

# REWRITING VICTORIAN STEREOTYPES: QUESTIONS OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN SARAH PERRY'S *THE ESSEX SERPENT*

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Contemporary British novelist Sarah Perry's pastiche, *The Essex Serpent* (2016), goes beyond the way women were portrayed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction in several ways, including their relationships with men. Therefore, it is worth having a closer look at the complexity of female-male relationships represented in the novel. After a brief outline of the social construct known as Victorian marriage, I will examine the three main female characters' relationships with men, let them be husbands, suitors or, for that matter, comrades. In this way, I intend to prove that these women understand female-male relationships on a spectrum transcending the stereotypical roles offered to them by Victorian society.

*Keywords:* Gender Studies, 21st-century novel, British novel, Sarah Perry, Neo-Victorian fiction

## 1 Introduction

In my interpretation, Sarah Perry's novel breaks down the idealised image of the Victorian marriage by providing a deeper insight into the complexity of gender relations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the centre of the Neo-Victorian narrative,<sup>1</sup> one finds three women, Cora Seaborne, Stella Ransome and Martha (without a family name), in whose lives marriage (or the lack of it) plays radically different roles.

In general, the idealised image of the Victorian married couple is based on the union of an obedient wife and mother, who also runs the household, and an assertive husband and father, who is responsible for the financial well-being and the public image of the family. This ideal is obviously rooted in the exemplary marriage of the royal couple: Queen Victoria both established and represented the moral standards of the period, as her harmonious relationship with Prince Albert and the way they

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<sup>1</sup> The whole narrative takes place within one year, starting with the New Year's Eve and ending with the November of 1893.

brought up their nine children laid the foundation of the ideal Victorian family. “By 1857, the Queen had borne nine children, and her devotion to her consort and to her home life had established her as a model bourgeois housewife – if one uniquely rich, famous, and active in national affairs” (Nelson 2007, 5).

In fact, this ideal secured the common social expectation that women should be married in order to lead an acceptable life. As Joan Perkin writes in her book on women and marriage in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain, “marriage was the life plan of most women, and the single state a fate to be avoided like the plague” (Perkin 1989, 3). As Perkin highlights, for many women, marriage was not a question of emotional determination, but rather a duty they had to fulfil in order to survive. Remaining single was a disgrace, which Perkin adequately expresses by likening this state to the plague. This commonly held opinion, however, in itself refutes the ideal represented by the royal couple, in whose case marriage was founded not on duty but on an emotional bond. In addition to this, one should also mention that marriage was not the only possible form of connection between men and women at the time, but extramarital affairs and comradeship-like friendships (as the one between Martha and Edward Burton) were clearly not among the socially accepted female-male relationships.

Perkin mentions yet another important aspect of the Victorian marriage, as she points out that one finds a great diversity of female-male relationships across the spectrum of the different social classes. Obviously, the members of the royal family were subject to the strictest marriage rules, such as limited partner choice, as they had to provide a model for society (1989, 4–5). The essence of this model was that women were by definition subordinated to men. Strangely, however, the power relations in the case of the royal couple went against this rule, since “Victoria as Queen Regnant had the same rights, duties and prerogatives as a King. She was the only woman in England not legally subordinate to her husband” (Perkin 1989, 35). Evidently, the dominant role Queen Victoria played both in terms of politics and in the privacy of her marriage with Prince Albert cannot be projected to other female members of the society, since everywhere else female subordination was the norm. As far as middle-class marriages are concerned, women and men had different roles: pursuing a career and maintaining social connections were among the “duties” of men, while women were confined to the home. As Perkin says, the “husband was likely to know and exert his legal rightsover [sic!] custody of children and control of his wife’s property and income” (1989, 8). As for working-class wives, their situation was even worse: although by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “women achieved an equality of legal rights within marriage” (Perkin 1989, 8), they not only had to run the household and obey their husbands like their middle-class peers, but they also needed to seek employment, which meant yet another obligation for them.

Naturally, this is only a superficial overview of marital relationships in the Victorian era, as in the case of each social class, one can find radically different experiences due to the variations in the social background and the personality of the partners involved, as well as in the challenges they faced during their marriage. Similarly, the novel represents female-male relationships on a wide social scale from the upper-middle class (Cora) through the lower-middle class (Stella) and the working class (Martha), but, as a piece of historiographic metafiction, it also aims to break down the idealised image of the Victorian marriage that still prevails in the common imagination. Moreover, the text displays a great variety of complex emotional relationships, some of which transgress Victorian social expectations, such as Platonic love, abusive marriage, female-male comradeship and adultery. These are paired with models of feminine identity that similarly transgress the social norms and customs of the era, for instance the New Woman, the proto-feminist, the socialist, the merry widow and the Angel in the House. In what follows, I will provide a thorough examination of female-male relationships present in the novel to reveal their complexity.

