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Ort, Datum Unterschrift

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List of Abbreviations

BSG	Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss
CS	Katherine Cooper and Emma Short
DD	*The Journal of Dora Damage*
GK	David Glover and Cora Kaplan
HL	Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn
KS	John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff

1. Introduction

"The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."

Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*

More than a hundred years have passed since the death of Queen Victoria and, thereby, since the factual end of what has become known as the Victorian age. Victoria's reign saw a vast number of changes within almost every aspect of human life. New technologies, scientific discoveries and advances have brought forth developments that our society still relies on heavily today. The great British Empire was at its peak during the 19th century, when new modes of poetry, literature and art were born. Today's fascination with this era does not come as a surprise, considering that the Victorians were, to a certain extent, the forebears of our time. This fascination, however, manifests itself in many different forms. For one, there are entire sub-cultures – such as steampunk or goth – with their members dedicated to dressing in pseudo-Victorian attire and thereby submerging themselves in their own fantasy worlds. Most obvious to the common consumer of contemporary pop culture is the presence of things Victorian or 'Victorianesque' in the film industry. There seems to be a very successful and almost magnetic force to the aesthetics, romanticization and historization of the Victorian era – as countless remakes of Victorian classics such as the Brontë sisters' or Dickens' novels might prove.[1]

In literature, the return to the 19th century has also proven to be well-received by readers, and both demand and supply, have continuously risen throughout the last three decades. Especially since A.S. Byatt's 1990 Man Booker Prize-winning *Possession: A Romance*, the production and popularity of historical novels, set in the Victorian age has risen dramatically. This sub-category of the historical novel has meanwhile established itself as 'neo-Victorianism'. Contrary to what the name might suggest, the genre does not try to create new great canonical works in the style of their 19th-century role models. Instead, it very often uses the Victorian setting to make a point about the present. In this context, it is specifically noteworthy, that mostly female writers seem to be particularly drawn to the genre,

[1] Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has inspired for over twenty film and TV-adaptations. Charles Dickens' work has shaped how Christmas is celebrated throughout the Anglophone world, with works such as *A Christmas Carol.* (cf. Rowelll, Geoffrey. 1993. "Dickens and the Construction of Christmas" in *History Today* 43.)

choosing to set their stories in the realm of Queen Victoria, which in itself encourages feminist readings of the literature they produce. Because even though the 19th century has brought forward great advances and novelties, it was also an era marked by various injustices. In particular, the role of the woman was strictly regulated. A woman's place was "in the home, as domesticity and motherhood were considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females" (Abrams: 1). Though ruled by a woman, 19th-century Britain was a place where women were mostly excluded from the public sphere. When women did, however, start to expand out into service work through to charitable missions, the first wave of feminism was born. Victorian feminism's main goal was to gain the right to have a say in their own fate – the right to vote.

Now, more than 100 years later, feminism is in its third wave and is more relevant than ever. Female writers' choice to set their narratives in the long 19th century – where the roots of feminist ideologies and our current society lie – could therefore be seen as an attempt to return to the past in order to make a statement about or even change the present and future. The aim of this paper is to explore this argument. In this paper I will focus on feminist interpretations of the neo-Victorian mode of contemporary historical fiction, as written by female authors. First, I will therefore give an overview of what neo-Victorianism in literature is and explore reasons and explanations for why the return to the Victorian period in modern-day fiction is frequent and how its cultural relevance and this 'return to the past' can (re-)shape the definition of self. Second, I will focus on the conditions under which the 19th century re-appears in and continues to inform our globalized present through female-written literature. Feminist theories will be included in the discussion to understand why neo-Victorian historical fiction is an important medium for female writers to project a critique of bygone times into the present. This will entail a detailed analysis of Belinda Starling's 2006 novel *The Journal of Dora Damage*, touching on and drawing comparisons to other works. I will furthermore explore how Starling contrasts a young Victorian heroine – who is submerged in the time's restrictive gender roles and strict sexual codes – with Victorian pornography and sexuality. Lastly, I will discuss how this, in turn, can be interpreted as a drive for self-knowledge and an even parodic attempt to shape the future by returning to the past – or if such an ambitious approach is even possible.

