Hidden from History

The Representation of Marginalized Figures in Historical Novels by Elizabeth Fremantle, Susan Fletcher and Colson Whitehead

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The Representation of Marginalized Figures in Historical Novels by Elizabeth Fremantle, Susan Fletcher and Colson Whitehead

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Abstract
This essay examines the ways in which historical fiction can be utilized to highlight the experiences of marginalized and subordinate people. The essay focuses on three historical novels that centralize and celebrate the experiences of marginalized figures by reimagining and rewriting history. The historical novels covered are Elizabeth Fremantle’s *Sisters of Treason* (2014), Susan Fletcher’s *Witch Light* (2010) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016). The three novels are substantially different due to the fact that they cover the experiences of different types of marginalized people from different countries and different time periods. However, they all highlight the experiences of women as marginalized figures, and they can be seen as serving a common purpose as they challenge dominant accounts of history.

The essay discusses the historical novel and historical fiction in general. A brief overview is given of how the historical novel as a genre is defined, as well as of how it has developed over time. Moreover, the resurgence of interest in the historical novel is discussed, especially in regard to women’s historical fiction. The essay discusses the historical background of each novel to some extent, providing readers with the necessary information for putting the novels into context. Firstly, Tudor fiction and women’s interest in Tudor fiction is examined prior to the discussion of *Sisters of Treason*. Secondly, witch persecution in Early modern Europe and the Massacre of Glencoe are covered before delving into *Witch Light*. Lastly, slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, along with a short coverage of the transatlantic slave trade are discussed prior to the analysis of *The Underground Railroad*. 
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Introduction

History allows us to explore the recorded past of human life from all over the world and gives us the chance to learn about different civilizations and events, dating back thousands of years. However, it is important to recognize that conventional history can be one-sided and non-inclusive. Marginalized people have consistently been ignored or misrepresented in conventional history and to this day, they lack proper representation. Historical fiction can help bridge the gaps in our history and the genre allows us to reimagine history in an inclusive way. The historical novel in particular has been extremely popular since its emergence in the nineteenth century and writers from all over the world have used the historical novel as a tool to bring attention to the narratives of people who have been overlooked or obscured by history. Women have been especially drawn to the historical novel, which is why it has often been regarded as a female genre. Conventional history has traditionally excluded women; however, the historical novel has given women the imaginative space to create a different and more inclusive version of history (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 3). Furthermore, the historical novel gives writers the opportunity to reimagine history and bring attention to the lives of marginalized people from all over the world. Historical fiction allows us to delve into the lives and experiences of marginalized people, including women, the working classes, people of colour, slaves and colonized people, and even people accused of practicing witchcraft (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 2).

Within the genre of historical fiction, Tudor fiction has been extremely popular in recent years, attracting a large readership worldwide. The Tudor period is a fascinating time in history that is in part recognized for the fact that certain women were able to rise to power in a male-dominated world. However, in conventional Tudor history, many of these female historical figures are ignored or misrepresented. Tudor fiction, by contrast, gives writers an opportunity to illuminate female experiences and dramatize the struggles women faced in sixteenth century England. Furthermore, the genre allows us to question and challenge dominant accounts of history, and the representation of women who might have been obscured by history. Elizabeth Fremantle’s novel *Sisters of Treason* (2014) brings attention to three women who have largely been ignored in conventional history: Levina Teerlinc and the Grey sisters, Mary and Katherine. Levina Teerlinc is a historical figure and one of the few well-known female painters of the sixteenth century. The two protagonists of the novel are the lesser-known Grey sisters, Mary and Katherine Grey, who in comparison to their sister Jane Grey have been overlooked in history, despite having been at the heart of the struggle
for the Tudor succession (Fremantle, “On Sisters of Treason). Little is known about Mary Grey, except that she was physically disabled. By making Mary Grey one of the protagonists of the novel, Fremantle offers a unique perspective into the life of a physically disabled person in sixteenth century England. *Sisters of Treason* illuminates the lives of these women and bridges the gap between the unknown and what is presented as historical fact. Similarly, Susan Fletcher’s historical novel *Witch Light* (2010) offers a fictional retelling of the story of an accused witch, who legend says bore witness to the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692. Fletcher’s novel touches upon the infamous massacre, where the members of a Highland clan were slaughtered in the middle of the night, as they lay asleep in their beds. This massacre is considered one of the most shameful events in Scottish history and it is a reflection of the political climate of the time. However, the main focus of the novel is not the massacre, as it is essentially the story of Corrag’s life as an accused witch. In *Witch Light*, Fletcher brings attention to witch persecution in early modern Europe, and through Corrag’s narrative we see the devastating effects of the witch persecution and witch-hunts that took place in late seventeenth century England. The novel underlines the degree of which women who were educated or had knowledge of plants and herbs were at risk of being persecuted for witchcraft. Furthermore, women who were considered outsiders in their communities and those who lived alone were often accused of witchcraft. It was a dark time in European history where marginalized women were forced to live in fear of witch persecution. *Witch Light* sheds light on the experiences of thousands of innocent women who were discriminated against and murdered in the name of superstition and religion.

Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) is a historical novel heavily inspired by slave narratives of African American slaves. Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative depicts the perilous journey of a young slave girl named Cora who attempts to escape the antebellum South using the Underground Railroad. Whitehead utilizes fantastical elements in his novel; for instance, the Underground Railroad takes on a physical form as an actual locomotive, transporting runaway slaves between states. The protagonist of the novel is female, and Cora’s neo-slave narrative is in part inspired by well-known female slave narratives. Whitehead brings attention to the unique experiences of female slaves in North America, and the specific struggles they faced as women. Furthermore, Whitehead’s powerful novel brings attention to the impact of slavery and the lasting legacies of slavery in America. Overall, *The Underground Railroad* reimagines history in a brilliant way, highlighting what has often been manipulated or omitted from history.
These three historical novels are 21st century texts published within the period of seven years, and essentially, they allow readers to view history from a 21st century standpoint. The novels differ substantially from one another, covering the experiences of marginalized people from different countries and different time periods. However, it can be argued that they all serve a common purpose as they highlight the experiences of the marginalized and challenge dominant accounts of history. In addition, all three novels focus specifically on the experiences of women as marginalized figures and in so doing, use historical fiction to bring the narratives of marginalized people into the present. The historical novel essentially provides a platform where we are able to give voice to the silenced and marginalized, by reimagining and rewriting history with them at the centre.
1. The historical novel

Historical fiction is a unique and diverse literary genre in which narratives are set in a particular historical period. The characters may or may not be historical, and writers of historical fiction frequently include historical figures as well as fictional characters in their work. Historical fiction is based on historically fictional narratives, including historical films, historical plays, historical short stories and the historical novel. The most recognized genre of historical fiction is arguably the historical novel. In addition, the historical novel includes numerous subgenres, including historical romance, war novels, historical mysteries, alternate history and historical fantasy, making it diverse and appealing to a variety of readers worldwide. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick defines the historical novel as “a novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing (often one or two generations before, sometimes several centuries), and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period” (114). Additionally, in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J. A. Cuddon defines the historical novel as “a form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and re-creates it imaginatively” (383). Thus, the historical novel goes beyond the simple re-telling of historical events, as it allows us to read between the lines and reflect not just on what was, but on what could have been. The historical novel has been an immensely popular genre since its emergence in the nineteenth century, and it continues to spark interest around the world today.

Historical fiction and the historical novel in particular, are popular literary genres that derive from a rich tradition of historically themed fiction. In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács states that while novels with historical themes can be found in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, they are not considered to be historical novels (19). This is due to the fact that they are simply historical in regard to the theme and costume of the story and largely reflect the manners of the time in which they are written. Nonetheless, early works of historically themed fiction can be viewed as precursors to the historical novel we know today. The historical novel in its classical form arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) being widely regarded as the first historical novel (Lukács 19). However, it should be noted that critics such as Jerome de Groot and Diana Wallace do not agree with Lukács on this matter. It is evident that Sir Walter Scott drew inspiration from pre-existing works of historically themed fiction in this novel. However, “what is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical
peculiarity of their age” (Lukács 19). Scott’s novel can be seen as a direct continuation of the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century, introducing new artistic features into epic literature (Lukács 31). These features include “the broad delineation of manners and circumstances attendant upon events, the dramatic character of action and, in close connection with this, the new and important role of dialogue in the novel” (Lukács 31). These elements are parts of what has shaped the genre, and they are still considered to be defining characteristics of today’s historical novel. Since its emergence in the early nineteenth century, the historical novel has evolved and flourished into a celebrated literary genre. It reaches a global audience and its flexibility and hybridity are parts of what makes it unique.

Today the historical novel is increasingly studied on university curricula and discussed at a research level, substantiating both its significance and its appeal to a variety of readers. It can be argued that the increasing popularity of the historical novel is by cause of its flexibility and the fact that it allows us to look at history from a modern standpoint. In fact, the historical novel’s intergeneric hybridity and flexibility have long been one of its defining characteristics (de Groot 2). Because of the genre’s flexibility, historical novelists are free to explore and reimagine our history, focusing on narratives that appeal to a modern audience. These narratives often centre on the lives of the marginalized, through which readers can be introduced to new perspectives and interpretations of historical events. The possibilities are countless, as history provides us with a plethora of narratives to explore. By challenging dominant accounts of history, historical fiction can shed light on various issues, bridge cultural gaps in our communities and change our views and interpretation of history. Indeed, history is written by its winners and can often be one-sided and non-inclusive. Writers of historical fiction acknowledge that there are gaps in our history and they have the power to fill in those gaps by giving voice to those who have been silenced or ignored.

1.1. Women and historical fiction
Modern historical fiction is often associated with women as it is incredibly popular with female readers. In addition, the genre has prominent female writers and the historical novel is often specifically marketed towards female readership. Women are indeed drawn to historical novels, where female experiences are not only featured, but celebrated. Unfortunately, historical novels by women and for women have often been dismissed by literary critics as frivolous, especially with the influx of female historical novelists in the late twentieth century (de Groot 67). In fact, historical fiction became one of the major forms of women’s reading and writing in the second half of the twentieth century (Light 60). As male writers moved
away from the historical novel, women turned to the genre, further hybridizing it by cross-fertilizing historical fiction with romance, fantasy and the Gothic (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 3). The historical novel was then disregarded and dismissed by literary critics due to the fact that it became viewed as a female genre, closely connected to popular fiction and romance novels (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 2). Reviewers, historians and academics alike have until recently remained ambivalent towards women’s historical fiction, often criticizing their works for lack of accuracy and for romanticizing historical events (Wallace, “Difficulties, discontinuities and differences” 206). Nonetheless, the sheer number of historical novels published by women writers over the twentieth century exemplifies the importance of the form (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 4).

In the 1980s and 1990s there was a general resurgence of interest in the historical novel and at this time women’s historical novels were often politically driven, refashioning history through fiction (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 176). With the revival of the historical novel and the renewed interest in the genre came recognition and validation. Wallace claims that “an important turning point in the respectability of the genre seems to have been 2009 when the Man Booker Prize was won by Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009), from a shortlist in which five out of the six novels were historical” (“Difficulties, discontinuities and differences” 206). Mantel’s victory – among a shortlist of primarily historical novels, no less – not only speaks volumes regarding overall attitudes towards the genre, but also validates female writers of historical fiction. In recent years, the historical novel has yet again been recognized as a valid and meaningful genre that among other things can help shed light on important issues. While historical fiction, especially women’s historical fiction, is still under some scrutiny, the genre continues to thrive and attract a large readership.

Over the past decades, the historical novel has been greatly popular with female readers and writers, likely because historical fiction gives women a platform to explore female experiences through alternative and more inclusive narratives. Historical fiction enables us to explore issues of gender and rewrite history from a point of view that centralizes women’s concerns and feelings (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 5). Moreover, the historical novel presents readers with an incredibly personal take on history, as it often focuses on individuals and the lives and loves of women (Light 59). In *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000*, Diana Wallace argues that: “‘History’ has traditionally excluded women, but paradoxically the ‘historical novel’ has offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of ‘history’, which
are accessible or appealing to them in various ways” (3). Furthermore, the historical novel can be used as a political tool, as both female and male writers utilize historical settings to write about taboo subjects, offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 2). Essentially, historical novelists are able to dive into the past and interpret it in a way that resonates with modern audiences.

The past is largely presented to us in the form of traditional recorded history. However, that history is in many cases a result of selection, presentation and in some cases, falsification based on particular ideologies and viewpoints (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 3). As a result, women and other marginalized figures are relegated to the sidelines of events, as their experiences are largely ignored. This has driven writers to challenge dominant accounts of history through fiction, focusing on the lives of the conquered, the victimized, the marginalized and those who have been left out of traditional history, which is, as the saying goes, written by its victors. In this way, the historical novel has allowed us to invent or reimagine the unrecorded lives of marginalized and subordinated people, not only women, but also the working classes, people of colour, slaves and colonized people, reshaping narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history (Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* 2).
2. **Tudor fiction and its popularity**

The Tudor period is a fascinating time in British history that has inspired many fictional works, including television series, films and historical novels. Tudor fiction has risen in popularity in recent years, which indicates that something about this particular historical period resonates with a twenty-first century audience. The Tudor period remains one of the most recognized in British history, as it is filled with dramatic events and controversial historical figures. This was a turbulent time, especially politically and in regard to religious reform in Europe. The split from Rome along with the dissolution of the monasteries are arguably some of the most engrossing events of sixteenth century England. Furthermore, the story of the six wives of Henry VIII, with elements of sexual drama, pathos and horror, filled Europe itself with amazement (Fraser 2). In addition to the controversial reign of Henry VIII, the Tudor period marks a time in British history where certain women were able to rise to power and deeply influence the course of history through their actions. Some of these women ended up paying the ultimate price for that power and their fate chills us to this day. The rise and fall of Anne Boleyn, Mary Tudor’s reign and Lady Jane Grey’s coronation and subsequent execution are some of the most memorable events in British history and have inspired many works of Tudor fiction. Further, the last reigning Tudor monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, is unquestionably among the most recognized historical figures of all time. Her reign has been the subject of countless works of history, fiction, film and television and her iconic image persists through the ages. To this day, people remain drawn to stories of the Tudors, and fiction set during the Tudor era revolves around exciting tales of royal succession, betrayal, seduction, executions and political alliances.

The dramatic events of the Tudor period pique the interest and attention of modern audiences, which has led to an influx of Tudor material being produced in recent years. The hit television series *The Tudors* (2007-2010), written and directed by Michael Hirst, and Philippa Gregory’s historical novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), which was later adapted into a big budget Hollywood film, are examples of well-known and incredibly popular works of Tudor fiction that captivated audiences worldwide. No English monarch has been portrayed in film more often than Queen Elizabeth I, and she remains one of the most celebrated monarchs in British history (Latham 3). Furthermore, Elizabeth I is portrayed in numerous works of fiction set in the Tudor period, including historical novels such as Alison Weir’s *The Lady Elizabeth* (2008) and Elizabeth Fremantle’s *Sisters of Treason* (2014). This is only the tip of the iceberg as far as Tudor set fiction is concerned, as an abundance of Tudor films, television shows, documentaries and novels have been produced over the years,
especially in the twenty-first century. It seems that audiences cannot get enough of the Tudors, and at this point the public’s fascination with the Tudors has become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon. It is impossible to pinpoint what exactly attracts audiences to Tudor fiction, yet it is safe to assume that it is a mixture of elements. Some are interested in the historical, others seek excitement and a large number of female readers and viewers certainly appreciate the inclusion of women in historical narratives.