## **2 Cora – The New Woman**

Cora Seaborne, the protagonist of the novel, has a complicated relationship with men in general. This becomes evident right from the beginning of the text, which narrates her marriage with the somewhat older Michael Seaborne, who is a senior civil servant by profession. In fact, his domination is present already during their first encounter, when Michael, on seeing the seventeen-year-old Cora, “scolded her for a broken nail” (Perry 2016). At the beginning of their relationship, the acts of Michael do not seem to be particularly violent, but they mark only the beginning of the process during which he wears down the spirit of Cora. In the soul of Cora, an innocent and naïve young girl, such seemingly harmless insults inflict enormous wounds, primarily, because she has not had a chance to experience what it means to be an unattached lady, as she becomes a married woman straight from the paternal embrace.

Later on, the text uses suggestive symbols to represent the growing scale of male oppression. “He gave her a gold ring which was too small – a year later another, and it was smaller still” (Perry 2016). Although the ring is commonly interpreted as a token of attachment, in this case, the tightness of the ring symbolises that her husband keeps a tight rein on Cora, while I interpret its shape, an endless circle, as a reference to the perpetually increasing oppression Cora needs to endure as long as they are together. The other gifts Cora receives from him are similarly symbolic: the “slim books, and small hard objects of no use” (Perry 2016) can be

interpreted as the expression of how small and insignificant Cora is in the eyes of Michael, while the emphasis on the uselessness of the objects establishes a parallel between her and the worthless and superfluous things she is given. The hardness of the objects, however, also refers to Michael, whose rigid and emotionless nature gradually includes more and more aggressive and violent undertones. In this sense, both the rings and the “small hard objects” (Perry 2016) become possible physical weapons against Cora, while his utterances and general behaviour form part of the mental abuse he conducts in relation to her.

As a consequence of his dominant behaviour, Cora gradually changes both externally and internally by the age of nineteen: “[s]he grew ashamed of them – of her loose untidy clothes, her unbraided hair” (Perry 2016). Parallel with her transformation from a wild, young girl into a decent lady, Cora also loses her direct contact with the liveliness of nature. Instead, she becomes associated with a “dead version” of nature: “she exchanged birdsong for feathered fans, crickets in the long grass for a jacket dotted with beetles’ wings; she was bound by whalebone, pierced with ivory, pinned by the hair with tortoiseshell” (Perry 2016). The fact that she starts dressing like a lady, however, also affects her behaviour, which gradually loses its individual charm: “[h]er speech grew languid to conceal its stumble; she walked nowhere” (Perry 2016). Thus, she partially loses her own self and becomes a schematised version of herself in an attempt to match the idealised image of the lady and to please Michael. Gradually, Michael becomes the ruler and Cora his faithful subject.

Despite the negative treatment she receives, however, Cora seems to be happy and enamoured of Michael in the first few months. “She had loved him – no-one could ever have loved more: she’d been too young to withstand it, a child intoxicated by an inch of drink” (Perry 2016). This blinded and seemingly limitless love Cora feels for Michael might be due to her innocence and her naivety. Since Michael is the first man who regards her as a woman, she does not even notice her increasing subordination in their relationship: like a child made dizzy by one sip of alcohol, she does not notice how intoxicating and painful this experience and this relationship would become for her. Because of the generation gap between them, she never dares to confront him, not even during his fatal disease.

When already married, Cora suffers increasing subordination, which might be due to her lack of privacy. Unlike Cora, Michael has a private life, which coincides with his public life, in which his wife can neither intervene nor participate. Interestingly, Cora infers, he seems to share this part of his life with anyone except for his family, including Cora: “[i]t struck her that really she’d known nothing of him in his public life, which was carried out in (she imagined) identical rooms in the Commons, and in his Whitehall set, and in the club which she could not attend, having the misfortune to be female” (Perry 2016).

In the Victorian period, “clubs were male-only institutions”, therefore, women often knew nothing about how men spent their time in those places (Milne-Smith 2011, 10). Although towards the end of the Victorian era, “the subject of women’s inclusion into club life came up,” still, the clubs “maintained a predominantly homosocial ethos” (Milne-Smith 2011, 11). At the same time, women did not have the privilege to break away from home and spend time alone or enjoy a social event without a guardian or chaperone – more evidence of their social inequality. This, naturally, led to a lack of social connections, which were provided for men primarily through the club life they shared with their middle-class peers.

Over the years of marriage, Michael becomes more and more violent, tormenting Cora both mentally and physically. The conscious and continuous mistreatment of Cora begins with the pondering of Michael, which foreshadows future abuses: “[w]hat a thing it would be: to have me break you, and mend your wounds with gold” (Perry 2016). Through this, Michael likens the way he wants to deal with Cora to a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese tradition, Kintsugi, which means that broken pottery is repaired with gold or other valuable materials. As Kintsugi “treats breakage as part of the object’s history rather than as an error or a failure to be covered up or discarded,” Michael also treats the breaking of Cora as a natural part of their relationship and does not try to hide the intentionality of his abuse (“Kintsugi++” 2018, 55). Similarly to Kintsugi, in which “[a] broken ceramic piece becomes an opportunity for innovation” (“Kintsugi++” 2018, 55), Michael intends to develop the personality of Cora by breaking and then shaping her to meet his expectations. In Kintsugi, after the pottery is repaired, it becomes more valuable, as is the case, ironically, with Cora in the sense that she becomes enriched with each experience, which will later add to her character as a widow and a single mother.