2. Neo-Victorianism

"How happily we erase past shame with present virtue."

Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage*

In terms of artistic history, a retrieval of the past can hardly be regarded as new or unique: "Renaissance aesthetics, neo-Gothicism and Pre-Raphaelites, for example, have all appropriated an artistic model from bygone times" (Gutleben: 6). The phenomenon of neo-Victorianism – sometimes also referred to as "postmodern Victoriana"[2] (cf. KS: x) or "retro-Victorianism" (cf. Sally Shuttleworth and Gutleben) – has an immense scope, which is not limited to the Anglophone sphere anymore.[3] Especially in recent years, the popularity of using the Victorian era a as setting for historical fiction, re-writings, re-makes and movie adaptations of canonical works has steadily risen. The Victorian age is brought into the 21st century not only by means of historical fiction, but also by TV-adaptations, novels, comics, and cultural groupings. Even neo-Victorian texts, such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* or Sarah Waters' *Affinity* and *Tipping the Velvet*, have been adapted for the screen.

This paper concerns itself with the representation of neo-Victorianism within historical fiction of the new millennium. In the following chapter I will provide an introduction to and overview of the neo-Victorian genre as it can be found in contemporary historical fiction. Furthermore, I will discuss why there is a persistent fascination among female writers with the genre. In order to give the latter point an academic perspective, I will draw parallels between this and feminism's[4] most recent waves, namely third-wave feminism and postfeminism, and bring attention to the underlying reasons as to why the neo-Victorian genre can be useful for female, feminist writers of the time.

[2]Victoriana: "1. Matters relating to the Victorian period; attitudes characteristic of that time. 2. Objects, as furniture, ornaments, etc., made in the Victorian period; also, buildings or architecture of that era." (*OED* "Victoriana")

[3] For more on the internationality of the neo-Victorian genre: Ho, Elizabeth. 2012. *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of the Empire*. London: Continuum. As well as Primorac, Antonija, Monika Pietrzak-Franger: "Introduction: What is Global Neo-Victorianism" *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8:1, 2015, pp. 1–16.

[4] Feminism, in fact, is a creation of the 19th century, with its first mention being accounted for in the OED in 1841. (*OED* "feminism")

2.1. New Mode of Historical Fiction

The advent of neo-Victorianism, when thinking chronologically, as Heilmann and Llewellyn (HL) in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* point out, could theoretically be set in 1901, with the end of Queen Victoria's reign (cf. 10). However, it is essential to distinguish *post*-Victorian, the 'after-Victorian', from *neo*-Victorian, the 'new-Victorian'. Whereas everything after 1901 can be seen as post-Victorian, including modernist and postmodernist works, the 'new-Victorian' genre is rather to be situated as a sub-genre of postmodernism.

In *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, which is one of the first essay collections that concerns itself with historicizing "postmodern rewritings of Victorian culture" (xi) and the revival of the 19th century in contemporary literature, John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff (KS) call this new movement "postmodern Victoriana" (x). They see the frantic return to the past as a result of living in an ever-faster moving world and draw on Jameson's postmodern historiography. Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* criticizes postmodernism's efforts to return to the past and declares: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). He distinguishes modernism from postmodernism pointing out that the latter looks for more "breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the tell-tale instant after which [history] is no longer the same" (ix). On the basis of this postmodern striving for fundamental disruptions, in combination with the loss of the ability to think historically, Jameson synthesizes postmodern history as being "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" which eventually ends in a "loss of historicity" (x–xi). With this insight KS explain the "fascination with the 19th century that inhabits late-century postmodernism's obsession with the tell-tale instance of historical rupture, with the 'shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things'" (Jameson 1991, ix as in KS, x, as in original). They argue that the "postmodern fixation on the nineteenth-century past [is] the specific site of Jameson's 'break,' in which the present imagines itself to have been born and history forever changed, [and] a cultural phenomenon that itself needs to be historicized – needs, indeed simply to be acknowledged" (KS: x). Furthermore, KS,

writing in 2000, also draw critical attention to "postmodernism's privileging of the Victorian as its historical 'other'" (xi).