2.1. Tudor women and a female perspective of history

Through modern fiction set in the Tudor period, writers are able to rewrite history with women at its centre, shining a light on the narratives of women who have been misrepresented or ignored. This is in part what attracts such a large female readership to fiction set during the Tudor era and readers appreciate the inclusion of women in an important piece of history. Tudor set fiction offers a narrative where female perspectives are celebrated and explored. This is in stark contrast to the female representation in conventional Tudor history, where most women, excluding prominent figures like that of Elizabeth I, are largely ignored and marginalized. In her article “‘Young Bess’: Historical Novels and Growing Up,” Alison Light argues:

Perhaps the attraction of the Tudor period – so often the setting for these novels – is exactly the number of women in it, a veritable plethora of queens, what with Henry’s six, and the presences at one time of Mary Tudor (‘Bloody Mary’), her half sister, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s cousins, Lady Jane Grey and Mary Queen of Scots. Often in competition with each other, this excess of femininities nevertheless does function as a kind of choice for readers. All these women did actually wield power and the historical importance of their private lives is therefore unquestionable. Advancement, achievement, public power and private satisfactions: these women who have it all, the prototypes, perhaps, of the 1980s Women of Substance. (61)

Through fiction, we are able to illuminate certain aspects of women’s history through the lives of these celebrated exemplars, women who were celebrated in the first place through marriage. At the same time, we acknowledge the fact that at this time in history, marriage was a triumphal arch through which women, almost without exception, had to pass in order to reach the public eye (Fraser 2). As married women, they were then expected to bear children, which was a dangerous ordeal in the sixteenth century. There was immense pressure on highborn women to produce male heirs, and after Henry VIII’s desperate crusade for a son, women’s prosperity, and in some cases their basic safety, depended solely on their ability to
bear a male child. Henry VIII blamed his wives for their inability to produce male heirs, which he then used to justify his actions as he cast them aside. Contemporary fiction and film enable us to delve into the lives of these women of history and to look at the Tudor period from a twenty-first century standpoint. We imagine what their lives might have been like, underlining the expectations and struggles they faced as women in sixteenth century England. In this way, Tudor fiction allows us to explore the narratives of historical figures, many of whom are women who have previously been placed on the sidelines of history.

The most recognized figures from the Tudor period are arguably Henry VIII, his six wives and his daughters, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. Today, these figures are very prominent in the popular imagination and much is written about them. Nevertheless, our knowledge of them is oftentimes somewhat superficial. While most people have heard of Henry VIII and his wives, their knowledge of these women is often limited to their names and how they died. This is likely a result of the fact that Henry VIII is most widely known for having outlived four out of his six wives, as well as for giving the controversial orders to execute Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard. In *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Antonia Fraser discusses this issue, and points to the fact that Henry VIII’s wives have essentially become defined by how their lives ended, and have since been portrayed as female stereotypes:

‘Divorced, beheaded, died … divorced, beheaded, survived …’: you can hear this rhyme, recalling the order of Henry VIII’s wives, like an endless respectful susurration on the lips of the visitors to the historic places associated with them. So the six women have become defined in a popular sense not so much by their lives as by the way these lives ended. In the same way their characters are popularly portrayed as female stereotypes: the Betrayed Wife, the Temptress, the Good Woman, the Ugly Sister, the Bad Girl and, finally, the Mother Figure. (1)

Conventional history hardly does these women justice, as they are placed on the sidelines of events with little attention being paid to their experiences in life. This is where fiction can bring history to life and give insight into the lives of people who have been overlooked and marginalized in history. Similarly, we are able to question the portrayals of those who have been painted as the villains of history, thereby possibly changing the public’s perception of people who have been misrepresented. Much of what is recorded history in regard to Tudor women is open to interpretation, and historical novelists often challenge the official narratives in their works. Furthermore, fiction gives writers a platform to explore what might have been and delve into the lives of lesser-known Tudor women.
It goes without saying that Tudor fiction largely revolves around the lives of the royals and the most recognized historical figures of the time period. Audiences are drawn to the excitement of the time and want to know more about the personal lives of iconic figures such as Elizabeth I, Henry VIII, Mary I, Anne Boleyn and many more. In the same fashion, historical novelists are able to breathe life into lesser-known historical figures from the Tudor period, shining a light on people who have been overlooked or obscured by history. Historical novelists often gravitate towards lesser-known figures such as Mary Boleyn, the Grey sisters and Catherine of Aragon and utilize the historical setting of the Tudor period to bring these characters to life. Some of these women are hardly mentioned in historical records and generally there is little information available on them, despite the fact that some of them were of royal blood. This demonstrates how women have been placed on the sidelines of history, and historical fiction is a tool that can be used to illuminate their narratives. Historical novelists and readers alike often gravitate towards lesser-known figures of history with a desire to explore the unknown. Devoted fans of Tudor fiction are excited to learn about the lives of marginalized figures from the Tudor period as they are brought forward into the spotlight. All in all, Tudor fiction allows us to dive deeper than before and explore the personal experiences and feelings of women who lack representation in conventional history. By bridging the gap between the unknown and what is presented as fact, historical fiction serves as a platform for female perspectives of history.

2.2. Sisters of Treason

*Sisters of Treason* (2014) is the second book in Elizabeth Fremantle’s Tudor trilogy. The novel follows the tragic lives of the two surviving Grey sisters, following the execution of Lady Jane Grey. Elizabeth Fremantle is an English novelist born in 1962, whose published works include *Queen’s Gambit* (2013), *Sisters of Treason* (2014) and *Watch the Lady* (2015). Fremantle claims that the forgotten lives of women in history have always fascinated her and her focus on Tudor fiction has enabled her to unfold the stories of women who have been obscured by history (Fremantle, “On *Sisters of Treason*”). This is essentially what she does in *Sisters of Treason*, where the narrative centres on Katherine and Mary Grey. In her online article “On *Sisters of Treason*”, Fremantle expands on this issue: “The novel is set during a period when the only heirs to the English throne were female and my protagonists the Grey sisters, Lady Katherine and Lady Mary, are two overlooked figures who were at the heart of the struggle for the Tudor succession”. In Fremantle’s novel we see the Grey sisters live their lives in the shadow of their murdered sister Lady Jane Grey. The execution of Lady Jane
Grey is still regarded as one of the most shocking and tragic events in British history, as this young woman died for her family’s ambitions. After all, Lady Jane Grey, the deposed queen who was later executed as a traitor, was an innocent young girl of seventeen and a pawn in a game of crowns (Fremantle, “On Sisters of Treason”). Throughout the novel Jane serves as a constant reminder of just how dangerous Tudor blood can be. Her fate underscores the mortal peril of anyone who posed a threat to the crown. In this way, Fremantle brings attention to the fact that the Grey sisters were in many ways victims of circumstance as they lived at a time in history when young women were commonly used for political gain.

In Sisters of Treason, Fremantle utilizes fiction as well as the historic to illuminate the lives of the Grey sisters Katherine and Mary. Moreover, the Flemish court painter Levina Teerlinc intersects the narrative, adding depth to the novel with her third person narration. Fremantle acknowledges that in order to depict a plausible sixteenth century world, it is vital to look outside the lives of the privileged classes (Fremantle, “On Sisters of Treason”). She accomplishes this by adding Levina Teerlinc to the narrative, a woman who is both a bystander and an active participant in the lives of Katherine and Mary Grey. Little is truly known about Levina Teerlinc and therefore much of her story is fictional as opposed to the two Grey sisters. Lady Katherine Grey’s life is quite well documented, and much of her story is based on fact. In comparison to Katherine, Lady Mary Grey’s background is quite vague, although there are records that describe her physicality along with detailed accounts of her marriage, incarceration and final years. However, it should be noted that many details of this period, particularly details pertaining to women’s lives, are unknown or disputed (Fremantle, Author’s note 451). Through fiction, Fremantle delves into the tragic lives of the Grey sisters, and in doing so, she brings forward three distinct narratives that among other things display themes of captivity and constant danger.

2.3. Levina Teerlinc

Levina Teerlinc is a historical figure and artist from the sixteenth century who worked as a painter at the English royal court for over thirty years. Teerlinc was first brought to England from Bruges in 1545, to serve Henry VIII after the deaths of his two portrait painters, Hans Holbein and Lucas Horenbrout, and thus began her career as a painter at the royal court (Padmore 158). She is thought to have been trained in the workshop of her father before traveling to England, and she is one of the few well-known female painters of the sixteenth century, as the profession was largely male-dominated (Padmore 158). Generally speaking, female artists from this time have received little recognition for their work, especially in
comparison to their male contemporaries (Padmore 159). There is little information available regarding Teerlinc’s work and personal life, and what is known of her comes mainly from court records of payments and gift registers, and from legal documents of wills and marriages. She was a skilled miniaturist and some of her works include a portrait of Katherine Grey (see figure 1) and a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I. Sadly, only a handful of works that can be definitely attributed to Levina Teerlinc have survived throughout the years, and even those attributions are subject to debate (Padmore 158). However, these existing portraits are in part what inspired Fremantle to include Levina Teerlinc in her novel. Fremantle states that “[t]he idea of interweaving Levina’s story with the Greys’ derives from the existing portraits attributed to Teerlinc of Katherine Grey, and another image by her that is possibly of Jane Grey” (Fremantle, Author’s note 451).

![Figure 1: Portrait miniature of Katherine Grey, Countess of Herford. Teerlinc, Levina.](image)

Teerlinc’s existing artwork ties her to the Grey family, a connection that Fremantle utilizes and builds upon in her novel. Teerlinc’s artwork is featured throughout *Sisters of Treason*, where Fremantle underlines Teerlinc’s undeniable talent while at the same time bringing attention to the scrutiny a woman in her position might have faced. After all, Teerlinc was a woman who despite all odds had a thriving career in what was considered to be a man’s profession.

At the beginning of *Sisters of Treason*, we are introduced to Levina Teerlinc, also called Veena, a Flemish painter at the royal court. As so little is truly known about this historical figure, much about her character is left open to interpretation. Fremantle utilizes Veena’s position as a migrant in England who is subsequently placed slightly outside the native-born English society to offer readers a unique point of view distinct from the first-person narration
of the two Grey sisters (Padmore 162). Veena’s role in the novel is in many ways that of an observer, as she bears witness to the atrocities of the age, recording them through her art (Padmore 163). Teerlinc is noted in the records as a gentlewoman as well as a court painter, which in Fremantle’s novel translates to increased social mobility. Teerlinc moves easily between the lower orders and religious spaces, as well as the tight circles of the nobles, adding detail and a wider perspective to the story as a whole (Padmore 164). Her narrative and third person perspective intersect the narratives of the two Grey sisters, offering added insight to the events of the novel. We quickly come to realize that Veena pays extreme attention to detail in her observations of the world around her. Working as a painter, she looks beyond what is in front of her and in the same way she is incredibly astute in her observations of the people in her daily life. She is involved with the narrative as well as being a bystander, and through her observations she sees the Grey sisters for who they really are.

In the very first scene of the novel, we see the execution of Lady Jane Grey through Veena’s eyes. This scene is a significant one as it sets the tone for the whole novel. We see Jane as a composed young woman as she faces her own death in front of the horrified crowd. While the gruesome scene unfolds, Veena is consumed by thoughts of Mary Tudor. Her thoughts of Mary foreshadow the tragedies to come and she imagines the queen’s face as Jane is brought to her own death: “her pinched face is blank as a sheet of new vellum, eyes dead, detached, suggesting that the killing has only begun” (Fremantle, Sisters of Treason 3). Moments before she is killed, Jane’s innocence is exemplified as she tries to reach for the execution block. Here Veena is reminded of a new-born animal as Jane flounders blindly, unable to find the block in her sightless state (Fremantle, Sisters of Treason 7). It is Veena that helps her find the block and as she guides her hands she notices how cold and small they are, like that of a child’s. When it is done, and Jane has been killed, Veena, aware that this is a figment of her imagination, sees the Queen Mary standing before her: “Levina does not know why she looks up then, but what she sees when she does is not reality; it is a scene conjured in her imagination: the Queen in the place of that headsman, her fingers twisted through the bloody hair of her young cousin, her face placid, oblivious to the spill of gore over her dress” (Fremantle, Sisters of Treason 8). Veena’s vision of Mary Tudor covered in blood is a clear reference to her image in later years, when she became known as Bloody Mary. This eerie image of Mary Tudor lingers in the subsequent chapters and Veena’s feelings towards the queen turn out to be justified.

It is February 1555 when the first executions occur and Veena witnesses a prisoner’s burning at the stake. She is deeply affected by this and in later chapters we see her struggle
with her feelings towards Mary Tudor. In 1558 the situation has escalated and in the course of only a few years, along with book burnings, over two hundred and fifty people have been burned alive for their Protestant beliefs (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 95). As a Protestant, Veena is in a precarious situation, and must take care to keep her true beliefs hidden. This was a reality for a large number of the English people under Mary Tudor’s rule, as Protestants lived in constant fear of being discovered. “Even dear friends cannot be trusted. And God forbid you should have an altercation with a neighbour, for all they need to do is make a suggestion that you are not attending Mass or that you read the Bible in English,” reflects Veena (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 98). Veena is torn between her own faith and her desire for self-preservation, yet she does what she can to bring attention to the events that are occurring in England. We learn that Veena has sent documents to Geneva, with witness accounts of the burnings, along with her own illustrations of events so that all can see what monstrous acts are rife in the reign of Catholic Mary Tudor (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 96). Overall, Veena’s narrative connects the outside world to the rest of the story. Readers are reminded of the on-going historical events of the time period, which adds to the atmosphere of the novel. Veena, as a foreigner and a female painter is in many ways an outsider and because of this she is exposed to the outside world in a way that the royal women are not. She is able to integrate the royal court as well as her life with the common people, and therefore offers a wider perspective on events. In this way she frames the narratives of the two Grey sisters.

Early on in the novel we see Veena interacting with the Grey sisters and their mother Frances, a dear friend of Veena’s. After Jane’s execution Veena is painfully aware of how dangerous life at court will be for these young girls. She vows to keep them safe and she watches both girls carefully throughout the novel. Her interactions with Mary are genuine and positive and it seems as though she sees Mary Grey for who she really is. She understands and appreciates Mary’s intellect and sees beyond her crooked shape. Veena does not pity Mary Grey; rather, she recognizes her intellect and finds beauty in her oddness. However, Veena understands the dangerous position of Katherine Grey and keeps a close eye on the young, beautiful and frivolous Grey sister. Once Mary Tudor has passed away and Elizabeth I is made queen, Veena notices to her dismay that Katherine does not have the queen’s favour. In a scene where Elizabeth has surrounded herself with old friends and cousins, Katherine is deliberately kept away from the line-up. Veena fears for Katherine’s safety and comes to the conclusion that “clearly the Queen doesn’t want competition from a girl who exceeds her in beauty and, according to some, has an equal claim to the throne”
Veena is fully aware of Katherine’s delicate position and tries to steer her away from doing anything that might upset Queen Elizabeth. Most importantly, she warns Katherine not to wed anyone without the Queen’s permission.

Throughout the novel, Veena remains attuned to her surroundings, constantly picking up on things that are hidden from the untrained eye. Veena is especially attentive when it comes to her work as a painter; as she looks upon her subjects, she sees what is hidden from others. It is as if she sees each person’s true nature and feelings when they sit before her. Veena’s observations are astute, and in her narrative, we see constant foreshadowing of things to come. Her role is in many ways passive, despite her efforts to assist and protect the two sisters Katherine and Mary. In the end she is helpless to protect Katherine as her fate is sealed the very moment she goes against Elizabeth’s wishes. Near the end of the novel, when Veena shows Mary Grey her drawings from many years ago, Mary accurately points out: “You have borne witness to it all, Veena, the great moments and the small. I suppose that is the role of a painter. I’d never really thought…the distillation of moments in time” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 448). At the very end of the novel, when Mary questions whether something could have been done to change the course of events, Veena is sure in her answer. “No,” she utters eventually. ‘It was the Tudor blood that damned your family. Mary of Scotland is full of it too, and so she is incarcerated as you and your sisters were. She will end up paying the ultimate price if Cecil has his way’” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 449).

Once again, Veena connects the narrative to the bigger picture and puts it into perspective. Veena’s third person point of view presents the story to us much like a painting. Veena sees the unfolding events as a whole, and continuously adds detail to the narrative. In this way, her perspective frames the narrative and binds it together.

### 2.4. Katherine Grey

Katherine Grey is a historical figure whose life is in many ways overshadowed by the death of her sister Lady Jane Grey. In *Sisters of Treason*, Fremantle brings attention to this fascinating woman, who at a very young age was in the perilous position of being, in some minds, the Protestant alternative to the Catholic Mary Tudor (Fremantle, “On *Sisters of Treason*”). Elizabeth Tudor was another formidable woman in line to the throne; however there were many who felt concern over the blot of illegitimacy that Elizabeth carried and thus believed Katherine Grey to be a better candidate. Katherine Grey is one of the two protagonists in Fremantle’s novel, and the narrative is largely shaped around the events of her teenage years and young adulthood. She embodies the tragic in the novel as she unwittingly
becomes the focus of schemes to overthrow Elizabeth, that ultimately lead to Katherine’s demise (Fremantle, “On Sisters of Treason”). The women in Katherine’s life are painfully aware of how careless she can be and as the story progresses we see them try to steer her away from danger.