In addition to this, Michael handles Cora not only as his own property, but also as a work of art which he creates and shapes. A permanent scar on the body of Cora is perhaps the most obvious sign of his abusive treatment: “[i]t was the perfect replica of the silver leaves on the silver candlesticks that flanked the silver mirror, and which her husband had pressed into her flesh as though he were sinking his signet ring into a pool of wax” (Perry 2016). This mark is like a signature of Michael to label his property; however, it is also a tell-tale sign of the fact that he treats Cora as if she were an artifact. In this sense, her scar resembles the signature the artist puts on the artwork after its completion.

Later, the mother-son relationship between Cora and her son, Francis, gives Michael the opportunity to abuse Cora not only physically but also mentally. At the age of twenty, Cora gives birth to their son, who seems to be the only refuge for her, “an ally” in her marriage with Michael (Perry 2016). Motherhood is a blessing for Cora, but at the same time, she also has the fear of becoming increasingly

vulnerable both physically and spiritually: because of her tender emotions towards Francis, “her heart would always be exposed to wind and weather” (Perry 2016). Her son, however, becomes her weak spot not only because her husband can use him against her, but also because she gets the “second rejection of her love” from Francis himself: “[i]f she nursed him, it appeared to cause him pain, or at least a rage he could not contain; if she held him he struggled, flailed, cut her eyelid with the sharp little nail on his thumb” (Perry 2016). Naturally, her failure in motherhood is a new “source of amusement to Michael,” who often makes Cora feel that she would not be suitable for this task either (Perry 2016). Although later the text makes it evident that Francis suffers from autism, at this point in the narrative, the reason why he is dismissive towards Cora is not obvious: either these are the early symptoms of his mental condition, or he might simply be following the example set by his father. Whatever the reason, this is just another opportunity for Michael to mentally abuse Cora, which is similar to how, even if unintentionally, Francis treats her. The complexity of the relationship between the three of them, however, becomes even more problematic if one considers that because of the large generation gap and the gendered binary opposition present in the Victorian era, the relationship of Michael and Cora resembles more a parent-child relationship than a husband-wife bond, in which Cora, the child, is punished without reason. Furthermore, by rejecting her, Francis also punishes his mother, and in this sense, the Francis – Cora relationship comes to mirror the one between Michael and Cora.

During the last months of Michael, his communication with Cora changes, as due to his serious illness, he gradually becomes unable to rule over his wife to the same extent as he did beforehand. While nursing him, Cora becomes so prepared as if “she might have memorised a manual on a woman’s duties down to its last syllable” (Perry 2016). One should note that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “almost all deaths (except for sudden accidents) took place at home” and “during the final stages of an illness a family member would remain in the room, day and night” (Mitchell 2009, 164). Cora remains true to this tradition in the sense that she stays with her husband until the very end, but even then, she behaves more like a professional nurse than a caring and devoted wife, as these hours go by without her expressing any emotions, be it anxiety or love. In this sense, she performs the role that American historian M. Jeanne Peterson associates with Victorian women: “she obeyed her husband, adored him, and promoted his spiritual and physical well-being” (1984, 678). Accordingly, she takes on personality traits which are connected to the idea of the Angel in the House. On the basis of this, one might conclude that Michael’s desire is fulfilled, as Cora, the work of art he has shaped over the years, is finally complete. However, Cora never transforms fully into the obedient Victorian wife, as during his last hours, there is nothing that would indicate her subordination; the

husband bears his fate, and the wife performs her duties. Therefore, in this scene, when for the first and the last time in the novel Cora could be represented as an Angel in the House, all that she becomes is an almost-angel.

After the death of Michael, Cora finally feels liberated. Ironically, her conception of widowhood is in stark contrast with the expectation that Queen Victoria generated with the way she mourned her husband: “[a]fter Albert’s sudden death in December 1861, Victoria embarked upon an ecstasy of mourning, secluding herself as much as possible from the public gaze for the next fifteen years and making it obvious that like the ideal woman of her age, her chief priorities were domestic” (Nelson 2007, 5-6). Cora, however, does not go into mourning and instead of withdrawing from the public eye, she begins to socialise almost immediately after her husband’s death. All the more so, since as a widow belonging to the upper-middle class, she does not have to face one of the greatest problems of Victorian middle-class widows: poverty.