Christian Gutleben in *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* situates the not yet uniformly named genre of neo-Victorianism as a sort of 'nostalgic postmodernism' and also draws on KS's approach of explaining the return to the 19th century in postmodern times as a result of the prevailing deconstructionist[5] mood. To Gutleben, deconstructionism *de*bunks, *un*does and/or *sub*verts "the relationship between postmodern fiction and Victorianism [which means that it] can therefore not be reduced to filial piety nor to any form of straightforward homage" (6–7). In his introduction Gutleben continues to distinguish whether neo-Victorian fiction is merely pastiche or already parody in order to focus on the effect these historic writings can have on a modern-day readership – or, whether this historiographic postmodernism, again, following Jameson, simply illustrates "the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past" (Jameson 1985: 114–116 in Gutleben: 6–7).

Similarly to the uncertainty about what neo-Victorianism actually is (I will return to this later), there is also debate as to which novels can be seen as the first 'forefathers' of what we today consider neo-Victorian fiction. Most commonly named are Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), as well as A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) because they all, according to HL, show a "conscious articulation of the desire to re-write, re-vision and challenge the 19th century assumptions" (8). Loesberg, however, in his critical essay *The Afterlife of Victorian Sexuality* goes even further back in time and proposes Michael Sadleir's 1940s novel *Fanny by Gaslight* because it is:

> a romantic melodrama, […] set, in large part, the Victorian sexual demi-monde of brothels, pleasure gardens, and loose drinking establishments with a heroine, who, while pointedly kept clear of prostitution, explicitly does not share Victorian sexual morés [*sic*], and chooses to live with her lover outside of marriage as a way of keeping their relationship clear of social consequences. (363–4)

[5] Following the above-mentioned definition from Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Or Jean-François Lyotard, who sees postmodernism as "a form of radical subjective fictionality, an aesthetic which refuses mimesis, organic unity, consensus" (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1979: 27).

All novels are set entirely or partly (in the case of *Possession*) in the 19th century and – some more obviously than others – give a modern critical perspective on restrictions and injustices of the past. The debate about which novel is actually '*the* first neo-Victorian novel', falls in seamlessly with a prevailing general uncertainty surrounding the genre of neo-Victorian fiction.

By now, a vast range of fictional works have been written, with different types of plots, narrative modes and settings labelled as 'neo-Victorian' that it proves difficult to pinpoint what the genre actually encompasses. As Miriam Burstein has for example satirically observed in her *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and Academic* blog entry "Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels" in 2006, "any novel based on an actual Victorian literary work must include considerable quantities of sex" and "the novelist must make the prose more antique by eliminating all contractions and using period slang (whether or not it is actually appropriate)" (cf. Burstein).

A general consensus, however, what mainly defines the genre is a contemporary return to the past in order to either mystify and romanticize a very influential era in history and/or at the same time criticize the past while drawing attention to issues that are still very current. HL's widely accepted definition of neo-Victorianism describes it as including self-consciousness, and encompassing "texts [which] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians,* [thus demonstrating a] sustained need to reinterpret the Victorians and what they mean to *us*" (HL: 4, 9, first emphasis original, second emphasis added).