The very first chapter of *Sisters of Treason* sets the tone for the novel and Jane’s execution underlines how dangerous Tudor blood can be. Moreover, Jane Grey and Levina Teerlinc realize that Katherine is now going to be in great danger. Moments before Jane Grey is executed, she leaves her sister Katherine a copy of the Greek New Testament along with a letter where she urges her sister to read the book, claiming that it will bring her an immortal and everlasting life. Jane fears for her sister Katherine and before she is brought to her own death she asks her mother to protect her younger sister. In this moment, Veena, who is also present at Jane’s execution, is struck by the horrible inevitability of Katherine becoming the new focus of reformist plots and yet another casualty in the plots of men (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 6). This foreshadowing looms over Katherine’s narrative, and throughout the novel we see the women in her life desperately trying to protect her. Even Katherine’s sister Mary Grey, who is five years her junior, understands the severity of the situation and tries to keep her out of harm’s way. Katherine is in many ways a victim of circumstance. However, her demeanour and impulsive nature largely contribute to her tragic fate.

When we are first introduced to Katherine Grey, she is a lovesick girl of fourteen, thinking lovingly of her husband Harry Herbert. We come to learn that her marriage with Harry Herbert has essentially been annulled and that after the trouble started with her family, the Herberts sought to distance themselves from the Greys, separating the young couple (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 19). Nevertheless, Katherine pines for Harry Herbert and repeatedly whispers his name to herself. Katherine’s behaviour can to some extent be traced back to the death of her father and her sister Jane. As a coping mechanism, Katherine keeps her thoughts on Harry Herbert: “I try to focus all my thoughts on him so there is no space left in me for thoughts of my sister Jane or Father, whom I miss as if there is a hole at the core of me” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 17-18). After her sister’s death, Katherine feels guilty for having been jealous of her sister Jane, as Jane Grey was recognized for her intelligence and grace. However, Katherine comes to the conclusion that she is content with being the beauty of the family rather than the paragon. Katherine worries that she might drown in grief if she thinks of her sister Jane and instead concludes that girls her age are supposed to think of love (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 18). Therefore, she engulfs herself in thoughts of marriage and
love as a way to escape reality. Katherine’s rationalization underlines her naiveté and for most of the narrative, she is presented as a ditsy and frivolous girl.

Katherine’s personality shines through the narrative as readers are exposed to her first-person perspective of events. She is a beautiful, charming and loving girl who cares deeply for her family, especially her sister Mary. Katherine and Mary’s narrative voices are distinctly different, and their personalities are in many ways complete opposites. Even their pet names, Kitty and Mouse underline the differences in the two girls. Mary, or Mouse, as Katherine often calls her, is intelligent and observant, and favours their late sister Jane. Katherine on the other hand has never been a great scholar and is insecure about her intellectual abilities. Moreover, she is frivolous, impulsive, self-centred and at times careless. Katherine’s impulsivity and carelessness are highlighted in a scene with her friend Juno, where Katherine wants to jump into a river pool. Juno warns Katherine that the water might be foul and there could be rocks hidden underneath as she holds her back from the edge (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 203). Katherine, who has grown tired of other people’s concerns for her, jumps into the water without hesitation: “I shake her off and jump, feeling the rush of air all about me. The thrill of it catches in my throat, making me squeal with glee, and then the cold surprise of the water. I am breathless with wet laughter” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 204). At this point in Katherine’s life, she pursues activities that give her thrill and joy. She does not stop to think of the consequences of her actions and is extremely careless, especially in matters of the heart.

In a way, Katherine lives in her own little world that revolves around love and her own marriage prospects. Katherine is a great beauty and is very charming, and even at the age of fourteen she understands that she has a powerful effect on men. She is flirtatious and loves being the centre of attention at the royal court. At one point in Katherine’s narrative we see her engage in a lesbian or bisexual relationship with her friend Jane Seymour. However, her relationship with Jane, or Juno as she is called, mostly highlights Katherine’s narcissistic tendencies. Katherine and Juno become incredibly close friends and both girls delight in the fact that they look alike. The two girls spend so much time together that they pick up on each other’s tendencies and before long people start mistaking them for twins. The girls take pleasure in their little trick and Katherine notices the added attention they get from men. Furthermore, as the girls grow closer they engage in a sexual relationship. They share a bed and start to explore each other’s bodies as they snuggle together in bed. However, as Katherine and Juno grow more intimate, Katherine’s thoughts of the relationship are always somewhat self-centred and narcissistic: “[s]ometimes I feel I love her more than I have ever
loved any lad. We have slept wound together at night, so tightly I have lost sight of where I begin and she ends. I have felt her breath on my cheek and the heat of her body against mine, touching the core of me with an inexplicable desire” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 115).

Even when Juno becomes ill and is fighting for her life, Katherine is mostly distraught by the thought of losing her perfect twin. “Now that hand lies limp against the rumpled linen bedclothes and I am devastated by the thought that the other me, my perfect double, may not last the night” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 118). By adding this bisexual element to Katherine’s story, Fremantle brings attention to the sexual relationships between women at this time in history. Women slept in the same rooms, often in the same bed and a relationship of this kind could have easily been hidden from plain view. However, where Juno’s feelings for Katherine seem sincere, Katherine appears more attracted to the idea of having a perfect double. Later, when she falls in love with Juno’s brother Edward Seymour, or Hertford, Veena notices that the three young people all look alike. Again, we see Katherine’s narcissistic tendencies being underlined. It is her romance with Hertford that ends up complicating her relationship with Elizabeth Tudor as a marriage between the two would make Katherine even more eligible for the throne.

Katherine Grey has a complicated relationship with Elizabeth Tudor that in the end leads to Katherine’s tragic end. It becomes clear early on that Elizabeth feels threatened by Katherine and her claim to the throne, and Elizabeth makes no effort to hide her feelings towards her cousin. Shortly after she becomes queen, Elizabeth discusses the Greys with Veena as she sits for a portrait, “‘I am fond of Frances, too. She is my cousin. But that daughter, Katherine.’ Her mouth turns down momentarily in distaste. ‘So like her father. He was the real traitor in the family’” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 175). Veena tries to defend Katherine, and perhaps change Elizabeth’s perception of her, but it is all for naught. Elizabeth has clearly made up her mind, and in her eyes, Katherine is nothing but trouble. Katherine is not in the queen’s favour and feels snubbed and humiliated. Moreover, Elizabeth controls her fate as she is not allowed to marry without her permission. This is what ultimately drives Katherine to go against the queen’s wishes by marrying Hertford, Juno’s brother, in secret. Katherine becomes pregnant and once they are found out, both Katherine and her husband are taken by guards to the Tower of London by Elizabeth’s orders. There Katherine remains, locked away much like a bird in a cage, and Mary and Veena are helpless to free her.

Once Katherine Grey has been incarcerated we see a tangible change in her character and for the remainder of the narrative she is portrayed as a tragic and sympathetic figure. After the birth of her first child Katherine’s priorities shift instantly and she becomes a
selfless and loving mother. Motherhood brings out another side of Katherine, allowing readers to see her with more clarity. In the first months of her incarceration Katherine has hopes of being set free and holds on to the idea that one day she will live happily with her family in another place. As time passes, Katherine’s outlook becomes bleaker and she feels for her sons who have spent their entire lives locked up in the Tower with her. She feels as if she has passed a curse onto her boys with her Tudor blood, and because of this they will never know freedom. Shortly after the birth of her second son, Katherine’s eldest son Edward is taken away from her on Elizabeth’s orders. She is also completely separated from her husband and given no means to communicate with him. At this point, Katherine starts to lose her grip on reality. The isolation and separation from her loved ones break her down completely. She becomes obsessed with ideas of sin and attempts to purge herself by not eating, which slowly leads to her wasting away. In her final hours, her thoughts are on her sister Jane and Katherine is sure that she has been sent by God to fetch her. Katherine dies a tragic figure, separated from her husband and eldest son, and from her only living sister Mary. After being locked up in lonely quarters for years, she finally succumbs to death.

Fremantle’s portrayal of Katherine’s final years illustrates the cruelty of her punishment. She is systematically broken down and even her innocent children suffer for her wrongdoings. In a similar way, the Grey sisters’ whole lives have been shaped by the actions of their father, whose ambitions soared too high. The Tudor period marks a time where certain women were able to rise to power, yet it was ingrained in society, from top to bottom, that men held dominance over women. Katherine is an overlooked figure who found herself at the heart of the struggle for the Tudor succession. She had little control over her own life, and many of her experiences mirror those of highborn women at this time in history. In comparison to Jane Grey, Katherine’s life and death have gotten little attention. Jane’s execution is considered a tragic and shameful event and when she was executed it shocked the nation. It is as if Katherine’s poor treatment went unnoticed, as she was hidden away in the Tower on Elizabeth I’s orders. We see an unfamiliar side of Elizabeth I in *Sisters of Treason*, especially in regard to her treatment of her cousin Katherine, and this shines a light on some of the brutal acts she was responsible for in order to hold on to her own power (Fremantle, “On *Sisters of Treason*”). Katherine might not have been executed like her sister Jane, but Elizabeth’s poor treatment of her cousin directly led to her sad and lonely death. In Fremantle’s portrayal, Katherine Grey is naïve during her teenage years and early adulthood, and her reckless behaviour contributes to her fate. However, she is also a victim of circumstance and in many ways her Tudor blood
damns her from the start. After Jane’s death, she becomes the focus of political plots and even after being locked away in the Tower, there are still people who seek to overthrow Elizabeth in her name. Ultimately it is the Tudor blood of her family that seals Katherine’s fate, along with her own impulsivity and careless nature. In the end, she emerges as a tragic character, and in many ways, a victim of circumstance.

2.5. Mary Grey
The Lady Mary Grey is an especially interesting character and it can even be argued that she is the heart of *Sisters of Treason*. She is the youngest of the three Grey sisters, yet she is wise beyond her years and there is an undeniable sense of maturity about her. She is physically disabled, hunchbacked and unusually small of stature, which makes her an outsider in many ways. At the same time, Mary’s royal blood places her at the royal court where she spends a large part of her formative years. Mary is incredibly loving and protective of her sister Katherine and always seems to have her sister’s best interest at heart. Despite being the younger sibling, Mary proves to be mature and level-headed, and, in many ways, she favours her late sister the lady Jane Grey. She enjoys reading, is an excellent student and is especially interested in philosophy. Overall, Mary’s chapters are incredibly touching and her personality shines through as we follow her first-person perspective of events. Mary’s narrative guides us through the novel and at the same time we experience her hardships and disappointments as she navigates through this difficult time in her life. Mary’s innermost feelings are exposed to the reader as well as the outside world’s treatment of this young girl. In fact, some of the most compelling aspects of Mary’s narrative pertain to her complicated feelings towards the outside world. Mary feels like an outsider most of her life and at the royal court those feelings are exemplified.

Mary Grey is an intelligent young girl who is incredibly self-aware and in tune with her surroundings. At a very young age she seems to understand just how different she is from others and that in turn she is treated a certain way. Following the execution of her father and sister, she is truly an outsider at the royal court, both physically and socially. Consequently, she finds herself either being judged or totally ignored: “I feel scrutinized for my ugliness as my sister must feel gazed upon for her beauty” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 28). As a result, Mary learns to make herself smaller and at times she feels invisible. She observes the people around her and notices things that others do not. At the royal court she is often overlooked, and on the whole, her abilities are underestimated. Mary Tudor treats her as if she were a plaything, a doll or a small child. She discusses sensitive information in her
presence, even the possibility of executing her sister Jane (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 32). Mary Tudor’s behaviour towards Mary Grey indicates that she does not see her as a threat, and at times she even treats her as if she is subhuman. Queen Elizabeth appreciates Mary’s intellect, yet she does not see her as a threat because of her disability. Furthermore, unlike her sister Katherine, Mary Tudor cannot have children, meaning she will never be eligible for the throne. Elizabeth makes her feelings towards Mary Grey clear in a scene where the two of them discuss Elizabeth’s marriage plans for her cousin Mary of Scotland: “‘Well at least you will never be a threat to the throne, Mary’. What she means is that I am the wrong shape for greatness and will not produce boys” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 411). At this time in history, a woman’s worth was deeply connected to her ability to produce children, and highborn girls were expected to produce male heirs. Thus, Mary ostensibly does not pose a threat to Elizabeth because her disability outweighs her claim to the throne. Mary understands that because of her disability it is unlikely that she will ever be able to have children. This is in part what makes her an outsider and in some people’s eyes, subhuman. Growing up in these circumstances takes a toll on Mary and it shapes her into the person she eventually becomes.

On the whole, Mary’s narrative is extremely personal as we follow her journey towards self-acceptance. As a young girl she is deeply affected by other people’s perception of her, and she struggles to adjust to life at court. Her presence at the royal court does not sit well with some people, likely because they are not used to being around a physically disabled person. She hates being touched by others and feels as if she is constantly being scrutinized for her appearance. At the age of nine, while preparing for Mary Tudor’s wedding, Mary Grey tries her best to keep her composure amongst girls who mock and belittle her: “‘I don’t know why the Queen would want such a creature at her wedding,’ Magdalen whispers to Cousin Margaret, not so quiet that I can’t hear” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 12). When Jane Dormer steps in and informs the girls that Mary Grey is full of royal blood, “‘Magdalen mutters, ‘but what a misshapen package,’” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 12). This scene sheds light on Mary’s treatment at the royal court as the girls mock Mary in her presence. Mary is clearly affected by this and tries to hold back the tears as the girls dress her. She fortifies herself with the thought that her late sister Jane would tell her to be stoic and to keep her feelings hidden from others. Furthermore, she would reassure Mary that God made her this way for a reason and that she is perfect in his eyes. Yet, Mary has a more realistic view on her situation as a whole: “[b]ut I know I am not perfect; I am so hunched about the shoulders and crooked at the spine, I look as if I have been hung by the scruff on a hook for
too long. And I am small as an infant of five, despite being almost twice that age”
(Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 12). Mary has in many ways come to terms with her disability, yet the people around her continue to patronize her in an attempt to shield her from the truth.

It becomes clear early on in the novel that an effort is being made to diminish the appearance of Mary’s physical disability. Her clothing is specifically tailored to fit her shape and to hide her crookedness. Moreover, Mary reveals that even her own mother keeps a portrait of her which makes her appear perfectly formed (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 28). Despite these efforts, Mary knows that there is no way to hide what she is from the outside world. Mary’s frustration is evident as she realizes that her family has been trying to shield her from the harsh truth. Mary herself would rather face reality and does not appreciate being lied to, even with good intentions. At the age of nine, Mary reflects on the people in her life who tell her small lies in order to make her feel better: “‘[y]ou are not so small, Mary, and your back is only a little crooked; it will straighten as you grow.’ It is said to make me feel better about my deformities, but I would rather the truth” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 31). Even at this early age, Mary does not care for deceit in any form, and the portrait her mother keeps of her, is untrue and deceiving. Mary does not see herself in the painting because it hides her disability and presents something else to the world.

It becomes clear later on that Mary wants to be seen for who she really is. Mary longs to be her authentic self and to project that image to the world. She grows tired of being presented in a way that she feels is misleading. Mary asks Veena to draw her truthfully, and the experience proves to be extremely therapeutic: “‘I would like you to draw me as I truly am – my crookedness, my ugliness – I want you to show it, for anything else would not be me’” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 127). Here Mary sees her body for what it truly is for the first time and it brings her joy. Mary confides in Veena that she has not been allowed a mirror in an effort to shield her from the truth: “‘[y]ou know they have never allowed me a mirror. They think that by obscuring the truth from me I will be better off’” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 129). Mary knows that her family has good intentions and that they only wish to protect her from the harshness of the outside world (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 129). However, Mary wants to embrace the truth and take control of her own image. In the painting session with Veena, Mary not only takes control of her own image, she also opens up about her intimate feelings.