In most cases, as Cynthia Curran says, becoming a widow in the Victorian era entailed the threat of financial insecurity and emotional estrangement from the world, as “a middle-class widow likely found herself not only bereft of her husband’s companionship and support, but without the means to maintain herself and her family” (1993, 225). Ironically, none of these threats are relevant in the case of Cora, as Michael never provided emotional support for her, and she has no financial problems, either. Consequently, Cora has the chance to pursue a life that was considered to be largely “unwomanly” in the period. Instead of following the example set by her contemporaries, as “many widows surely would have attempted to turn to the traditional refuge of the helpless female – remarriage” (Curran 1993, 225), Cora decides to use her newly-gained independence to change her surroundings, pursue her long-standing passion for geology and get rid of her painfully acquired feminine looks – all this within a month after the death of her husband. Parallel with this, she regains her individuality and her quite unconventional attitude to femininity: “the wonderful thing about being a widow is that, really, you’re not obliged to be much of a woman anymore” (Perry 2016).

This is the point when she, accompanied by Francis and his nanny, Martha, leaves her house in London and moves temporarily to Essex. The change of surroundings and leaving the modern, thriving city of London (the place of her marriage) behind can be understood as the realisation of her aim to reinterpret herself – to get away from social expectations and requirements, that is, to dress and behave like a lady and to perform the role of the Angel in the House. At the same time, although she has “freed [her]self from the obligation to try and be beautiful” (Perry 2016) and has left the world of superfluous formalities behind, she still retains ambivalent feelings in connection with her life shared with Michael: “[t]here was grief, too, that was certain, and she was grateful for it, since however

loathed he'd been by the end, he'd formed her, at least in part – and what good ever came of self-loathing?" (Perry 2016). At this time, she gets closer to Michael's former doctor, Luke Garrett, who is eager to provide consolation for Cora during her time of mourning.

Cora meets Luke for the first time in her Foulis Street house when he is called to Michael during his illness. Already during his first visit, Luke witnesses that no tenderness exists between Cora and Michael and that their marriage is characterised more by duty than by desire, which later gives him the hope that perhaps after the passing of Michael he could replace him in Cora's life. At the same time, although his affection for Cora is present already during their first encounter, Luke dares to express his tender emotions towards her only after Michael's death: "I loved you when you asked if I could save him and I knew then you hoped I would not and I knew that I would not try" (Perry 2016). However, although Luke sacrifices his vocational principles solely to please the woman he loves, his devotion remains unrequited, as Cora regards him only as a friend and not as someone whom she would seriously consider as a potential partner. Therefore, Luke's passionate love remains only Platonic, which is not unrelated to Cora's desire to retain her independence and the freedom to act as she wants: "it seemed an attempt to force her hand – all the years of what ought to have been her youth she'd been in someone's possession, and now, with hardly a few months' freedom to her name, someone wanted to put their mark on her again" (Perry 2016). Thus, he becomes the first man, soon joined by William Ransome, who sees Cora as a *femme fatale*.

### 3 Stella – The Angel in the House

Stella Ransome, the next central female figure of *The Essex Serpent*, represents the opposite of Cora Seaborne: while Cora is fighting against the expectations of Victorian society (represented also by Michael) to transform her into an Angel in the House, Stella, at least when she first appears, seems to be the manifestation of the same Victorian ideal. Therefore, I examine her position in her family in general and her role as a wife in particular as standing in sharp contrast with Cora's attempts to regain and then retain her freedom from marital constraints, which she finds suffocating. As for the narrative, Stella is introduced as the devoted wife of the clergyman of Aldwinter, William Ransome, and an enthusiastic mother of three. She unquestionably meets social expectations regarding middle-class women, as she dedicates her life to her family and household. However, her idyllic life is soon shattered by the appearance of Cora when she arrives in Essex.

As for Stella and William, they represent a perfect example of “[t]he middle-class marital ideal [that] involved love, companionship, and mutual respect based upon the complementary strengths that the partners were expected to bring to the union” (Nelson 2007, 15). One can feel this respect both in their actions and during their conversations. Stella admires her husband for his pastoral work and the financial stability he provides, while William acknowledges the energy Stella invests into running their household and raising their children; furthermore, he is grateful for the spiritual peace she creates in the family. Unlike Cora and Michael, they also share the mandatory tasks of both their private and their public lives, through which they contribute to the well-being of their family. Another difference between the two couples is that Stella and William are not afraid to show their love for each other every day through performing small gestures, for instance saying goodbye when the husband goes to work and greeting each other with a kiss when he arrives home. In addition to this, Stella cherishes a childlike passion for her husband: for her, “the mere existence of William Ransome, with his grave eyes and his sincerity and his deeply buried humour, was a miracle on a par with the wedding at Cana” (Perry 2016).