In *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterlives,* Kate Mitchell follows this idea of remembering and metatextually re-imagining the past, while focussing on memory discourse: "[n]eo-Victorian fiction prompts authors, readers and critics to confront the problem of historical recollection […] what is involved in this re-creation of history, what it means to fashion the past for the contemplation of the present" (3). Mitchell, as well as HL, lays emphasis on the contemporary, political relevance of (re-)turning to the past. Hence, they all argue that neo-Victorian fiction is not simply historicized, romantic and fictionalized writing, but that it addresses underlying issues – including those of 'othering', gender and sexuality – which have managed to prevail into modern times. Mitchell continues to argue as follows:

> If we are indeed invaded by Victoriana, we welcome the incursion and insist upon it […] I suggest that the emergence of memory discourse in the late twentieth century, and the increasing interest in non-academic forms of history, enables *us* to think through the contribution neo-Victorian fiction makes to the way we remember the nineteenth-century past in ways that resist privileging history's non-fictional discourse, on the one hand, and postmodernism's problematization of representation on the other" (Mitchell:1, 4, added emphasis).

Mitchell here aligns with Gutleben's as well as KS's view of postmodernist elements such as 'othering' being present in neo-Victorian fiction, as well as HL's point of utilising the genre for self-conscious remembering and thereby connecting it to present-day political as well as societal issues.

More than a decade after Gutleben's and KS's early attempts at drawing scholarly attention to the contemporary revival of the 19th century, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (BSG) in their 2014 publication *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* assert that neo-Victorianism has become a "neo-Victorian project". They explain this by drawing on Ina Schabert's explanation of material signifiers (412–417) and conclude that the neo-Victorian project has "moved beyond postmodern concerns such as intertextuality, self-reflectivity or metafiction" and instead needs "newly calibrated tools of analysis which enable […] us to approach it as a symptom of a contemporary literature and culture which more strongly integrates questions of ethics, reconsiders the author, allows the reference to become visible again behind the veil of material signifiers, and plays at and with practices of immersion" (BSG: 1–2). For BSG, neo-Victorianism also plays an important role in how it shapes our perspectives and constructs our contemporary cultural memory, while at the same time creating our understanding of the present:

> [Neo-Victorianism] explores the changing purposes with which we fashion the past —and with it, ourselves. The process of fashioning the neo-Victorian, that is, crucially entails a self-fashioning, which implies that the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism can be understood in the context of concerns regarding twentieth- and twenty-first-century identity politics. (1)

In conclusion, neo-Victorianism has developed quite extensively since its early days in the mid-twentieth century. The genre has gained increasing popularity and marketability as well as attracts scholarly attention while continuing to fascinate and intrigue. The modern-day public's often compulsive return to the 19th century conveys more than simple romanticization of bygone times.

2.2. Feminist Fascination: (Re)structuring the Past to Shape the Future

"The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any woman at all – it is very tiresome."

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1817)

Historical fiction, a popular genre throughout the history of the novel, has for a long time been associated with a female readership, because of its general association with 'female' subjects such as romance, love and domestic intrigue. These presumptions often led critics to regarding the historical novel as less accurate and the historical setting as being a plot device for novelty and exaltation (cf. CS: 1–2). Sir Walter Scott[6], with his reinvention of the historical novel in the 19th century, has already laid the basis for these heavily gendered opinions that the women's historical novel is associated with romance and/or historical inaccuracy. "Scott's novels – the adventure stories of *Rob Roy* (1817) and *Ivanhoe* (1819) – were aimed largely at a male audience, and emphasis was placed on their basis in historical fact" (CS: 2). To this day, Scott is often referred to as the "benchmark of the genre" (2), whereas women who ventured into the genre even before him – such as Maria Edgeworth with *Castle Rackrent* (1800) – were widely dismissed. Diana Wallace describes this as a tendency of critics "to associate women's historical novels with romance and thus to stigmatize it as escapist" (ix). This has led to a tradition that critics tend to "concentrate predominantly on the work of male authors, often appraising historical novels entirely on the basis of their historical accuracy and depiction of the traditionally male spheres of politics and war" (CS: 2). These critics, as a result, were prone to be dismissive of narratives that turned toward romance, fantasy of anything diverging from acknowledged historical accuracy – calling it "escapism of the popular type" (Fleischmann: xvii).