The painting session with Veena allows Mary to be open and vulnerable, and it is here that she admits to her most intimate feelings. It is as if her vulnerability and nakedness edge her on to open up to Veena and express how she truly feels. Mary, wise beyond her years,
starts to discuss Plato’s Symposium and explains to Veena that the philosophical text is about
love:

‘It is all about love. There is an idea in it, that in our true state we were once like
wheels, two heads, four arms, four legs, spinning across the earth, and that somehow
we became split and are destined to seek out the other half of ourselves. It is silly of
course, but a little like the story of man’s fall, is it not?’ Levina nods and smiles, then
is surprised at the force with which Mary says, ‘Do you suppose there is the
misshapen half of a wheel somewhere in the world to match me?’ (Fremantle, Sisters
of Treason 129-30)

Mary opens up to Veena because unlike the others, Veena sees Mary for who she really is
and does not patronize her. It is clear that Mary longs for love and has feelings like any other
girl her age. This is something that is touched upon throughout the narrative and affects Mary
deeply. As in all other matters, Mary is realistic and straightforward, and she knows that her
prospects of finding love are minimal. She does however express these feelings to Veena,
revealing that someday she would like to find love. In the end it is Veena that brings Mary
and Thomas Keyes together, urging him to ask for Mary’s hand. Keys is a simple man, and
not of noble birth, but in his eyes, Mary is perfect. He sees beyond her shape and truly loves
every part of her. This is a turning point in Mary’s narrative as we see her follow her heart
and chase after her own happiness: “I find myself thinking not what would Jane do, but what
would Katherine do – after all, she is the expert in things concerning love. I find I am
swamped with this new feeling, giddy with it, and begin to understand what has driven
Katherine all these years’” (Fremantle, Sisters of Treason 430). Even though her happiness is
short lived, Mary regrets nothing. She finally stands up to Elizabeth and puts herself first.
Mary and Thomas Keyes enjoy two blissful weeks together before they are discovered, and
Thomas sadly passes away while Mary is in captivity for her treachery. Despite losing the
man she loved, and only having experienced love for a short time, Mary is grateful to have
experienced it at all. At the end of the novel, Mary assures Veena that she is thankful for her
moment in the sun. Moreover, she reflects that in the scheme of a life, it is not the duration of
a moment that matters, but rather the impact (Fremantle, Sisters of Treason 448). After years
of living a confined life, Mary manages to break free by seizing control of her own life.

Throughout Sisters of Treason, readers are presented with a reoccurring image of
caged birds. These birds can be seen as a metaphor for a life in captivity, symbolizing the
confined lives of Katherine and Mary Grey. Both girls live incredibly constrained lives after
the death of their sister Jane and while Katherine is physically held captive for years, Mary is
also a prisoner in a sense. She is powerless to help her sister Katherine, and because of her physical disability Mary feels trapped in her own body. Elizabeth I has two lovebirds as pets, and they likely symbolize the two Grey sisters. During Elizabeth’s reign, Mary Grey empathizes with the birds and as Katherine’s situation worsens with her being sent to the Tower, Mary tries to set them free. She cannot bear to see them shut away and unfastens the door to their cage in hopes that they will fly about the palace, even if it is only for a little while (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 381). She confesses to Veena that she has deliberately been letting the birds out of their cage and Veena suspects that Mary sees herself in these birds (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 382). As always, Veena’s observations are astute and Mary Grey, deeply affected by the incarceration of her sister, longs to set the birds free for good, hoping that they will fly far away. In a scene where Elizabeth is fuming with anger, having discovered the birds missing, Mary spots the birds in their hiding place. “A frisson runs through me, as if it is I who is balancing, gazing down upon the Queen and her ladies” (Fremantle, *Sisters of Treason* 387). Her act of rebellion might be small, but it is symbolic nonetheless. In a state of helplessness, Mary Grey tries to grant these little birds the freedom she and her sister cannot have. Elizabeth has a hold on them both and while Mary Grey is unable to fight back, this small rebellious act makes her feel like she could at some point be in control of her own destiny. She finally decides to follow her own heart and stand up to Elizabeth when she marries Thomas Keyes without her consent. When Mary takes control of her own life, she essentially breaks free from her cage.

Overall, Mary Grey’s narrative offers a unique perspective on dominant attitudes towards the disabled in sixteenth century England. In addition, Fremantle explores Mary’s emotional state as she struggles with her identity as well as her desire to be free and find happiness in her life. Mary is resilient and her journey towards acceptance and finding her self-worth is both painful and beautiful. In the end, she refuses to be held back by her disability as she fights for her own happiness. On the whole, Mary’s story is that of an intelligent and accomplished woman who despite her extraordinary story has been overlooked in history (Fremantle, “On *Sisters of Treason*”). Shining a light on the experiences and feelings of a young disabled woman brings attention to marginalized figures who to this day lack representation in most mediums. In her online article “On *Sisters of Treason*”, Fremantle explains the significance of Mary’s story:

Mary offered me a unique opportunity to uncover Early Modern attitudes to disability, something that is usually brushed under the carpet of history and also to describe a more nuanced view than the familiar crook-backed villain found in literature. Indeed
it is rare to find a disabled protagonist in contemporary fiction, historical or otherwise and Mary is a woman who ultimately refuses to have her life curbed by her physical circumstances so I feel the true heart of the story lies with her. (Fremantle, “On Sisters of Treason”)

Mary’s voice throughout the narrative is refreshing and impactful. Her story is one of loss and hardship, but it is also a story of love. We follow Mary’s journey toward self-acceptance and when she finally finds it, it is a beautiful thing. Despite having lost so much, she remains positive and most of all grateful for the happy times in her life. In Sisters of Treason, Fremantle puts a disabled person at the forefront and in many ways brings attention to the struggles people with disabilities faced at this time.
3. Historical fiction on accused witches

Historical fiction can bring forward a variety of narratives, and writers of historical fiction often focus on the lives of marginalized people. A myriad of time periods and groups of people can be explored and represented through fiction, which makes the genre both diverse and unique. In many cases, contemporary audiences seem drawn to the strangeness of the past and some of the darkest times in the history of modern Europe have inspired popular works of historical fiction. The witch persecution that took place in early modern Europe is a phenomenon that people remain fascinated by to this day. The gruesome acts that took place during this time period seem unbelievable by today’s standards and in recent years, witch persecution and the witch-hunts of early modern Europe have inspired various works of historical fiction. There seems to be an increased awareness of the plight of women in history who were accused of practicing witchcraft. Many of the victims were healers, outcasts or simply women who lived alone, and no woman was truly safe from witch persecution during this time. This is reflected in historical fiction on accused witches where a majority of the stories that have been published focus on the experiences of women. After all, those who stood accused of witchcraft in early modern Europe were predominantly women. Historical novels on accused witches have been popular for some time now and in the last year alone, Beth Underdown’s *The Witchfinder’s Sister* (2018), Tracy Borman’s *The King’s Witch* (2018) and Stacey Hall’s *The Familiars* (2019) were published to great acclaim among readers worldwide. These are only a few of the historical novels available on the subject and when it comes to witch persecution there are many angles and viewpoints that can be explored.

Susan Fletcher’s historical novel *Witch Light* (2010) sheds light on witch persecution and the perception of witches in seventeenth century England and Scotland. The novel tells the story of Corrag, an accused witch who legend says bore witness to the Massacre of Glencoe in February 1692. Fletcher utilizes the legend of Corrag in her novel and incorporates one of the most shameful events in Scottish history, the Massacre of Glencoe. The massacre is central to the story; however, the main focus of the novel is on Corrag, a young woman who at an early age is forced to flee her home on account of witch persecution. She is an outcast of society, and eventually finds refuge in Glencoe, in the Highlands of Scotland. Fletcher’s novel illustrates the accusatory mentality of the time, and underlines the hysteria surrounding witch persecution in seventeenth century England. Moreover, *Witch Light* showcases attitudes towards witches in the wider context of the British Isles, especially through the novel’s second narrator, Charles Leslie. Fletcher’s novel emphasizes how women
who were educated, solitary or simply different in some way often fell victim to witch persecution. In addition, Fletcher sheds light on the complicated political climate of late seventeenth century Scotland, and how the Highland clans were viewed by Lowlanders and the English people. In the two following chapters, background will be provided to contextualize the discussion and historical background of Fletcher’s novel.

3.1. Witch persecution in early modern Europe

The history of witchcraft and the persecution and prosecution of witches in Europe has attracted considerable attention throughout the years. It is a fascinating subject and a gruesome part of history that intrigues people to this day. During the early modern period of European history, roughly from 1450 to 1750, thousands of people were tried for the crime of witchcraft. The accused were predominantly women and about half of these individuals were executed, usually by burning (Levack 1). Sadly, there is no way for us to know exactly how many perished during this period of witch-hunts. In *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Levack states that “[b]ecause so many judicial records have been destroyed or otherwise lost, and because the trials of so many witches were never even officially recorded, the total number of witchcraft prosecutions and executions cannot be determined with any degree of accuracy” (19). However, by examining records from witchcraft trials in Europe it can be estimated that there were around 110,000 trials, and that the overall execution rate was around 48 per cent (Levack 21). There are thought to have been about 5,000 trials in the British Isles alone, with more than half of them occurring in Scotland (Levack 20). These numbers are significantly lower than previous estimates, some of which numbered in the millions. However, this does not change the fact that these figures represent a grim reality where alleged witches were tried and killed for crimes that they either did not commit or for crimes that were grossly exaggerated. Moreover, these numbers simply represent official trials and are not in any way a reflection of how many people lived under suspicion of witchcraft (Levack 21). People were driven by superstition and hatred as they turned against neighbours, friends and even family members, trying to rid the world of witches.

Witch prosecutions and witch-hunts varied in size and once a witch-hunt had been initiated, it could follow a number of different courses. The first type, and by far the most common, usually consisted of one to three persons (Levack 156). As Levack explains, “The main feature of the small hunt is that the search for malefactors was limited to the individuals who were originally accused” (157). Hunts of this type were most common in England, where judges could not use torture to obtain the names of accomplices. Many of the smaller
hunts did not grow in size because the populace or authorities were determined to rid themselves of a specific individual, and once the goal was reached there was no reason to pursue the matter further. However, small hunts of this kind had the potential to develop into larger hunts. When authorities were not content to restrict their investigations to the originally accused persons, a medium-sized witch-hunt of five to ten victims often ensued. The main characteristic of a hunt of this size is that torture was employed which resulted in a second round of accusations taking place (Levack 157). The large witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which claimed anywhere from ten to hundreds of victims, were characterized by a high degree of panic and hysteria. They were most common in Germany, but almost all European countries, including England, Scotland, Spain and Denmark, experienced at least one large-scale witch-hunt. These hunts were caused by a chain-reaction of prosecutions and the results were catastrophic (Levack 158).

Witch prosecution and witch-hunts at this scale are a phenomenon unique to Europe. Levack argues that “[a]lthough the number of witches who were tried varied from place to place, and from time to time, all of these witchcraft prosecutions can be considered parts of one very large judicial operation that took place only in Europe and only during the early modern period” (1-2). There was a gradual increase in the number of these prosecutions during the fifteenth century, followed by a slight reduction in the early sixteenth century. There was however a dramatic increase in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries before a gradual decline started in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Levack 1). Hence, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries mark a time when witch prosecutions were at an all-time high in Europe. However, there is disagreement among scholars concerning the history of witch prosecution, namely regarding why there was a rise and decline in witchcraft accusations and beliefs (Macfarlane 3). The most widely accepted explanation for the dramatic increase of witch prosecutions in Europe in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the Reformation and the public’s perception of witches in general. This perception and the subsequent ramifications were forwarded by the cultivated popes of the Renaissance, by scholars, lawyers and by the great Protestant reformers (Trevor-Roper 121).

In the late sixteenth century there was a change in the way witches were perceived, as they became a part of an elite male discourse about the morality and efficacy of magic. At the village level, a witch was regarded as evil because she did harm to others on the basis of her own magical powers; these evil doings were often referred to as *maleficium* (Popkin 199). Accusations were often made by neighbours or family members and were generally made out
of malice or for revenge. These witchcraft accusations allowed members of early modern European communities to resolve conflicts between themselves and their neighbours (Levack 116). Moreover, they used witchcraft as a way to explain misfortunes that occurred in their daily lives. Witches were essentially members of their community who were believed to do harm to others by witchcraft. However, in elite writings, a witch’s evil nature was attributed to the fact that she had rejected God and made a pact with the devil who deluded her into believing she possessed independent power. Witches therefore deserved to be prosecuted not simply because of their maleficium, but even more so for the crime of heresy (Popkin 199). The witch prosecutions became a tool to control the masses and to push forward a very negative image of women in general. In “Wives, Mothers, and Witches: The Learned Discourse about Women in Early Modern Europe”, Popkin states that “[d]eclaring the witch incapable of independent action was a way of denying the power that women derived from their functions as nurturers, which reflected the sixteenth-century Protestants’ wariness of all female nurturing power – whether malevolent or benevolent” (199). These Protestant attitudes towards women and witches were especially prominent in sixteenth and seventeenth century England and Scotland.

Writers in sixteenth and seventeenth century England believed that women’s temperaments were to blame for the predominance of female witches. People in power suggested that the female sex was both weak and vicious, weak towards Satan and vicious towards fellow human beings (Macfarlane 161). Women were thus suspected of witchcraft because they were seen as the weaker sex and therefore considered more likely to succumb to diabolical temptations (Levack 126). Additionally, women did not possess any legal or judicial power at this time, making it extremely difficult for them to defend themselves against charges of witchcraft in court (Levack 128). This resulted in a large number of female witch convictions, which reinforced the stereotype of the female witch. In fact, in the county of Essex, England, 92 per cent of those who stood accused of being witches between the years 1560 and 1672 were women. According to Macfarlane, suspected witches in England were characteristically middle-aged or old, and their victims were often younger adults (162). It was a common belief that witches grew more wicked and powerful with age, so children could not be powerful witches. There were also recorded cases where both mothers and their daughters were accused of being witches and in such cases the mothers were believed to be the stronger witch (Macfarlane 162). Widows and those who lived in solidarity were often victims of witch accusations and in general, outsiders were targeted and subsequently prosecuted for witchcraft.
There are many factors to consider regarding the individuals who were prosecuted for being witches, including morality, sexuality, religion and the marginalization of those who were perceived as the other (Popkin 197). “Those who did not share in the community belief raised the specter of heresy and needed to be pushed to the margins so that the threat might be contained,” Popkin explains (198). Women who were outsiders in society were often the targets of witch accusations, especially women who were considered different, were promiscuous or had extensive knowledge of herbs and an affinity with nature, as is the case with both Corrag and her mother in Fletcher’s *Witch Light*. Women often acted as healers in early modern European villages and were known as wise women. These women used a variety of folk remedies, mainly herbs and ointments in their work and many people believed these treatments to be magical because the natural ingredients were usually supplemented with magical formulae or superstitious prayer. These wise women had a useful function in their communities and therefore they were generally tolerated by their neighbours. They were, however, vulnerable to charges of practicing magic and when the villagers contracted a disease or died unexpectedly, these women could easily be accused of using their magical arts for maleficent purposes (Levack 127). Further, because witch accusations were often fuelled by anger and desire for revenge, a quarrel between neighbours or an unexpected death in the village could be enough to turn the villagers against one another, and marginalized women were especially vulnerable to these accusations. Thankfully, witch prosecutions came to an end in the late seventeenth century. The last execution of a so-called witch in Britain took place in 1727. Finally, the Witchcraft Act of 1735 was passed by the Parliament of the Kingdom of Great Britain, putting an end to generations of fear and persecutions (Fletcher, Afterword 354).