In this sense, the relationship of Stella and William, based on mutual love, goes against the nature of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century wedlock, as in the Victorian era, “couples frequently married without being passionately in love on their wedding day” and instead, were simply motivated by “a desire for children (or for a stepparent for existing children), for sexual release, for financial support, for higher social status, or for companionship, or simply by a feeling that the surrounding culture expected adults to pair off” (Nelson 2007, 27–28). The relationship of Cora and Michael, however, is in stark contrast to what Stella experiences, and, consequently, I argue that it is much closer to a possible form of the reality of the Victorian marriage than the idealised love of Stella and William. The ideal aspect of their relationship is present primarily in how Stella sees it: “[h]er love for Will – which had arrived as suddenly as a fever when she was seventeen and had been just as dizzying – had not abated or diminished, even briefly, in their fifteen years of marriage” (Perry 2016). Therefore, Stella and William share a union that is much closer to an ideal than to Victorian reality.

Part of this ideal is that Stella “had taken to every aspect of marriage with indecent delight,” which is less present in William’s more thoughtful and balanced feelings for her. For instance, she enjoys serving her husband, doing housework, and, most of all, giving birth to their children whom she sees as divine blessings. The relationship of Stella and William proves to be so strong, at least until the arrival of Cora, that “even the loss of two children had not struck a blow to their love, only settled it more deeply on its foundation” (Perry 2016). In this relationship based on support, trust and fidelity, Stella successfully accomplishes her “mission” to be an ideal Victorian

woman and, consequently, she is the only female character in the novel who has found her berth by the beginning of the narrative. However, her seemingly ideal marriage, based on a union of body and mind, soon dissolves when its foundation is shattered – or rather transferred to William and Cora’s relationship. As a response to their budding love, Stella increasingly becomes like the Virgin Mary both in her attitude to her marriage (she becomes an asexual being who is prone to self-sacrifice) and in terms of her clothes (the colour mostly associated with her is blue, the symbolic colour of the Virgin Mary).<sup>2</sup>

As William’s attention turns from Stella to Cora, he gradually lets her closer to himself. A significant act demonstrating this shift takes place when he lets her into his study, the place he uses to hide from the world (and occasionally from his family). Since I interpret his study as a possible projection of his soul, I find it of symbolic importance who he lets into this intimate space. Everything in the room, including his books and notes, belongs to that part of his life that he intends to conceal from the public. Before Cora’s arrival, the only person he admits into his study is his wife, Stella, which is a further reference to the intimate relationship they share: “it would seem to him less exposing to relieve himself against Traitor’s Oak at noon than to allow anyone across the threshold” (Perry 2016). This threshold symbolises the boundary between his public and his private self, which only those are allowed to pass who share a special intimacy with him. Even their children are not entitled to enter: for them, the room is a forbidden place where they can set foot only at the direct request of their father.

Therefore, allowing Cora into this room is a significant turning point in their relationship, which, eventually, destroys the unconditional trust and sincerity on which his relationship with Stella is based. At the same time, primarily due to Stella’s inherently self-sacrificing attitude, their love triangle is far less dramatic than one would expect. When the tender emotions between William, her husband, and Cora, her friend, become obvious for Stella, instead of trying to stifle them, she rather encourages their development. For instance, when Cora throws a summer party and Joanna, Stella’s daughter, starts playing the piano, Stella symbolically offers her place to Cora, saying “I’m too tired to dance with my husband, will my friend take my place?” (Perry 2016). Despite her self-sacrificing behaviour, however, T. J. Edelstein’s claim that adultery brings about “the destruction of the Victorian home” (1983, 209) is relevant to *The Essex Serpent*, even though the devotion Stella feels for her husband does not let her conclude their marriage with a divorce, that is, in a conventional way. Rather, the innocence that characterises

<sup>2</sup> As Vivian and Wilhelmina Jacobs say, “[i]n the Church blue has become the traditional color of the Virgin Mary and is used on days commemorating events in her life” (1958, 29).

Stella both in terms of her demeanour and physical appearance makes her choose death instead of being involved in a love triangle.

After Stella symbolically sets her husband free, the physical relationship between William and Cora becomes more intimate, and he regards her as his new heroine. At this point, William does not allow Stella an insight into the privacy of his life anymore, even though she is aware of the affection present between William and Cora. This awareness is what eventually causes the decline of Stella's health, which one notices also in William's changed perception of her. While previously he felt a "[l]onging for her, and for the sound of children at his study door," now "he knew he'd touch her and find her for the first time slight and insubstantial" (Perry 2016). Stella's response to this situation is psychosomatic: she starts fading and when she gets sick, the process during which her condition deteriorates goes parallel with the strengthening of William and Cora's attachment. The nature of her illness is both symptomatic and symbolic: "Stella Ransome was no fool, and knew consumption when she saw it speckle the white folds of a handkerchief" (Perry 2016). Since consumption is an illness that literally consumes the body, I interpret its effect on Stella's health as being similar to the effect the attachment between William and Cora has on her spirit: it consumes Stella's soul and takes away her energy and her will to live.