All this resulted in a long tradition of historical fiction being marked by a preference for "narratives featuring male agency and female passivity, and in many

[6] Scott, a renowned lawyer before becoming a novelist, even felt the need to initially publish anonymously (as Waverley), possibly also because he did not want to be associated with the femininity of the genre. (cf. Cooney, Seamus. "Scott's Anonymity – Its Motives and Consequences," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 10:4, 1973, pp. 207–19.)

of these texts men were lauded as great explorers, heroes and adventurers, while female figures, real or imagined, were marginalized, and featured solely as romantic interests" (CS: 2). Some of these motives can still be found in neo-Victorian fiction today. Taking as an example Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Faber's *The Petal and the White* and following Kohlke's "sexsational" (2008b) argumentation to the genre (more on this in Chapter 4.2.1.), female characters, even though not necessarily passive characters, are often highly sexualized characters – created to appeal to the male reader.

Whereas historical fiction has remained popular with readers of all genders since Scott, the genre "has become increasingly dominated by female authors writing for a largely female readership" (CS: 3) in the last three decades. From A.S. Byatt's Man Booker Prize-winning *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) to Kate Williams' *The Pleasures of Men* (2012), the revival of the female figure in history has shown that the "previously obscured […] is now palpable, multidimensional and undeniably present" (CS: 1). The enormous success of writers such as Waters or Byatt proves that the "female figure is now not only desirable, but also marketable" (CS: 1). However, neo-Victorian novelists not only carry out historization and romanticization. As Jeanette King in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (2005) points out: "revisiting Victorian women's lives provides an opportunity to challenge the answers which nineteenth-century society produced in response to the 'the Woman Question'" (6). Therefore, contemporary neo-Victorian novelists' interests lie also in what the "Victorian period can add to the modern reader's understanding of gender [and raise] a question which is as potentially charged an issue now as it was at the end of the nineteenth century, and continues to be debated in both the popular and academic press'" (King: 6). Diana Wallace in *The Woman's Historical Novel, 1900–2000*, equally, goes as far by saying that "the questions which some of the best [historical] novelists […] ask about the relationships between gender, power, nationality, sexuality, religion and violence are still, sadly, all too relevant" (228).

Contemporary female neo-Victorian writers, by placing female figures at the centre of their narratives, to some extent also work in response to the formerly mentioned traditionally perceived aspects to historical fiction which entail "associations of men with accuracy and historical fact [which in turn] perpetuated the view that women's writing (or writing for women) was somehow automatically

historically inaccurate and trivial" (CS: 3). This notion resulted in female historical figures being represented and understood through male-authored narratives, which lead to an "inherent bias [that] further cultivates the view of history, *his*tory, as the preserve of the male, and problematizes historical fiction by, for and about women" (CS: 3, original emphasis). Even today, as CS synthesise Wallace in chapter twelve of their essay collection: "contemporary historians continue to undermine the value of both women's history and women's histories" (CS: 2–3).

In their 2000 publication *Genders,* Glover and Kaplan (GK) interconnect the literary manifestation of historical fiction to gender studies and add in this sense: "Modern feminist critics use the Victorian period to revisit the unresolved issues of what kind of position gender is, and what kind of ethics and politics can be assigned to 'traditional' femininity" (66, as in original). Across the neo-Victorian canon many motives can be found that are also relevant to feminism including matrilineality, pornography, mental health, prostitution, women's life writing, independence, freedom and self-determination.

Contemporary feminist theory is therefore not to be underestimated as a framework for readings of – especially female-written – neo-Victorian fiction. King draws attention to the importance of such an approach when referring to the "'post-feminist' mood that prevails at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (6). What this mood exactly entails, how she defines the term and how this might influence neo-Victorianism, is, however, left unexplained.