3.2. The Massacre of Glencoe in 1692

The Massacre of Glencoe took place in the early morning hours of February 13, 1692, in Glencoe in the Highlands of Scotland. A detachment of government soldiers under the command of Captain Robert Campbell of Glenlyon, acting on secret orders from Lord Advocate, Dalrymple of Stair, butchered thirty-eight of the small clan of the MacDonalds of Glencoe (Lynch 305). Many more died of exposure in the snow, mostly women and children, as they fled up into the mountains to avoid the slaughter on this cold February morning. What led to this event was in many ways the political climate of the time, as the Highland clans refused to recognize William III as their king. Many of the Scottish clans remained loyal to King James II of England and Ireland and VII of Scotland after he was deposed and replaced
on the English and Scottish thrones by William III in 1689. In August 1691, the government offered indemnity to all chiefs who should take an oath of allegiance to King William III, before January 1, 1692 (Massacre of Glencoe). The small clan was essentially massacred due to the fact that their chief was six days late when he signed an oath of allegiance to King William III. The massacre later became notorious, partly because it was a murder under trust, as the troops had accepted the MacDonalds’ hospitality for over a week before they carried out the order of killing the clan. The murder of men, women and children as they slept soundly in their beds was a most dishonourable affair (Prebble 10). Sadly, the massacre was neither the first nor the worst atrocity committed by the government in the Highlands in the seventeenth century (Lynch 305). Nonetheless, the Massacre of Glencoe remains one of the most tragic and shameful events of Scottish history.

The Massacre of Glencoe occurred during a turbulent time in Scottish history, only a few years after the Jacobite rising of 1689. The name Jacobite was given to the supporters of the exiled branch of the Stuart dynasty. They sought to restore James II and VII, the exiled Stuart king and the last Catholic monarch, to the throne of Scotland and Ireland. After the Revolution of 1688-89, two areas in the British Isles remained loyal to King James II and VII, most of Ireland and the central core of the Highlands of Scotland. The Highland War mostly consisted of raids and counter-raids and small battles between the years 1689 and 1690. After losing their best commander, Dundee, in a battle at Killiecrankie in 1689, the war deteriorated into a series of raids by Jacobite clans on their Williamite neighbours and Lowland areas close to the Highlands (Szechi 81). When the Jacobite army in Ireland surrendered in 1691, all hope of reinforcement evaporated, and the clans accordingly negotiated a surrender of their own. However, the onset of peace in Scotland was marred by the massacre of the MacDonalds of Glencoe on February 13, 1692. The Massacre of Glencoe proved to have repercussions in the Highlands for generations to come (Szechi 82).

Shortly after the massacre, the British government made an official inquiry into the events. The first inquiry was inconclusive and the second exonerated everyone except Dalrymple and the deputy governor of Fort William. However, the Scottish parliament decided in 1695 that the atrocities in Glencoe had been an act of murder. These results gave a sharp boost to Jacobite sympathizers in the western Highlands (Lynch 306). The massacre shocked and disgusted a broad spectrum of Scots after news of it began to circulate some months later and this contributed to their gathering alienation from the Williamite regime (Szechi 88). Furthermore, the massacre is an accurate mirror of the divisions and different lines of communications which existed within William’s government and had indeed
permeated every Stewart government throughout the century. It was the product of a moderate Highland policy which went terribly wrong (Lynch 307). Furthermore, the Massacre of Glencoe can be seen as an example of the decline of the Highland society.

The Highland people once constituted a majority of Scotland’s population. They were a military society that largely helped to establish and maintain the monarchy. The society of the Highland people was tribal and feudal, and it would not change itself to meet a changing world, nor did it wish to. The decline of the Highland society became more rapid in the second half of the seventeenth century, and within a hundred and fifty years, its people had been driven from the mountains (Prebble 9). The Highlanders were in many cases disliked by the Lowlanders as well as by the English people. By 1690, the Highlanders were regarded by many Lowlanders as an obstacle to the complete political union of England and Scotland, and their stubbornness and independence of spirit, expressed in their customs, clothes and their language, had to be broken and humbled (Prebble 9). In Glencoe: The Story of the Massacre, John Prebble brings attention to the fact that “[t]he MacDonalds of Glencoe were early victims of what the Highlanders called Mi-run mor nan Gall, the Lowlander’s great hatred. Lowland leaders naturally despised what they wished to destroy and therefore that destruction seemed to be a virtuous necessity” (9). The late seventeenth century was a turbulent time in Scotland, with internal division between the clans and conflict between the Highlanders and Lowlanders and between Catholics and Protestants. Even so, when news of the massacre broke, it caused an outrage nationwide.

In 1692, three months after the massacre in Glencoe, a pamphlet entitled A Letter From a Gentleman in Scotland, appeared in Edinburgh. The pamphlet gave intimate accounts of the deaths in Glencoe, leading most to believe that the pamphlet was simply Jacobite propaganda. To this day, it remains the most substantial source of information on the Massacre of Glencoe. The pamphlet was published anonymously; however, it is almost certain that the author was Charles Leslie (Fletcher, Afterword 353). Malcolm Laing was a Scottish historian, advocate and politician, who in The Belfast Monthly Magazine in 1814 published an anonymous historical account of the massacre from Laing’s History of Scotland:

Before the break of day, a party, entering as friends, shot Glencoe as he rose from his bed. His wife was stripped naked by the soldiers, who tore the rings with their teeth from her fingers; and she expired next morning with horror and grief. Nine men were bound and deliberately shot at Glenlyon’s quarters; his landlord was shot by his orders, and a young boy, who clung to his knees for protection, was stabbed to death. (Historical Account 25)
This account of the Massacre of Glencoe is incredibly chilling as the slaughter is described in great detail. It goes on to describe how thirty-eight members of the clan were killed by their inmates and guests, and the women and children, stripped naked, were left to find their way to some remote friendly habitation, or to perish in the snow (Historical Account 25). The Massacre of Glencoe is still regarded as a horrific and shameful event in Scottish history. For many people, the massacre is an example of the poor treatment of the Highland clans in the late seventeenth century.

3.3. Witch Light

Witch Light, previously published as Corrag, is Susan Fletcher’s third novel and in 2010 it was shortlisted for the Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize. Witch Light tells the story of Corrag, a young English woman imprisoned as a witch in 1692. Corrag has been sentenced to death by burning and awaits her fate in a cold and filthy prison cell in Inverary, Scotland. She is visited by Charles Leslie, an Irish Anglican priest who questions her about the events that took place at Glencoe on February 13, 1692. It becomes clear that Corrag witnessed the Massacre of Glencoe, and the novel follows her experiences that lead up to the massacre. Corrag’s narrative voice is incredibly personal as she tells her story to Mr. Leslie and readers get a glimpse into her past before she made her way to Glencoe. Her story is passionate and beautiful and filled with heartbreak. Corrag’s narrative is interspersed with short chapters written from Leslie’s viewpoint in the form of letters that he sends to his beloved wife. Leslie’s chapters frame the narrative and put Corrag’s story into perspective. Leslie connects Corrag’s story to the outside world and his insightful commentary adds depth to the story without interrupting it.

In Witch Light, Fletcher brings attention to the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692. In addition, the novel provides insight into the persecution of witches, and how dangerous it could be for a woman to be an outsider in society in seventeenth century England. Witch Light tells the story of a young English woman named Corrag, who on account of witch persecution flees her home and seeks shelter in the Highlands of Scotland. Corrag is a woman who legend says tried to protect the MacDonalds from their fate. Her wish to protect the people of Glencoe from the sword has since passed into folklore (Fletcher, Afterword 354). It is rumoured that no local men died by the sword in battle for two centuries, until a sword was found in Loch Leven in 1916 and brought ashore (Fletcher, Afterword 354). There is no account of Corrag’s own death, although legend says that when she died she was an old woman, and that she was buried with the highest honours, by the MacDonald clan (Fletcher,
Afterword 354). Fletcher utilizes the narrative perspective of this woman who has since passed into myth, as well as the voice of Charles Leslie. As stated above, Charles Leslie is the man who is believed to have sent a pamphlet to Edinburgh three months after the Massacre of Glencoe, informing them of the atrocities that occurred in the Glen. The pamphlet remains the most substantial source of information on the Massacre of Glencoe and its contents are clearly reflected in Fletcher’s telling of the massacre (Fletcher, Afterword 353). However, the focus of the novel as a whole is not on the massacre itself. Rather, the focus is on Corrag’s trials and triumphs and her life in proximity to the MacDonals. Corrag essentially decides to live in solitude to escape a community by which she has been rejected her entire life. It is when she is accepted by the Highland clan that she finds true happiness. In the novel we are presented with different sides of human nature, both the good and the bad. The novel is a story of bravery, passion and betrayal, and it shows how much difference one person can make, even to major historical events.

3.4. Corrag

When we are first introduced to Corrag, she is a prisoner in a cold cell, awaiting her execution. She has been sentenced to die by burning and is believed to be a witch. Corrag has grown accustomed to solitude which is made evident in the very beginning of the novel. Her first chapter consists solely of her inner monologue, as she reflects on her life. She thinks of the glen, of a man she loves and of her mother Cora and what brought her to this place. Corrag is consumed with thoughts of what it means to be called a witch, and she wonders if that is all she will be remembered for in her death: “The oldest name. The worst. I know its thick, mud-weight. I know the mouth’s shape when it says it. I reckon it’s the most hated word of all – more hated than Highland, or Papist is. Some won’t say William like it’s poison – I know many people don’t want him to be King. But he is King, for now. And I was always witch” (Fletcher, Witch Light 10). Corrag goes back and forth in time, as she thinks of the different lives she has lived. In her mind, she has lived four lives, and the best life she has ever known is when she lived in the glen. When Charles Leslie approaches her in her cell, she agrees to tell him what she saw in Glencoe, with the condition that he will listen to her life’s tale (Fletcher, Witch Light 36). Underneath it all, Corrag wants to be remembered for the good she did while she was alive. Corrag’s story begins with her first life, when she lived with her mother Cora in England.

When Corrag looks back on her childhood and her life before the glen, we are first presented with images of her mother Cora. Cora is a beautiful and fiery woman who at the
age of six or seven runs away from her hometown after her mother’s execution for witchcraft (Fletcher, Witch Light 46). In the years that follow, Cora wanders around the country, meeting other people in hiding along the way. She learns about herbs from other outcasts, accused witches and rogues, and lives a gypsy’s life before she eventually settles down in a small village in the north of England called Thorneyburnbank (Fletcher, Witch Light 47). This village is close to the Scottish border and Cora hopes that the threat of thieving Mosssmen will be enough to occupy the villagers. She reasons that with one eye on the border reivers, the villagers will be less likely to accuse her of being a witch. Years later, five of the border reivers are caught and hanged. Thereafter, the villagers’ eyes turn to Cora, and they slowly start to blame her for their own misfortunes. A calf is born with a white star on its head, which the villagers believe to be an evil marking (Fletcher, Witch Light 58). The situation escalates quickly when the churchman dies unexpectedly, and a younger man comes in his place. He urges the villagers to cleanse the world of sinners, namely those who have fallen from the sight of god: “[t]here are those who know the Devil’s way and is it not our duty to cleanse the earth? To rid it of such sinners?” (Fletcher, Witch Light 60). Finally, when a baby is born blue and dead, Cora knows that the end is nigh (Fletcher, Witch Light 60). These events are inspired by the witch persecution that took place in seventeenth century England, and Fletcher captures the spirit of the time perfectly. We see neighbour turning against neighbour, and the churchman urging the villagers to rid the world of sinners, who in many cases are women. The villagers gather one night in a witch-hunt, and this is when Cora sends her only daughter into the night, hoping that she will be safe if she goes north and west (Fletcher, Witch Light 61).

Cora’s second life is her journey north and west, before she finds her way to Glencoe. On her journey, Corra encounters a small group of Mossmen who empathize with her because they have a lot in common. “We are the same – you and us. You might think that we are not, but we are. Our ancestors are mostly dead by the hangman’s doing. We also live by nature’s laws – which are the true laws. He shook his head. Man’s laws are not as they should be” (Fletcher, Witch Light 77). Throughout the novel we are presented with examples of crimes and punishments, where the law seems ruthless and barbaric. The Mossmen are hanged for stealing and women are drowned, hanged or burned if they are found guilty of practicing witchcraft. People who live by their own laws are seen as outsiders or rebels and at the same time, they are pushed to the margins where they live in fear of being persecuted for being different. The Mossmen take Corra in because just like them, she is an outsider. During her time with the Mossmen, Corra learns for the first time just how divided Scotland
One of the men explains to Corrag that Scotland is split into two countries, Highland and Lowland. They describe the Lowlands as green and lush, with civil people who speak English and favour the Orange king, William III. The Mossmen go on to describe the Highlands as savage and wild, with hardy people who have their own language and their own faith. Most importantly, they mention that the Highlanders are hated by the Lowlanders, who believe that the Highlands weigh the nation down (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 81). Corrag contemplates her situation and wonders if the Highlands could be a safe place for a girl called witch: “what of us? Of people like me? What does witch mean here? They hang them, or drown them in pools, where I’m from. Or they try them by a judge, and do not kill them – but they are called witch for forever, then, and have stones thrown at them all their lives” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 82). One of the Mossmen comes to the conclusion that the safest place for Corrag might well be in the Highlands, for the Highlanders are more hated than she will ever be (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 83). Corrag decides to slip away in the night and travels north and west to the Highlands, in a hope that she will be able to live there in peace.

When Corrag finally makes it to Glencoe, she immediately feels at home. “This is the place. I was certain. For the heart knows its home when it finds it, and on finding it, stays there” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 118). She builds a hut in a place called the lost valley, “[made for a witch-called girl, I thought, who wants to rest and be safe” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 130). Glencoe becomes her safe haven, a place where she can finally live in peace, far away from people who would do her harm. Corrag feels a strong connection to the environment and the nature of Glencoe. She knows in her whole being that this is the place her mother meant for her to find when she told her to ride north and west (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 126). It is entirely possible that Cora had the second sight, which would explain how she knew her daughter would be safe in the Highlands. The second sight is commonly known as the ability to foresee future events and the term originated in the Highlands with the Gaels. Thereafter, this strange phenomenon became particularly associated with the Scottish Highlands, where many documented examples of it were recorded (Hunter 1). The second sight is an important part of Highland and Gaelic culture and in *Witch Light* we see at least three women who seem to possess this ability. While *Witch Light* mostly stays true to a faithful representation of reality, Fletcher also explores the magical within the story. Corrag’s connection to nature and all living things could be interpreted as a supernatural or magical element as well as the visions she has of her own mother. As the story progresses, Corrag embraces her strong connection to nature and learns to trust her intuition. Corrag also learns of other women living in proximity of the glen, who like her, are social outcasts.
Shortly after settling in the glen, Corrag encounters a woman named Gormshuil. This old woman lives on a pointed mountain in the east of the glen, with two other women named Doideag and Laorag. These are broken women who live on the mountain, sealed off from the world. Corrag wonders what drove these women to live their lives in total isolation: “no one lives such a life by choice. No one lives on a mountain unless there has been some kind of sadness – a hurt, or a loss, or fear upon fear” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 211). Gormshuil appears to have the second sight and has likely fled her old home on account of witch persecutions (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 210). The second woman, Doideag, has a severely damaged face, likely from a beating (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 208). The third, Laorag from Tiree, has lost her ability to speak after surviving a horrific shipwreck. These three women all appear in folklore, and according to Fletcher, the tales about them are not very flattering (“About the author” 3). Fletcher’s choice to include these women in her novel, is driven by her desire to emphasize that they were human beings. She humanizes the three broken women by giving readers some insight into their former lives. Whoever these women were in reality, they had also been sisters, daughters and maybe wives. Here Fletcher reminds us that what is part of legend and folklore today, might simply stem from the mistreatment of innocent people. Gormshuil in particular is clearly damaged by her past and forced to live the only life she can cope with, a life in isolation (“About the author” 3). Moreover, she uses a poisonous plant called henbane to dull her senses and cope with whatever happened to her in the past. Corrag is not as far gone as the three women living on the mountaintop, but she keeps to herself in the hut she built in the glen. She keeps her distance from the MacDonalds of Glencoe, and the clan tolerates her presence even though they believe her to be a fairy or a witch.