Even though William's adultery seemingly does not bring about fundamental changes in their marriage, Stella understands it as her failure to fulfil the requirements attached to the role of the ideal Victorian wife, which leads to her gradual decline. Stella considers herself useless, as if she were the one who hinders William in his attempt at leading a happy life. Her viewpoint is assumed also by William, who uses the transformation of her behaviour as a pretext to criticise her: "sometimes I think she wants to leave us – that she wants to go away from me" (Perry 2016). Paradoxically, William accuses Stella of leaving him, while he is the one who is cheating on her. Even though his feelings for her have not diminished, it is symptomatic of the growing distance between them that he becomes conscious of the love he still feels for Stella only when Cora asks: "[d]id you really think because you loved *here* you couldn't love *there*?" (Perry 2016).

However, even without leaving his family, William stops being fully present in Stella's life, as he nurtures tender feelings for another woman. In response to his neglect, Stella consciously sacrifices her life for the sake of William's happiness, while at the same time becomes the victim of the love shared by William and Cora. The most obvious sign of Stella's transformation is that she gradually appears to lose her corporeal reality and become a quasi-translucent and ethereal creature. Therefore, it is not by chance that towards the end of the narrative (and of her life) she establishes a strong emotional relationship with Cora's son, Francis; a bond that is based not on the attachment of the bodies but on the connection of two fellow spirits.

There is no man in the life of Stella who would perform the role William does, yet, her relationship with Francis, Cora's psychologically troubled son, generates a feeling of appreciation in her that she lacks in other fields of her life (for instance as a wife and as a mother). Both Francis and Stella have unsolved emotional problems: Francis lacks the love he cannot get from Cora because of their uneasy relationship (Cora has problems with handling his strange behaviour), while Stella also lacks the motherly love she cannot give to her children because of their absence (the Ransome children are taken away lest they should get infected by Stella). Therefore, it is not by chance that Stella and Francis become fellow spirits helping each other: Stella cares for Francis like a solicitous surrogate mother, while Francis feels an admiration for her that is totally missing from his relationship with his own mother. Both of them become enriched by this quasi-mother-son relationship, since Francis realises that he has a lot to lose by not letting his mother love him, while Stella finds consolation in her attachment to Francis after being ousted from her role of the perfect mother and wife. Through this relationship, they become allies as it helps them achieve their goals: Francis finds his way back to his mother, while Stella sacrifices her life on Earth for the sake of her soul's immortality.

#### 4 Martha – The Socialist

Cora and Stella handle their relationships with men in different but comparable ways: Cora gradually distances herself from the Victorian ideal of femininity with which Stella willingly identifies. In contrast, the approach Martha, Francis's nanny, shows to men seems to be radically different from both Cora's and Stella's, as her actions are guided by principles that fully ignore the expectations of the era. Furthermore, Martha is ready to come to radical decisions regarding both her public and her private life, which, evidently, has an effect on the way she handles the men (and the women) present in her life. As for her social status, Martha comes from the working class, so she stands below both the lower-middle class Stella and the upper-middle class Cora. She is introduced as the nanny of Cora's son, which means that she ought to play a mother-like figure in Francis's life, even if, just like Cora, she is unable to perform this role.<sup>3</sup> Being a single woman, Martha lives in

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<sup>3</sup> I find it important to note that, according to Peterson, “[t]he governess should not be confused with the nurse, also called nursemaid or ‘nanny.’ The nursemaid, also responsible for child care, was clearly of the servant class. As much overlapping as there might have been in child care duties, the distinction between the two occupations was always clear” (1970, 23, n. 8).

the household at Foulis Street and later she follows Cora and Francis to Essex and back – in fact, she lives wherever Cora does throughout the novel.

Naturally, the symbiosis of Martha and Cora results in an intimate relationship between them, which is present already while Michael, Cora's husband, is alive. In fact, Michael's presence in the household does not prevent the close relationship that develops between the two women, rather, his oppressive behaviour contributes to it, as he does not give Cora the emotional support she needs; therefore, Cora tries to find it elsewhere. Furthermore, Cora cannot escape from her abusive husband, not even temporarily: as a Victorian wife, she is "a 'feme covert' or 'hidden woman' – absorbed into her husband, and regarded as one person with him by Common Law" (Simonsen 1997, 510). Therefore, as an upper-middle class wife, she is not allowed to leave her home without a guardian, which means that she cannot establish friendships in public, only within the confines of her home. In addition to her troubled relationship with her husband, Cora cannot seek solace in her son, Francis, either, as the child rejects her attempts to approach him. Thus, the only person who can offer consolation for her is Martha, who lives in the same house, and consequently, is always available, and who, as a woman and as a witness to Cora's sufferings, has direct experience of what Cora has to go through. Although Martha is unable to revolt against Michael due to her subordinate status as a servant, she is still ready to support Cora emotionally, which, eventually, leads to the formation of a lesbian-like bond between the two of them.

