her to take the train and find the Convent, which effectively leaves the reader in the dark regarding her fate. By allowing Agnes to slip away quietly from the reader's gaze, Faber ensures she gets the freedom she would have never had with William, without knowing whether it is in a new life in a convent or in a peaceful death.

Faber's representation of Victorian women's fight for freedom reaches its pinnacle with Sugar's relationship with Sophie. In Sugar's eyes, Sophie is a replica of her younger self (Kohlke 131). Sugar's new role as a governess forces her to face her past and break away from her mother's legacy of child abuse and prostitution. In Faber's hands, Sophie thus serves as a traumatic mirror for Sugar (Kohlke 132). Flashbacks from Sugar's childhood emphasise the strong grip Mrs. Castaway still has on her. In one particular instance, where Sophie has wet the bed, Sugar's first thought of a response to the child's apologies is straight from her mother's mouth fifteen years earlier: "Well, we've no other sheets, and it's raining outside and I'll soon be entertaining visitors who won't appreciate your dirty smell in their noses – so what do *you* suggest we do, hmm, my sorry little poppet?" (Faber 538). The memory of "her own inflamed genitals, examined in a cracked mirror in Church Lane, the moment the fat old man with the hairy hands had finally left her alone" comes to Sugar's mind as she notices, "when the naked child steps from her sour-smelling bed into the tub, that Sophie's vulva is an angry red" (Faber 538). Sugar's connection to Sophie via her memories is further intensified once "the child's sex has been powdered pale [with talcum] as a whore's face, with a thin red mouth" (Faber 539). As Marie-Luise Kohlke notes, the "imagery and resulting association in both Sugar's and the reader's minds hold out at least

the *possibility* that Sophie too has been subjected to sexual violation within the very sanctity of the family home” (Kohlke 133). By alluding to the possibility of Sophie being violated in her own home, as well as connecting Sugar’s sexualized childhood memories with Sophie, Faber brings to light how women of the era were never completely safe from the hands of men.

Sugar’s need to save Sophie from the male-dominated world she seems destined to grow up in culminates in her kidnapping the child. Sugar’s connection to Sophie has grown into a stronger relationship than Sugar ever had with her own mother, which further breaks her connection with her former life. By saving Sophie, Sugar saves herself (Kohlke 134). The final journey Sugar and Sophie undertake in *The Crimson Petal and the White* not only signals their escape from William but also their escape from the world Faber has created. The story ends before the reader gets the satisfaction of knowing Sugar and Sophie’s fate, just like how Agnes’ fate is never revealed. By letting Sugar and Sophie slip away from the narrative, Faber gives them a chance to lead a better life away from the novel’s patriarchal ideals (Braid 7).

The life Sugar is able to give Sophie by taking her away from William is alluded to in Faber’s short story “A Mighty Horde of Women in Very Big Hats...” Narrated by Sophie’s now aging son Henry, born at the start of the twentieth century, the short story recounts his life with his parents and aunt as they fight for women’s right to vote. It is evident that the life Sophie has lead is remarkably different to the one she would have had if Sugar had not taken her away from William and his Victorian ideals. Sugar herself is only a mythical figure in Henry’s eyes, as his mother’s “steadfast travelling companion during their exploration of the world” (*The Apple* 146), as someone he overhears talked about in conversations not meant for his ears. Despite Sugar not being around in Henry’s life, her presence is everywhere. Sophie, who was born into an environment where women were below men in every aspect, became an avid fighter for women’s equality, continuing Sugar’s beliefs. Mirroring Sugar’s angry objections to the aforementioned pamphlet, Sophie defaces library books written by men on female subjects by “inscribing all manner of disparaging and, frankly, indecent glosses in the margins” (*The Apple* 152).

By penning this short story, Faber not only gives his readership the closure they are denied in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, but also gives Sugar the redemption she strives for. By taking Sophie and giving her a life full of adventure and possibilities she would never have had with her father, Faber allows Sugar to break free from her mother’s legacy of

prostitution and neglect. With this final story from the world of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber ultimately establishes Sugar as a female saviour who triumphed over the patriarchal ideologies of Victorian society.

7. Conclusion

As this essay has clearly established, *The Crimson Petal and the White* highlights the inherently patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century society. This is most effectively achieved through Faber's employment of the three main female characters, Sugar, Agnes and Sophie, to demonstrate how Victorian women, regardless of both class and age, were treated by men. As well as showing the submissive world of women, as particularly shown through the eyes of Agnes, Faber explores women's fight for equality by making Sugar a true neo-Victorian heroine. Sugar's fight against the control of men represents the growing feminism of the nineteenth century as well as being the neo-Victorian element of the story.

The neo-Victorian genre explores modern themes in the setting of a Victorian novel, which is exactly what Faber does in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. In a true neo-Victorian fashion, Faber writes about social issues that his contemporary readership can sympathise with, such as gender inequality, prostitution, abuse, and neglect, whilst being set in Victorian London. The biggest issue Faber writes about, however, is the status of women which is a hugely popular subject within the neo-Victorian genre.

As has been shown, Victorian women were under the control of the patriarchy. The idea of the spheres, which took hold in the nineteenth century, helped reinforce the perpetual belief that women were better suited at home. The separation of the sexes undermined women in society and held them back from an independent life and serious education. Nearing the end of the century, women's education, as well as opportunities outside of the home, started to improve and the figure of the New Woman started to emerge. With this, women began to gain more freedom and independence in their lives, leaving behind the patriarchal prison of the Victorian era.

As previously discussed, *The Crimson Petal and the White* broaches the subject of female equality with the character of Sugar. Described as being vastly different from other women, both physically and mentally, Sugar takes on the role of a saviour of both Agnes and Sophie and heralds a change in Faber's patriarchal world. With her clever manipulations, Sugar becomes the controller in her relationship with William which ultimately brings forth the fall of the head of the Rackham family. By saving Agnes from the abuse she suffered at

the hands of Doctor Curlew, Sugar gives Agnes the possibility of freedom. Sugar's saving of Sophie, however, brings an even greater change to both of the characters and the narrative itself. By taking Sophie away from her father and the life she had been born into, Sugar not only saves the child from a life of submission and rules, but also furthers her own feminist ideals. Thanks to Sugar, Sophie is brought up believing that anything is possible and that women can do whatever they like, a belief Sophie later passes on to her own son. Thus with Faber's final input to the world of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Sugar, a former prostitute thinking only of herself, emerges as a heroine fighting for women's freedom from the control of men.

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