After staying in the glen for a short time, a MacDonald man comes to Corrag for help, asking if her plants and herbs have healing powers. McLain, the chief of the clan has suffered a large and possibly fatal head wound and Corrag goes to mend the chief. After this incident the MacDonalds show her kindness and introduce her to their community. However, Corrag always maintains her distance, living alone in her little hut, and she appreciates her privacy. In the months that follow, the MacDonalds come to Corrag for remedies and healing. She helps people with splinters, toothaches and many other things, including an extremely difficult childbirth. As time goes by, Corrag feels less like an outsider, and for the first time in her life she is accepted within a community. She is celebrated for her abilities and healing powers, and they do not call her witch. Corrag starts to care greatly for the people in Glencoe and she develops deep feelings for Alasdair Og MacDonald, the chief’s son. She loves Alasdair but knows that they cannot be together as he is married and it is his baby that she
delivers into the world. Her love for Alasdair and the MacDonalds is what drives her to save as many people as possible when the massacre occurs. In the end, she is not able to save them all, but some of the MacDonalds manage to escape in time. It is Corrag’s final wish that the world knows of the Massacre of Glencoe and it is her telling of the events that Charles Leslie brings forward when he writes his pamphlet.

3.5. Charles Leslie

Charles Leslie is one of the two narrative voices of the novel and his chapters intersect the main narrative presented through Corrag’s storytelling. Leslie’s viewpoint frames the narrative and puts Corrag’s story into perspective. In addition, Leslie interacts with the local people, thereby adding depth to the story as a whole by connecting it to the outside world. In Leslie’s chapters we often see the public’s view of the events in Glencoe as well as their attitudes towards the Highland clans. Leslie’s chapters are rather short, and they are all in the form of letters that he sends to his wife, informing her of the progress he is making on his quest for the truth. In his very first letter he speaks of whispers in Edinburgh, whispers of treachery and of a mauling in the Highlands: “Deaths are often violent there, but I hear these were despicably done. A clan, they say, has been slaughtered. Their guests rose up against them and killed them in their beds” (Fletcher, Witch Light 1). Leslie goes to Scotland to investigate the incident, and he feels that it is his duty to learn what he can and report it. It is rumoured that King William III ordered these killings, and Leslie believes that if the king is behind this wickedness, it may prove his undoing (Fletcher, Witch Light 1); this is particularly important because Leslie wishes to restore the true King (James II and VII) to his throne. Leslie hopes that by going to Scotland and reporting on the incident in Glencoe he might be able to help the Jacobite cause. Leslie makes his way to the town of Inverary, and there he hears of the events that transpired in Glencoe. The landlord at an inn speaks ill of the Highland clans, claiming that they are Catholics, criminals and dishonest men, who shame the whole country and plot against the true king, King William III. He then speaks of a witch, who is held captive for her malicious ways, and he tells Leslie that she was in Glencoe when the massacre occurred (Fletcher, Witch Light 25).

Charles Leslie is an Irish Anglican priest who is familiar with the Devil’s work and is of the belief that those who meddle in such affairs should be purged by water or fire (Fletcher, Witch Light 25). In his mind, the world is filled with wickedness and ridding the world of witches would make it a better place. He is reluctant to speak with the witch in Inverary, but in the end, he does it for his cause. “I am not keen to visit her, or to spend time
with such a cankered, godless piece – nor do I wish to get her lice. But I must remember my cause. If she was at these deaths then she must have her uses. She will have seen the red-coats – and any word, even a witch’s, is a better word than none” (Fletcher, Witch Light 26).

Leslie is cautious when he first goes to see Corrag, and after their first meeting he is sure that she is a witch. He believes that the Devil is speaking through this young woman and that her girlish voice and talk of good deeds and kindness are but tricks of the Devil. Furthermore, he believes that her execution cannot come soon enough, and that the flames will purge her soul and clean her of wickedness. He is enraged when he hears of the ungodly ways of her mother Cora, and he is especially offended when Corrag speaks of her herbs and what he believes to be greenish alchemy (Fletcher, Witch Light 64). In his mind, this is not something to be dallied with, and he has no sympathy for Corrag, or her mother. Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Leslie’s views represent the widespread prejudice towards witches found in the British Isles at this time in history. He sees Corrag as a defiled and unchristian creature and in his mind her execution is more than justified. Leslie’s opinion of Corrag and his blatant hatred of women of her kind is clearly reflected in the early letters he sends to his wife. Moreover, his attitude can be seen as a reflection of the dominant views held by men in his position at the time. However, as time passes, we see Leslie slowly take a liking to Corrag.

In his early visits, Leslie is a wary man who is sure that Corrag’s kindness and charm are some form of witchcraft. Nonetheless, as Corrag tells her story, Leslie’s attitude towards her changes, and he starts to see her as a victim of circumstance. In his mind, she has endured great cruelty in her life, without ever inflicting cruelty on to others (Fletcher, Witch Light 106). Leslie is also influenced by his wife, who in her letters to him asks him to consider the fact that calling Corrag a witch might do her harm. In these letters, she refers to Corrag as a prisoner rather than a witch and emphasizes Corrag’s humanity. It is clear that Leslie’s wife does not agree with the poor treatment of this young woman and that she sympathizes with her. Her letters help Leslie to see the error of his ways as he is touched by his wife’s eloquence and truth and acknowledges the fact that his prejudice might have clouded his judgement when he first met Corrag (Fletcher, Witch Light 105). After seeing Corrag a few times, Leslie starts to believe that her way with words is a God-given talent and not witchcraft at all (Fletcher, Witch Light 119). He even starts to question his stance against the use of plants and herbs for medicinal purposes, when Corrag points out the fact that if herbs are made by God, then their qualities are God-given and have no darkness in them. Leslie is captivated by Corrag’s storytelling and believes her to be well-meaning, kind and brave (Fletcher, Witch Light 166). He even states that she speaks better than some men of his
profession and that underneath it all, she has her Godly ways (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 167). Leslie’s opinion of Corrag and his overall attitude towards her is crucial at this point in the novel. This is the time where Corrag begins to tell him of her life in Glencoe, and of her relationship with the MacDonalds. We see Leslie warming up to Corrag, and more importantly, we see that he believes she is telling the truth.

Leslie continues to conduct his interviews with Corrag, and in between those visits, he tries to gather information from the people of Inverary. Leslie eventually speaks with the sheriff, Colin Campbell of Arkinglas, who tells Leslie of the oath and how the chief MacIain came six days late to swear his allegiance to King William. Arkinglas goes on to describe the chief’s desperate plea for him to accept the oath: “[h]e begged me. To accept the oath – no matter the lateness. He said, ‘the snow has hindered me! But my people and I are the King’s servants now.’ He begged. It was a sight – a man of such stature and fierceness, a man of such reputation, weeping before me” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 220). Arkinglas accepts the oath, and when MacIain leaves Inverary, he believes his clan to be safe (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 220). Leslie’s discoveries all come together with Corrag’s tale of these events. With this added information he sees the whole picture of what occurred in a political sense. However, it is Corrag’s telling that captivates him. She tells her story in a way that makes Leslie understand what life was truly like in Glencoe. Her focus is on the MacDonalds themselves, on how they lived and what they were like. In a way, Corrag’s story humanizes the Highland clan, just as her own life story has made Leslie more sympathetic towards her. Her descriptions of the people and of the nature in Glencoe make him feel as if he were there. This seems to add fuel to his fire and inspires him to get the word out about what transpired in Glencoe.

When Corrag tells her story, Charles Leslie feels as if he is walking where she walks and seeing what she sees. What she says stays with him, and the way she tells her tale feels like magic. Her sadness along with her poetic descriptions of the landscape and the people of Glencoe make Mr. Leslie fall deeply into her tale (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 218). There are even times where Leslie is so caught up in her story that he stops writing it down and only listens to her speak, “Corrag (I have not thought or called her witch since your letter, my love) spoke of the Highland region this evening, and the wild moor that lies before Glencoe. I did not write down a word of her story, for I was also lost on it. I did not write because my ears and eyes were on the windy moor, not the paper. She can give such accounts Jane” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 119). Corrag’s tale emphasizes the wild nature of the Glen and the way that wildness is reflected in the MacDonald clan. On the surface the MacDonalds seem untamed
and brutal, especially in the eyes of the Lowland people. However, even Charles Leslie gains a deeper understanding of their ways after hearing Corrag’s tale. They are a proud group of people who hold on to their beliefs, their language and their ways. Despite all this, the chief MacIain decides to swallow his pride and set their beliefs aside to save the clan. Consequently, it is not the MacDonald pride that leads to their demise. Rather, they are slaughtered on account of a technicality, when MacIain is six days late in swearing the oath. In the end, those who ordered the killing of the clan acted out in this way because the opportunity arose to rid the world of Glencoe men (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 220). Their annihilation and the reasoning behind it clearly affects Charles Leslie deeply. He also sees the wrong of his own ways in regard to his feelings towards witches and he understands that his preconceived notion of Corrag was totally false.

After spending time with Corrag while conducing his interviews, Leslie’s view of her changes completely. In the beginning of the novel, Leslie’s prejudice towards Corrag can be seen as representing the patriarchy and the dominant attitudes towards women at the time. Initially Leslie sees her as a wicked creature and believes her to be controlled by the devil. He has no sympathy for her, and honestly believes that she deserves to be burned at the stake. However, his view of Corrag changes and he quickly starts to feel for her and later on he starts to question his whole belief system. Near the end of the novel, Corrag speaks of her second sight, and how she can know things with her body. Leslie acknowledges that at one point, he would have recoiled, hissed and prayed upon hearing such talk (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 300). Corrag essentially teaches him to respect other people’s belief systems, even though they might differ from his own. Leslie feels ashamed for having once hated what he did not understand and sees the error of his ways. He comes to believe that love is the heart of faith, and that as god’s servant it is his duty to help those in need (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 343).

In the end, Leslie sees Corrag for who she is, a kind and loving woman who has unfortunately endured substantial travails in her life as an outcast. He sets her free to save her from an unjust execution and ultimately, he is inspired by her as he utilizes her story to write of the Massacre of Glencoe. Fletcher makes a powerful statement by having not only a man, but a priest, bring Corrag’s story forward. When witches became a part of the elite male discourse about the morality and efficacy of magic, there was a change in the way that they were perceived (Popkin 199). This is what led to the massive scale of the European witch-hunts, and because of the persistent hatred of women, thousands of women fell victim to these witch-hunts. Thankfully, witch persecution in Europe started to decline in the late
seventeenth century before eventually coming to an end in the early eighteenth century (Levack 212). Perhaps Leslie’s changed view of Corrag symbolizes the changing times ahead.

3.6. Witch persecution in *Witch Light*

Women were the main targets of witch persecution and witch-hunts in Europe, largely because they were seen as the weaker sex. The image of women as the more carnal and sexually indulgent gender was pervasive in medieval and early modern European culture (Levack 126). This stereotype was pushed forward by Protestants, Calvinists and Catholics and had a serious impact on the lives of women, who in turn were controlled by the threat of witch persecution. In *Witch Light*, Susan Fletcher brings attention to the brutality of the witch prosecutions that took place in early modern England. Furthermore, Fletcher emphasizes how brave, solitary or educated women were often targeted and accused of practicing witchcraft (Fletcher, “About the author” 2). The events of the novel mostly take place between the years 1690 and 1692, a few decades before witch prosecutions would finally come to an end.

However, Corrag frequently looks back on her childhood and we see how generations of women in her family have struggled with being accused of witchcraft. Throughout the novel, Corrag reflects on what it means to be called a witch and as we follow her narrative, readers are introduced to horrific descriptions of witch-hunts. Fletcher includes examples of different execution methods, as well as the superstitious beliefs of those who believed witches to exist. Fletcher draws inspiration from historic accounts of witch prosecutions in her novel, and her descriptions of these events are both detailed and chilling.

Corrag, her mother and her grandmother are all accused of being witches at some point in their lives. This is a reflection of the mentality of this time as it was common for people to accuse more than one family member of practicing witchcraft (Macfarlane 162). Early on in the novel, Corrag thinks of her grandmother and of her execution. Her grandmother was suspected of witchcraft simply because her daughter Cora was believed to be an ill-luck child. The townspeople gather in a witch-hunt, and Corrag’s grandmother, accused of fornicating with the devil, is ripped from her family and taken to a ducking stool (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 45). Cora watches as her mother is drowned in a dread pool outside the town, “[a]nd then they tied her thumbs to her big toes so that her chin touched her knees. Then they dropped her in. She floated three times. On the fourth time she went under, and that was her end” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 46). Having experienced her own mother’s execution at a very young age, Cora knows exactly what is about to happen when she wakes up to the
sound of dogs barking many years later. She knows that the people from the village have gathered in a witch-hunt and in a panic, she sends her daughter alone into the night, hoping that it will save her life. When Corrag is still making her way north and west she has a vision of her mother, with light shining about her neck (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 83). In this moment, Corrag knows that her mother’s days are numbered, and she looks to the sky and sends all her love to Cora. She envisions her mother standing on the scaffold with her thumbs tied behind her back and Corrag hopes that she dies feeling loved (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 84). When Corrag herself has been deemed a witch, she is sentenced to die by burning. As she sits in her prison cell, Corrag comes to think of her own execution, as well as her mother’s and grandmother’s. Corrag thinks to herself: “[b]ut not all deaths are peaceful. They are lucky, who get those. We do not get them. Peaceful deaths. Not us who have hag as a name” (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 17). Death by drowning, death by hanging and death by fire; these are violent deaths and they are chilling examples of how alleged witches were killed during the time of witch-hunts in Europe.

As we follow Corrag’s story, we see that before Glencoe, she never truly belonged anywhere. Fletcher highlights the fact that while thousands of accused witches were killed all over Europe, there is no telling how many lived in fear, and how many were driven away from their homes in order to escape abuse or death. When Corrag travels to Glencoe she thinks about how impactful the word “witch” truly is, and how people accused of witchcraft are seen as witches, even if proven innocent. She is aware of the fact that even those who are tried by a judge and found not guilty are called witches and hated in their own communities for the rest of their days (Fletcher, *Witch Light* 82). This is a direct reflection of the witch prosecutions that took place in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Because of the nature of the trials in England, the number of accused witches that were actually executed is lower than in many other European countries (Levack 182). However, that does not necessarily mean that the people accused were able to live normal lives after being accused and prosecuted for witchcraft. *Witch Light* tells the story of unconventional and marginalized women who faced many hardships in their lives. Corrag, Gormshuil, Doideag and Laorag all represent women who were forced to live in solitude to escape a world that would do them harm. Corrag’s mother and grandmother represent the women that were persecuted and eventually executed for being different. In the end, Corrag escapes her death; however it is clear that she will continue her life in nature, far away from the society that has judged her all her life. *Witch Light* does not only tell the story of the Massacre of Glencoe, it tells the story
of countless women who were discriminated against, mistreated and murdered, during one of the darkest times in early modern history.
4. Slavery and historical fiction

African slaves and their descendants are yet another group of marginalized people whose narratives can be highlighted in historical fiction. Slave narratives can be utilized as a blueprint or inspiration for neo-slave narratives that can fill in the gaps in conventional history and bring these stories into the present. In this way, we can reimagine history and focus on the hardships as well as the triumphs of those affected by the slave trade in a very personal way. The transatlantic slave trade was a segment of the global slave trade that transported between ten and twelve million enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. It is estimated that between fifteen and twenty-five per cent of the African slaves bound for the Americas died aboard the slave ships. The remaining millions of slaves then endured the horrors of slavery for years to come (Lewis). Slavery has had a lasting effect on modern society and there is no way to tell exactly how severe that impact has truly been. Sadly, the history of the slave trade and slavery has been deliberately suppressed or erased from mainstream public memory on both sides of the Atlantic. To avoid questions of historical responsibility and guilt, many have tried to present a sanitized version of the past, ignoring or downplaying the significance of slavery in the history of their countries (Nehl 191). However, there has been a change in the discourse regarding slavery in recent years, and the republishing of slave narratives has played a part in bringing attention to the lives of millions of slaves.

In the late nineteen-sixties and seventies in the United States, a great number of slave narratives were discovered and republished. Since then, distinguished writers across the African Diaspora have recovered elements of original slave narratives and taken part in the widespread rewriting of the genre (Lima 135). Slave narratives of African slaves have thus inspired writers to utilize what is referred to as a neo-slave narrative in modern works of historical fiction. Most of the original slave narratives are African American slave narratives, and therefore most slave narratives focus on the experiences of African American slaves. In addition, most of the theorizing on the neo-slave narrative has been done in the Americas. However, it should be noted that in recent years, many British neo-slave narratives have been published, bringing attention to the unwillingness of the academic establishment to come to terms with that part of British history (Lima 136). Today, writers of historical fiction continue to bring slavery and slave narratives into the spotlight. Many of these writers focus on the lasting legacy of slavery and underline the importance of bringing these stories forward today. The worldwide success of Colson Whitehead’s recent historical novel *The Underground Railroad* demonstrates that modern readers want to uncover the untold stories
of African slaves. Historical fiction gives writers a platform to explore the experiences of
slaves and their descendants and bring them into the present.