This lesbian-like relationship becomes obvious when one night Cora, after having a heated argument with Michael, enters Martha's room and seeks consolation from her, against which Martha has no objection: she "had raised the cloths that covered her, and taken Cora into her arms; she drew up her knees to enclose her entirely, and held her very tight, so that the other woman's trembling entered her" (Perry 2016). Through this embrace, during which all the differences regarding their status and their social position seem to vanish, Cora and Martha get as close to each other as possible, and an intimate alliance is formed between the two of them. When Martha takes Cora "into her arms" (Perry 2016), she behaves as a mother does when cuddling her baby; however, the atmosphere the scene suggests is rather homosexual than filial in nature. In addition to this, Martha "was given to standing with her arm about Cora Seaborne's waist with a possessive gesture" (Perry 2016), through which she boldly and openly shows her tender emotions towards Cora. Martha's behaviour might also suggest that Cora is her own property even though she is a married woman at the beginning of the novel. Symbolically, this intimate embrace reveals Martha's intention to chain Cora to herself.

However, latent homosexuality is more obviously present in Martha; as for Cora, her intimate connection with the nanny is only a deeply felt friendship, which

serves as a shelter providing her safety whenever she needs it. At the same time, the term “friend” is somewhat ambiguous, “as for Victorians, a friend was first and foremost an emotional intimate who was not a relative or a sexual partner, but the term could also be a euphemism for a lover” (Marcus 2007, 26). The diversity of this interpretation appears also in Martha and Cora’s relationship, as for Cora, this attachment means only a spiritual intimacy, while for Martha, it is rather a combination of an emotional bond and physical love. Nevertheless, the relationship between them remains only latently lesbian, as it is far less explicit than what Sharon Marcus defines as a relationship between “female lovers.” As Marcus explains, “friends differed significantly from female lovers who threw themselves into obsessive passions or lived together, functioned socially as a couple, merged finances, and bequeathed property to each other” (Marcus 2007, 29). Seen from this perspective, Cora and Martha do not become a lesbian couple in the novel, because their general behaviour, attitudes, social position and lifestyle do not match. Furthermore, although their intimate affection for each other is present all through the narrative, they are not financially and socially co-dependent (even though after Michael’s demise, Martha is obviously employed by Cora).

At the same time, their relationship is still on the verge of homosexuality, at least seen from the perspective of Lesbian Studies. As Marcus points out, “[l]esbian studies place women’s friendships on a continuum with lesbian relationships and equate both with resistance to the family and marriage” (Marcus 2007, 29). This attitude, obviously, positioned itself in opposition to the social norms of the marriage-centred Victorian society, in which “[m]arriage [represented] heterosexuality more forcibly than any other public institution” (Vicinus 1997, 72). As for the novel, Cora escapes into the arms of Martha because of her abusive marriage and the emotionally unsatisfactory atmosphere in which she lives, while as for Martha, homosexuality can be understood as a revolt against the expectations of the Victorian society, according to which marriage is “the approved female destiny for all classes” (Walkowitz 1992, 64). Therefore, Martha, a radical and a proto-feminist, may demonstrate more noble purposes through her lesbian-like relationship with Cora, such as equality between women and men. Thus, she stands for those aims that became widespread already among the proto-feminists of the Victorian era: “[w]omen in female marriages were thus in the vanguard of the movement to modernize marriage, for their relationships anticipated the increasing equality of husbands and wives gradually written into law over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Marcus 2007, 194).

Cora’s acquaintance with William leads to a turning point in the life of Martha, as her only rival so far has been Luke Garrett. However, with the appearance of William, Cora does not seem to need the emotional support of Martha anymore. At this point, the two rivals, Martha and Luke, realise that neither of them has a chance

to win over Cora's heart, and therefore, they choose to become allies. During their sexual intercourse, they console each other while imagining that Cora is there with them: "it was Cora's mouth he kissed, and Cora's hand she placed where she wanted it most. Each was only second best: they wore each other like hand-me-down coats" (Perry 2016). Losing Cora, the object of their desire, might be all the more traumatic for Martha, since, meeting the expectations of the era regarding single women, she is a virgin. However, she casts her purity aside with the intercourse; and, therefore, becomes both physically and spiritually the victim of her unrequited love for Cora.

As time goes by, Martha resigns herself to the inevitable fact that she cannot deepen her relationship with Cora and she begins to open up towards others. The first man in Martha's life to whom she can get close emotionally is Edward Burton, a young clerk, whose life is saved by Luke after getting stabbed by a stranger. The nature of their relationship is completely different from the one she has with Cora: "[t]o Martha – used to Cora's endless conversation and her sudden fits of joy or gloom – his company was peaceful" (Perry 2016). This serenity and his wounded condition bring about a change in Martha: she becomes Edward's caring nurse and it seems that she starts living the life of an average Victorian woman. She is always there for Edward, looking after him and worrying about his well-being, as a dedicated housewife would: "Martha had found herself fretting, in the following days, that Burton would not eat enough, or test the strength of his legs by walking the length of the road, and so she had returned a week later with packets of fish and chips, a net of oranges, and several of Francis's abandoned copies of *The Strand*" (Perry 2016). Her affection brings them closer to each other, and Edward contemplates Martha with admiration, which he does not fail to express: "she looked, he thought, breaking batter from his bit of fish, like an angel, if an angel could be hungry, and didn't mind grease on her chin and a smear of green peas on her sleeve" (Perry 2016). This comparison of Martha to an angel reminds one of the idea of the Angel in the House, which further highlights the fact that for Edward, Martha becomes a potential housewife.

At the beginning of her relationship with Edward, Martha behaves as if she has forgotten the principles that she previously represented. However, this phase ends when Martha rejects Edward's marriage proposal, as she considers it an offer that would threaten her independence. With this decision, Martha not only rejects the idea of marriage, but also rebels against the expectations of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century society. In this sense, she becomes a fictional representative of a growing number of women, since "the percentage of women who never married increased slightly in the late-Victorian period" (Walkowitz 1992, 64).

At the same time, one should also consider that, as Martha Vicinus points out, although "[i]n the nineteenth century the dominant ideology of separate spheres

gave both women and men opportunities for a wide range of emotional and erotic relationships among themselves, [...] heterosexual marriage remained the presumed emotional, religious, and social center of society” (1997, 72). Martha also seems to be aware of the alleged superiority of the heterosexual marriage when she tries to resolve the problematic situation caused by her rejection with an offer: “[i]f you cannot have a wife, will you take a companion – will you have a comrade?” (Perry 2016). Although her aim might be to prevent Edward from taking this refusal as a personal insult, her suggestion of a female-male comradeship is also problematic: similarly to homosexuality, it goes against the Victorian ideal of heterosexual relationships, which prefers marriage as the only suitable connection between men and women. As a proto-feminist and socialist, Martha rejects the idea of marriage, which often results in the oppression of women. This late-Victorian tendency is also mentioned by Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, who claim that at the *fin-de-siècle*, “the principle of comradeship and equality replaced the traditional view of the wife as subordinate to and dependent on her husband” (2004, 123). Through her denial, Martha openly rejects the opportunity to become a Victorian wife and to live according to the expectations regarding contemporary women – she follows a different ideology.

The last relationship of Martha to be analysed essentially differs from the previously mentioned ones, as the connection between Martha and George Spencer, Luke’s wealthy friend who is also a surgeon, exemplifies a situation in which the woman is in a superior position and she is the one who takes advantage of the emotions of the man. Spencer<sup>4</sup> is hopelessly in love with Martha, however, she does not return his emotions. At the same time, Martha, being a socialist who aims to improve the housing conditions of the poor, realises that she could achieve her noble goals, or at least make progress in this respect if she had Spencer’s money at her disposal. Therefore, she decides to deceive Spencer in order to achieve her goals, which leads to a relationship based on the Platonic love of Spencer and on the ulterior motives of Martha: “[i]f I let him love me, and pretend I might return it, and it makes him do something good – is it really so bad? Is a broken heart too high a price to pay for a better city?” (Perry 2016). Eventually, Martha convinces Spencer to take steps in improving the housing conditions and in replacing the London slums with newly built houses. The uniqueness of this relationship lies in the fact that here the traditional roles between men and women are reversed, as Martha controls Spencer according to her own financial interests, while Spencer is put into a position that is inferior to hers. Although this relationship is only of minor importance in the narrative, in a way it can be understood as the climax of the novel, which, as a pastiche, both celebrates and rewrites the female-male relationships present in the Victorian period.

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<sup>4</sup> George Spencer is practically the only character who is most often referred to by his family name.

## 5 Conclusion

When encountering the term “the Victorian woman,” one tends to imagine a woman living in a happy marriage, raising several children and in general, embodying the Angel in the House both in terms of her behaviour and her attitude to life. However, as this novel also suggests, it would be precipitous to assume that every woman living in the Victorian period was expected or had the chance to conform to the same ideal. In fact, their diversity was present both in terms of their social class and their family status and also in their attitude towards the expectations of the society around them. Moreover, the novel raises not only the possibility that the concept of “the Victorian Woman” was more heterogeneous than homogeneous, but also that perhaps it did not even exist, as none of the female characters embody this ideal. Cora exchanges the obligations of married life for the liberty of a single existence, Stella leaves behind her exemplary role as a wife and a mother and chooses sublimation from the terrestrial world, while Martha, although having been offered the prospects of a presumably happy marriage, decides to follow her socialist ideas about female equality. Therefore, one might conclude with saying that it is this contradiction between how the Victorian era exists in our collective imagination and how this Neo-Victorian novel portrays it that accounts for its innovative character, as *The Essex Serpent* reinterprets the idealised image of “the Victorian Woman” to show its complexity – in full accordance with the subversive ambiguities that characterise the genre.

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