4.1 Slave narratives
A slave narrative is an account of the life, or a major portion of a life, of a fugitive or former
slave that is either written or orally related by the slave personally (Andrews). The slave
narrative is a text with a purpose, and it was a key artefact in the global campaign to end first
the slave trade, then colonial slavery and finally slavery in the United States of America
(Fisch 2). The slave narrative first emerged during the 1770s and 1780s, and the genre’s
publication history, narrative designs and major themes were largely shaped by the
transatlantic political and religious movements of the late eighteenth century. During this
time, important cultural and philosophical changes facilitated the rise of antislavery
movements and the publication of slave narratives. The conditions for publishing these early
narratives were in many ways unique, and Evangelical Christian groups often sponsored and
oversaw the publication of slave narratives (Gould 11). Gould states that: “[b]y the 1780’s,
new political organizations, like the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave
Trade (1778) and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (1775/1784), dedicated to the abolition
of the slave trade, also played a role in encouraging and publishing these narratives” (11).
However, it was not until the organization of more radical antislavery societies in America,
during the 1830s and 1840s, that the genre turned towards Southern plantation slavery. The
antebellum slave narrative sharpened the focus of the genre and it became an increasingly
popular and effective political instrument to fight slavery (Gould 12).

Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential literary traditions in American
literature. The genre has shaped the form and themes of some of the most controversial and
celebrated writing in the history of the United States, both in fiction and in autobiographies.
In the United States, approximately 100 autobiographies of fugitive or former slaves
appeared from the year 1760 to the end of the Civil War (Andrews). Later on, after slavery
was abolished in the United States in 1865, approximately fifty former slaves wrote or
dictated book-length accounts of their lives (Andrews). In subsequent years, slave narratives
continued to be published in rising numbers. “During the great Depression of the 1930s, the
WPA Federal Writers’ Project gathered oral personal histories from over 2,500 former slaves,
whose testimony eventually filled 40 volumes” (Andrews). With the rise of the abolition
movement came a demand for eyewitness accounts of the harsh realities of slavery in the
United States (Andrews). In response, the narratives of Frederick Douglass, William Wells
Brown, Ellen Craft and many more, claimed thousands of readers in England as well as the United States (Andrews). These slave narratives mostly centre on the hardship and cruelty of enslaved life along with the journey towards freedom.

Slave narratives have been extremely popular in the United States since the early 19th century. The American slave narrative typically focuses on the narrator’s rite of passage from slavery in the South to freedom in the North (Andrews). Frederick Douglass’s memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), is widely regarded as the epitome of the slave narrative (Andrews). The memoir links the quest for freedom to the pursuit of literacy, thereby creating a lasting ideal of the African American hero, particularly, someone who is committed to intellectual freedom as well as physical freedom. In comparison to male slave narratives, female slave narratives are not as numerous, and female writers got published considerably later than their male counterparts. The first female African American slave narrative was published in 1861 and was written by Harriet Jacobs (Andrews). The autobiographical slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) depicts Harriet’s resistance to her master’s sexual exploitations and her ultimate achievement of freedom for herself and her two children (Andrews). Female slave narratives of this kind are unique in the sense that they highlight the experiences of female slaves and offer insights into the lives of women who lived through these horrible conditions. It is imperative that we recognize the struggles of American slaves, both men and women, during this time in American history. Moreover, the slave narratives of these men and women went on to inspire fictional works that contributed to the abolition of slavery in America.

Slave narratives have inspired some of the most recognized novels of the 19th century, some of which helped fan the flames of the abolition movement. Following the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, American slave narratives contributed to the rising national debate over slavery (Andrews). Additionally, slave narratives inspired antislavery novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which depicts the grim reality of life under slavery. It remains one of the most controversial and widely read novels of the 19th century and it was largely influenced by Stowe’s reading of slave narratives. In fact, Stowe attributes many graphic incidents from her novel to events presented in slave narratives. In addition, some of the most memorable characters from the novel are modelled after people from these texts. *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*, published in 2002, but written in the mid-1850s, purports to be the autobiography of a fugitive slave from North Carolina named Hannah Crafts. However, this unique manuscript is also highly fictionalized, making it an important contribution to the novelization of the slave narrative (Andrews). In truth, slave narratives,
with or without fictional elements have been considered unreliable as historical sources, in
many cases due to ideological differences and the nature of history writing itself. However,
as more slave narratives were discovered and republished in the late nineteen-sixties and
seventies in the United States, the rewriting of such stories has become central to the
contemporary effort to re-imagine history from the point of view of the subaltern. It can be
argued that neo-slave narratives still need to be written in order to expose systematic
inequality and the unjust treatment of black peoples everywhere (Lima 135).

4.2. Neo-slave narratives
Neo-slave narratives can be viewed as a form of rewriting the original slave narrative. The
rewriting of slave narratives was widespread in the post-abolition era in the United States,
which in many ways re-affirmed the historical value of the slave narrative (Lima 135). The
term neo-slave narrative was first coined by Bernard W. Bell, and in his study The Afro-
American Novel and Its Tradition (1987), Bell defines neo-slave narratives as “residually
oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). Over time, the definition
of neo-slave narratives has expanded and now it includes a wider variety of texts, including
texts that deal with the aftermath of slavery in a contemporary context. However, neo-slave
narratives are mostly recognized as modern fictional works that depict the lives of slaves. The
original slave narratives were written by individuals who overcame their hardships and
emerged from a system that denied them literacy. Neo-slave narratives come from this rich
tradition and form an extraordinary genre of retrospective literature about slavery (Smith
168). Furthermore, neo-slave narratives have helped reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by
reimagining their subjectivity and personal experiences through fiction (Lima 135).

When it comes to contemporary neo-slave narratives, the focus of the text is not the
abolition of slavery; rather, authors of neo-slave narratives seek reconciliation with the past
that still affects the present. Neo-slave narratives not only offer insight into the lives of
slaves, but also illustrate the centrality of history and the memory of slavery to our individual,
racial and cultural identities (Smith 168). In “Neo-slave Narratives” Smith argues that:

Further, they provide a perspective of a host of issues that resonate in contemporary
cultural, historical, critical and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of
representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other
atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of construction of race
and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the
power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. (168-69)

These issues can be explored through neo-slave narratives and contemporary authors write from a perspective that is informed and enriched by the study of original slave narratives. Furthermore, authors of neo-slave narratives are free to use their imaginations to explore the unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants (Smith 169). Through fiction, we are able to fill in the gaps of our history and explore what might have been. In this way, neo-slave narratives offer insight into the lives of slaves and often go beyond what is presented in conventional history. The subject of slavery in general continues to spark interest and horror among readers worldwide, which contributes to the popularity of contemporary neo-slave narratives.

Ever since the late 20th century, neo-slave narratives have been extremely popular and today they still show no signs of abating (Smith 168). The most recognized neo-slave narrative is arguably Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Morrison’s historical novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 and it remains one of the most celebrated and impactful novels of the 20th century. The novel is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman in Boone County, Kentucky, who killed her own child rather than allow her to be sold into slavery (Smith 174). Morrison’s novel takes place in 1873 in Cincinnati, eight years after the end of the Civil War (Smith 174). Despite taking place after the Civil War, *Beloved* is nevertheless a novel about slavery (Smith 175). It tells the story of Sethe, who after escaping from slavery in 1856 becomes haunted by a ghost named Beloved. Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is in fact the ghost of her eldest daughter, whom she murdered at the age of two when her master attempted to reclaim Sethe and her children. This is a heart-breaking story in which Beloved represents, on an allegorical level, the pain and inescapable past of slavery. The characters in the novel, Sethe in particular, are so profoundly affected by the experience of slavery that time cannot separate them from its horror or undo its effects (Smith 175). This is a reoccurring theme within the genre, namely how the past influences the present. After the immense success of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the genre continued to thrive. In the last decade alone, several notable works of historical fiction that utilize neo-slave narratives have been published to a worldwide readership. These include but are not limited to Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016), Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* (2010), Laurie Halse Anderson’s trilogy *The Seeds of America* (2008-2016) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016).
4.3. The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad is a historical novel that has won critical acclaim worldwide since its publication in 2016. It is Colson Whitehead’s sixth novel, and it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the National Book Award for Fiction and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Furthermore, the novel became a number one New York Times Bestseller and has been translated into forty languages. The Underground Railroad tells the story of Cora, a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia who, along with another slave named Caesar attempts to escape the plantation and the antebellum South for good. As Cora travels North, she is pursued by a malicious slave-catcher named Ridgeway, who is obsessed with her capture. Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative depicts Cora’s perilous journey towards freedom as she tries to escape the horrors of bondage. In the novel, the Underground Railroad takes on a physical form as it transports runaway slaves from state to state in a literal Underground Railroad system. Cora uses the Underground Railroad as a means of travel on her journey to freedom, and each destination is represented by a chapter in the novel. The Underground Railroad is painful and even horrific reading at times, yet it also manages to be hopeful and empowering. It is a thrilling tale of escape that at the same time highlights one of the darkest times in American history. Cora’s narrative is heavily inspired by existing slave narratives, and her story in many ways highlights the struggles of female slaves in the antebellum South. In this novel, Whitehead reimagines history in a powerful way, and gives voice to the enslaved. Furthermore, Whitehead brings attention to the impact of enslavement and the lasting legacies of slavery in America.

4.4. Narrative structure in The Underground Railroad

In The Underground Railroad, Colson Whitehead utilizes a third-person omniscient point of view in his storytelling. The narrator of the story is unknown and provides readers with insight into Cora, the protagonist, as well as other characters in the novel. Cora’s narrative is divided into six rather long chapters that all take place at different locations on her journey towards freedom. The narrative is punctuated by short chapters that follow an event or events in the life of another character in the novel. Here readers are exposed to experiences that are outside Cora’s reach. The short chapters enrich the narrative as a whole and offer insight into the lives of other characters. Here we see occurrences that Cora herself does not witness, giving us a greater understanding of the story as a whole. For a large part of her journey, Cora is alone, and she loses touch with the people she meets along the way. With the smaller chapters that intersect the narrative, each one focusing on a character, readers get the closure
that Cora herself never really gets. This emulates the experiences of real runaway slaves, where communication with loved ones was absolutely out of the question. Cora’s journey represents the stories of many runaway slaves, and her limited view plays a part in her narrative.

*The Underground Railroad* can be read as a neo-slave narrative, and Cora’s chapters in particular bear resemblance to original female slave narratives. By making the protagonist of the novel a fifteen-year-old slave girl, Whitehead focuses specifically on the experiences of female slaves. Slavery was an abhorrent reality for both male and female slaves; however, female slaves had to live through different dimensions of horror. Not only was there a constant threat of sexual and physical abuse, but there was also the expectation to bear children that then became the property of their masters. This is something Whitehead explores in the novel, through the relationship of Cora and her mother Mabel. Cora is essentially a third-generation slave, born and raised on the plantation in Georgia. In regard to the violence and sexual assault that Cora experiences, Whitehead has stated that it was his hope to write a true depiction of slavery in his novel (Whitehead, “Colson Whitehead”). These aspects of the novel might be seen by some as too graphic or even gratuitous at times. However, these detailed descriptions of abuse are true to original slave narratives and shed light on what the slaves endured during this time.

*The Underground Railroad* contains references to other slave narratives, namely related to Cora’s journey from enslavement to freedom and her pursuit of literacy. Cora’s intellectual freedom is achieved when she learns to read, which becomes an important part of her liberation from slavery. Here, Whitehead references original slave narratives, where the ideal of the African American hero was someone committed to intellectual freedom as well as physical freedom (Andrews). There is also a clear reference to a specific slave narrative in Whitehead’s novel, Harriet Ann Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* from 1861. In Jacobs’s slave narrative, she tells the story of how she spent seven years hidden away in an attic before finally making her escape to the North (Jacobs 224). Similarly, in *The Underground Railroad*, Cora is hidden away in an attic when she travels to North Carolina. Despite the fact that Whitehead utilizes an omniscient third person storyteller, Cora’s chapters read as a neo-slave narrative. The storyteller focuses on Cora’s experiences and never reveals anything that Cora herself would not know. Overall, her chapters could be written in the first person but the stylistic choice to use an omniscient third person storyteller allows us to view the story from the outside. Her chapters read as a neo-slave narrative.
because so many elements from original slave narratives are there and the main focus is on Cora and her journey towards freedom.

At the beginning of each chapter that focuses on Cora, Whitehead includes primary sources of actual runaway slave reward advertisements. The runaway slave advertisements add to the authenticity and overall ethos of the story. In an interview with Scroll.in, Whitehead states that the runaway slave ads were based on real ads from newspapers in North Carolina (Whitehead, “Colson Whitehead”). The advertisements describe the runaway slave, offer a reward, and often include specific details about how the slave behaves and how they might try to disguise their identity (Whitehead, Underground 12). In the very last chapter we are presented with an advertisement that is different from the others. The last runaway ad is fabricated and titled “RAN AWAY”. It is written in the same style as the previous advertisements, except for the fact that it essentially declares that Cora has stopped running, and that she was never property to begin with (Whitehead, Underground 356). Whitehead explains that the very last advertisement serves as an apology from him to Cora, for all the terrible things he has put her through as a fictional character (Whitehead, “Colson Whitehead”). The advertisements presented throughout the narrative connect the novel to reality and serve as a stark reminder of how runaway slaves were persecuted for years after their escape. The last advertisement, Whitehead’s apology to Cora, is hopeful and empowering. It leaves readers with the feeling that Cora might be able to live a happy life free from persecution.

4.5. Cora’s journey towards freedom as a female slave in America

In The Underground Railroad we follow the journey of Cora, a fifteen year old slave girl who escapes a cotton plantation in Georgia. By making the protagonist of the novel a female slave, Whitehead explores the trials these women went through, specifically as women. His novel pays homage to female slave narratives, as is mirrored in Cora’s narrative. Whitehead covers many of the issues female slaves faced at this time in history as we follow Cora’s journey to freedom.

Cora is eleven years old when her mother vanishes from the Randall plantation in Georgia, and without her mother she becomes a stray among the other slaves. Cora soon becomes an outcast in her own community and ends up living in a cabin they call the Hob. Living in this cabin there are women who are outcasts and strays. These are women who have been crippled by the overseers’ punishments, women who have been sexually abused and women who have lost their babies and their minds: “[w]hite men and brown men had used
the women’s bodies violently, their babies came out stunted and shrunken, beatings had knocked the sense out of their heads, and they repeated the names of their dead children in the darkness” (Whitehead, *Underground* 19). After a confrontation with another slave, Cora herself experiences sexual abuse and is brutally raped by four enslaved men. Later, when one of the plantation owners dies, the vicious Terrance Randall takes over. In the end, it is the threat of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of Terrance that pushes Cora to run away with a young man named Caesar. Cora’s time at the plantation brings attention to the specific hardships female slaves faced, hardships that have often been overlooked in history and even omitted from female slave narratives. When female slave narratives first surfaced, they were subjected to extensive scrutiny because of the cultural norms at the time, which insisted on the privacy of women (Santamarina 232). Therefore, slave women consciously shaped their narratives in direct response to these problematic contexts (Santamarina 232). Whitehead brings these stories forward, including details regarding the sexual exploitation of women at the hands of both their owners and other slaves, the complicated role of motherhood and the physical abuse these women endured. Impressively, Whitehead tackles these immense issues without making them the sole focus of Cora’s narrative. Rather, these harrowing scenes serve as a reminder of what the future would hold if she were to stay at the Randall plantation. On the whole, Cora’s narrative is centred on her journey towards physical and intellectual freedom.

Cora is accompanied by Caesar early on in the narrative, and along the way many people come to her aid. However, *The Underground Railroad* focuses on Cora’s individual journey as she takes control of her own life. This she does by rising up in the face of injustice and danger, and Cora’s bravery is highlighted when she stands up for herself as well as others. Furthermore, we see Cora defend her own bodily autonomy, both when she decides to escape the plantation and when she refuses to be sterilized in North Carolina. Cora understands that the sterilization of women of colour robs them of their futures and in her mind, it takes away the hope that one day their people will experience freedom and prosperity (Whitehead, *Underground* 139). However, Cora is not satisfied with merely gaining physical freedom and along the way we see her make an effort to learn how to read. Near the end of the novel, when Cora has taken refuge at Valentine farm, we see the way literacy affects her intellectual freedom. At the Valentine farm, she reads about her ancestors, African empires and the miracles of Egyptian slaves who erected the pyramids. She also discovers slave narratives, poetry and autobiographies written by people of colour. She reads the stories of former slaves, about the miseries of bondage and their hair-raising escapes: “[s]he recognized
their stories as her own. They were the stories of all the coloured people she had ever known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundation of their triumphs” (Whitehead, *Underground 327*). Similarly, Cora’s neo-slave narrative brings these stories forward for modern audiences. *The Underground Railroad* tells the story of countless slaves, and specifically focuses on the experiences of women who have often been placed on the sidelines of history.

4.6. Fantastical elements and time travel in *The Underground Railroad*

*The Underground Railroad* is a historical novel, which for the most part accurately depicts early to mid 19th century America. However, there are also some fantastical and ahistorical elements that are carefully placed within the narrative. Whitehead has deliberately included these elements in the novel, in order to lean away from the type of absolute realism that is often presented in historical novels. However, these fantastical elements serve a purpose and they do not necessarily diminish the historical. Rather, Whitehead puts the novel into perspective and connects it to modern times, thus making it more relevant to contemporary readership. The most recognizable and perhaps the most important fantastical element of the novel is the Underground Railroad.

The very title of the novel, *The Underground Railroad*, references a movement that took place during the early to mid 19th century in America. The Underground Railroad was essentially a network of secret routes and safehouses that escaped slaves from the South used to reach places of safety in the North or in Canada. Sympathetic Northerners, most of whom were members of the free black community, would aid the escaped slaves. The escape routes originated in Southern states and extended in all directions throughout the fourteen Northern states and Canada. Overall, it is estimated that roughly 40,000 to 100,000 fugitive slaves reached freedom with the help of the Underground Railroad (“Underground”). In reality the Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad, but it was thus named because its activities had to be carried out in secret, using darkness or disguise, and because railway terms were used in reference to the conduct of the system (“Underground”). However, in Whitehead’s novel, the Underground Railroad assumes a physical form as an actual locomotive that transports runaway slaves between states. The metaphorical train becomes a literal train and each stop shows Cora a different version of America (Whitehead, “Colson Whitehead”). When Cora first uses the Underground Railroad, the conductor tells her: “If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll see the true face of America” (Whitehead, *Underground*)
When Cora looks outside the window she sees nothing but darkness and the unknown. This likely represents the country’s dark history in regard to slavery. Furthermore, runaway slaves faced the unknown as they fled their captors and had to blindly rely on this network to survive. In the novel, each stop along the way shows a different side of America, and in some cases we are presented with events that take place later in American history. The Underground Railroad transports Cora into different states and in a way, she is transported in time as well, as some of these events actually take place decades later than the mid-19th century.

One example of Whitehead’s tweaking of historical facts takes place when Cora temporarily takes refuge in South Carolina. Initially, this settlement seems promising, and overall it is a stark contrast to the plantation in Georgia. The state seems liberal at first glance, and Cora is able to work and live in a dormitory with other women of colour. However, Cora slowly starts to see that something is awry. When she goes to have a physical examination, the doctor asks her if she has considered birth control. He then explains that South Carolina is in the midst of a large public health program where the tubes of women are severed to prevent the growth of a baby (Whitehead, *Underground* 134). He goes on to explain that the allegedly simple, permanent and risk-free procedure is mandatory in some cases: “[a]s of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Coloured women who have already birthed more than two children, in the name of population control” (Whitehead, *Underground* 135). Cora realizes that she is still a slave in South Carolina, despite having fled the plantation, and that coloured women in South Carolina are still being herded and domesticated. They are treated like livestock, bred, neutered and penned in dormitories that resemble chicken coops (Whitehead, *Underground* 149). Here Whitehead choses to include a reference to the eugenics movement that actually took place from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries. North Carolina, Cora’s next stop on the Underground Railroad, was one of the 31 states that ran a eugenics program. Between 1929 and 1974, it is estimated that 7,600 people were sterilized in North Carolina and eighty-five per cent of those sterilized were female (Nittle). Forty per cent of those sterilized were minorities, most of whom were African American (Nittle). Whitehead distorts the timeline to include this historical event that in reality took place decades later. This serves as a reminder that despite what one might think, slavery and the legacy of slavery are not confined to the past. *The Underground Railroad* brings attention to the lasting legacy of slavery, by giving readers a glimpse into the not so distant past, where people of colour were still being discriminated against.
Later in the novel, Whitehead adds another symbolic and fantastical element that emphasizes the vastness and ruthlessness of slavery in America. When Cora first arrives in North Carolina, she travels down a country road that the people have started calling the Freedom Trail. To Cora’s horror she sees the corpses of lynched slaves stretching as far out as the eye can see. The bodies hang from the trees like rotting ornaments with gross wounds and injuries covering the bodies (Whitehead, _Underground_ 182). Cora sees men and women, some naked, some mutilated and even a pregnant woman hanging lifeless on the trail. This horrific scene makes her wonder what she has gotten herself into, as the man transporting her informs her that the trail stretches all the way to town (Whitehead, _Underground_ 183). The trail is a bad omen and foreshadows the brutal acts Cora comes to witness in this small town in North Carolina. Furthermore, the trail and the victims could be a reference to all the people Cora loses along the way on her journey towards freedom. Most of her companions and the people who aid her end up being killed, and some are even lynched. In reality, no such trail existed; however, it symbolizes the vast number of African Americans that were lynched in the United States. This is another example of how Whitehead utilizes events that transpire later in history in his narrative. After slavery was formally abolished in 1865, lynching emerged as a tool of racial control, where a mob, under the pretext of administering justice without trial, would execute a presumed offender, often after inflicting torture and corporal mutilation. Statistics of reported lynching in the United States indicate that between the years 1882 and 1951, over 3,400 African Americans were lynched (Abbott). Lynching continued to be associated with racial unrest in the United States and during the 1950s and the 1960s; civil rights workers and advocates were often threatened and, in some cases, killed by mobs (Abbott). These public acts of violence and racial terrorism instilled fear in black communities and the racial injustice that took place during this time shaped the lives of African Americans for years to come. With the addition of the Freedom Trail in his novel, Whitehead reminds readers that decades after the abolition of slavery, former slaves and descendants of slaves would endure injustice and torture in the name of white supremacy. The seemingly endless trail emphasizes the horror of these killings and underlines the fact that there is no way of knowing exactly how many perished in this brutal manner.

4.7. The museum as a metaphor for erasure

During her time in South Carolina, Cora works at a museum called Living History. This particular museum focuses on American history with displays that incorporate sculptures, wax figures and actors. The curator of the museum, Mr. Fields, explains to Cora that for a
young nation, a museum of this kind can educate the public about various subjects. He claims that by looking at these displays, the public can learn about the untamed flora and fauna of the North American continent and get an opportunity to see its people. Cora and two other African American women work at the museum, where they take turns working in three different rooms. Each room has a theme and a large glass window that separates Cora from the public as she works in the display. The three rooms all represent different stages in the life of a captured slave. The first room is entitled Scenes from Darkest Africa. Here Cora wears a colourful African costume, and in the display, there is a hut, a bench, assorted tools, and birds hanging from the ceiling (Whitehead, *Underground* 130). The second display is entitled Life on the Slave Ship, and here Cora impersonates a young boy helping with various small tasks on the deck of the ship. The third and final display is entitled Typical Day on the Plantation. In this display, Cora, dressed in a coarse and authentic negro cloth, sits at a spinning wheel outside a slave’s cabin (Whitehead, *Underground* 131). Cora feels ashamed when she puts on the slave garb and dislikes working in that specific display. However, what bothers her the most is the inaccuracy of the displays.

While working at the museum, Cora starts to wonder if any of the displays are really truthful and thinks of the contradictions and inaccuracies in her own displays:

There had been no kidnapped boys swabbing the decks and earning pats on the head from white kidnappers. The enterprising African boy whose fine leather boots she wore would have been chained belowdecks, swabbing his body in his own filth. Slave work was sometimes spinning thread, yes; most times it was not. No slave had ever keeled over dead at a spinning wheel or been butchered for a tangle. (Whitehead, *Underground* 138)

The exhibits are an untruthful display of the transportation of slaves and slavery in America. They show a pleasant version of events that is appealing to the museum visitors and conveniently erases the unpleasant truths of slavery. Here Cora sees that not only are people unwilling to speak of the true dispositions of the world, they refuse to acknowledge them (Whitehead, *Underground* 138). In her eyes the people on the other side of the glass are white monsters who push their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting, refusing to listen. Cora reaches the conclusion that at the museum, truth is subjective: “[t]ruth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach” (Whitehead, *Underground* 139). The untruths in the museum displays in many ways mirror the erasure and disguise found in dominant accounts of history.
In regard to slavery in the United States, there are examples of omissions and disguise in the narrative histories of both Southern and Northern states. Erasure of this kind can have severe consequences and can have a lasting effect on racial ideologies. In “Erasing Slavery: Memory, History, and Race in New England”, Kellow draws attention to the fact that there are silences and omissions in the narrative history of New England (Kellow 526). Slavery existed for 150 years in New England and was a considerable aspect of its economy. However, the role of slaveholding was virtually obliterated from New England’s history (Kellow 526). New England became constructed as a place with virtually no experience of slavery, despite a century and a half of enslavement of Africans in these states. This skewed history has had severe consequences for African Americans living in New England, who struggled to assert their humanity and autonomy (Kellow 527). Kellow states that “[a]s white New Englanders juxtaposed themselves to the slave-ridden South, they erased their own history of slaveowning and thereby broke the connection between the legacies of enslavement in New England and the oppressed conditions of those African American in their midst” (527). These misperceptions have affected and distorted historiographical debates and this failure continues the obliteration of the African-American presence in the history of New England (Kellow 527). By denying the fact that slavery had hardly ever existed in New England, the presence of African Americans in New England became problematic (Kellow 528). These attitudes and racial ideologies can have a devastating and lasting effect continues to pervade modern society. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead uses the museum as a metaphor for the erasure that is present in American history, and underlines the lasting effect it can have on society.

In *The Underground Railroad*, the museum and its displays can be seen as a metaphor for untruth and erasure found in dominant accounts of history. Cora notices that the exhibit is like a changing display in a shop window, which is manipulated when you are not looking. In the same way, slavery has often been omitted from history. The people at the museum are unwilling to see the truth and what is displayed before their eyes is a version of history that perhaps they can own up to and live with. Whitehead’s novel discusses slavery in a frank and honest manner and compels its readers to face the ugly truths of slavery. Minorities and marginalized people still face inequality in America and the impact and legacy of slavery must be recognized. Slave narratives and neo-slave narratives have counteracted the erasure and omission of slave experiences from history for over a century. By reimagining America’s dark past, Whitehead also pushes readers to look into America’s present and assess how slavery still has an effect on people of colour living in America today. In *The Underground Railroad*
Railroad, Whitehead masterfully brings forward important parts of American history, intertwining the narrative with the factual and the fantastical, the good and the bad, so that we can recognize the past and move forward.
Conclusion
The historical novel is a unique literary genre that enables us to reimagine and rewrite history in an inclusive way, by bringing attention to the narratives of silenced and marginalized people from all over the world. The genre provides a platform for those who lack representation in conventional history and gives writers the opportunity to question and challenge dominant accounts of history. Writers of historical fiction often focus on the gaps in our history and try to shed light on underplayed or overlooked historical accounts and figures. Subsequently, historical fiction can fill in these gaps and provide a new perspective on the past by placing marginalized figures at the centre of the narrative.

In *Sisters of Treason*, Elizabeth Fremantle focuses on three historical figures that have largely been overlooked by conventional history. Levina Teerlinc, Katherine Grey and Mary Grey are all notable historical figures, yet there is little information available on these women, as they have been placed on the sidelines of history. Through fiction, Fremantle bridges the gap between what is unknown and what is presented as historical fact. The novel highlights the expectations and struggles many women faced in sixteenth century England and at the same time it shines a light on these lesser-known historical figures. Themes of captivity are central to the story as well as female agency and the roles of women in general. Furthermore, the novel uncovers early modern attitudes towards disability by placing a young disabled woman at the centre of the story. Fremantle honours all three women in her novel by bringing their stories forward in a powerful way with three distinct narrative perspectives. *Sisters of Treason* offers readers a more inclusive version of history where women’s experiences are centralized and celebrated.

Susan Fletcher’s *Witch Light* focuses on the devastating effects of witch persecution in early modern Europe and simultaneously ties the story of an accused witch to the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692. The novel illuminates the complicated political climate of late seventeenth century Scotland and provides a detailed account of the massacre itself. The infamous massacre is central to the story; however, the main focus of the novel is Corrag’s life. Corrag’s narrative presents readers with an extremely personal account of witch persecution that reflects the experiences of countless victims of the witch-hunts of early modern Europe. At the same time, Charles Leslie’s chapters intersect the narrative and connect it to the outside world. Leslie’s initial prejudice towards Corrag can be seen as a reflection of the patriarchy and the dominant attitudes towards women at the time. Similarly, his changing view of Corrag may signify the changing times ahead as witch persecution would come to an end a few decades later. On the whole, *Witch Light* exemplifies the way in
which unconventional and marginalized women were often forced to live in solitude to escape discrimination, mistreatment or even death. Through heartfelt and personal storytelling, *Witch Light* dramatizes the Massacre of Glencoe while also giving voice to the countless victims who were discriminated against during one of the darkest times in early modern history.

Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* centres on the thrilling tale of Cora’s escape from the antebellum South to freedom. Cora’s journey towards freedom is both physical and intellectual and her story sheds light on the struggles of female slaves in America. Whitehead’s neo-slave narrative is heavily inspired by existing slave narratives of African American slaves, especially those of women. By utilizing a neo-slave narrative, Whitehead is able to incorporate elements from existing slave narratives and bring them forward in a contemporary way. *The Underground Railroad* is an example of historical fiction that goes beyond simply being a fictional narrative set in a realistically portrayed past time (Hodgkin 26). The ahistorical elements of the novel serve as a reminder of how long the enslaved and the descendants of slaves would continue to suffer for years to come after the abolition of slavery. Whitehead’s mixture of the fantastical with historical and realist elements creates a story of great relevance to contemporary readers. Moreover, Whitehead’s use of symbolism points to the untruths and erasure found in dominant accounts of history. *The Underground Railroad* depicts the horrors of slavery while also revealing the resilience of the human spirit. Cora’s perilous journey echoes the experiences of countless slaves and through her narrative, Whitehead gives voice to some of history’s hidden figures. *The Underground Railroad* pushes readers to look into the present as well as the past to recognize the lasting legacy of slavery in America.

Conventional history is in many ways ambiguous and historical fiction gives writers a platform to reimagine history from different perspectives. It can be argued that historical fiction has an advantage over history in the sense that it can create narratives that focus on figures who have otherwise been hidden from our history (Hodgkin 25). Historical novels, such as the texts by Fremantle, Fletcher and Whitehead discussed in this essay, provide the opportunity to rewrite and reimagine the lives of marginalized and subordinate people. Moreover, historical fiction, as exemplified in the three novels by these three authors, can be used to fill in the gaps of our history and centralize the experiences of marginalized groups. Through fiction, the marginalized can be given a voice and a point of view, thereby subverting the notion that history is the story of the dominant classes and nations (Hodgkin 25). Women in particular have consistently been marginalized in history and their
experiences have been of minimal interest to historians for centuries. However, historical fiction provides an imaginative space for writers to create inclusive versions of history that resonate with modern readerships (Wallace 3). Historical fiction gives us the opportunity to rewrite and reimagine the lives of marginalized and subordinate people, including slaves, colonized people, the poor, the ignored and women in general (Wallace, The Woman’s Historical Novel 2). Writers of historical fiction acknowledge that there are gaps in our history, and through fiction they are able to fill in those gaps by giving voice to those who have been silenced or ignored.
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