Postfeminism's temporal prefix indicates the advent of a new era, one which declares previous feminism as something belonging to the past. Hence it can indicate "an anti-feminist critique of the misguidedness of feminism [and hence the need to leave its ideologies behind, or] a pro-feminist nod to feminism's victories" (Henry: 19). In contrast to postfeminism's clear distinction from previous feminisms, third-wave feminism opposes this phenomenon, because it understands itself as a backlash against the past and its politics. The difference between the two, as Stéphanie Genz in her article *Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism* explains,

> is to be found at the level of foundations, where these notions originate, and their loyalties lie. In this way, third wave feminism establishes itself as a political movement that depends on a close dialogue with second wave feminism and its organized opposition to women's exclusion and oppression (340–341).

Third-wave feminism provides a corresponding theoretical framework when analyzing feminist motives in Neo-Victorian fiction, because they both proceed to criticise and, hence, position themselves above and against their predecessors. The third-wave's very name suggests a connection with feminist history as it can also be understood as "mimicking the nomenclature of its predecessors, […] acknowledg[ing] that it stands on the shoulders of other, earlier, feminist movements. [However,] its agenda does not mirror the preceding waves' theories straightforwardly and unquestioningly" (Genz: 340).

Neo-Victorianism can not only be seen as a revolt against a previously established literary avant-garde but can also be understood as a manner of addressing very prevalent gender issues. The previously mentioned matters not only addressed by Wallace, GK and others, fit in especially well with contemporary third-wave feminism, because both it and the neo-Victorian genre, are driven by a profound interest in history and its relation to the present. They are both preoccupied with the accomplishments, failures and capabilities of their predecessors. In 'looking back', both movements' historical and historiographic concerns form their equivocal and perhaps even paradoxical sexual politics in relation to sexualised Western consumer cultures.

3. The Third Wave and Neo-Victorian Literature

"I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives."

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

One particular issue on which both third-wave feminism and neo-Victorian fiction reflect by their representations of sexual politics is their contribution to and critique of the increasingly sexualised culture of contemporary consumerism. The third-wave movement, often responding to as well as partaking in what has become known as "pornographication of the mainstream" (McNair: 12) or as the "sexualization of culture" (Attwood: xiii), tries to critique aspects of contemporary culture from within by becoming agents, rather than objects. As Michelle Miller in *Branding Miss G: Third Wave Feminists and the Media* explains:

> within the third wave, feminists focus on a body politics that celebrates the strength of the female sexual body, while recognizing that there are structural forces, such as patriarchy and capitalism, applying power on them and constraining the way they are expected to behave in the world. Instead of rejecting beauty and sexuality, third wave feminists focus on asserting their sexual selves, not necessarily for the male gaze but for themselves, allowing them to be both subject and object in their own sexual lives. (67)

For third wavers, there is an omnipresent "awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited" (Senna: 20). There is, for example, an increasing visibility of sex within all areas of consumer cultures. However, in contrast to previous feminists, third wavers embrace this market-driven sexualization and make it their own not only by acknowledging it, but also by taking active part in and taking pleasure from these structures.

Neo-Victorianism is part of this contemporary sexualized culture and in many ways also feeds market demands. The sexual culture of the stereotyped prudish Victorians influencing Britain's attitudes toward sex and sexuality until the late 1960s has a long tradition of fascination. Starting only two decades after Queen Victoria's death, with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) through to the 1960s and Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Victorian England* (1964), the "nineteenth century has been (re)defined according to its sexual politics, not least in order to contrast perceived Victorian conservativeness with later generations'

sense of their own modernity" (Muller: 115). With the arrival of the new millennium, this sexualization of the past, due to neo-Victorian fiction's propensity to return to matters of gender and sex, is what Marie-Luise Kohlke defines as "sexsation" (2008b). Kohlke neatly points out that neo-Victorianism has, from its very beginnings on, been "crucially concerned with gender issues, particularly the role of women and the historical discrimination and abuses perpetrated against them" (Kohlke 2013: 207). She goes on relating historical fiction to the long tradition of connotating it as a 'feminine' genre, comparing it to "a poor spinster cousin of the more 'literary' novel" (207). To her, the neo-Victorian novel is "engaged in feminist consciousness-raising, whether directly or indirectly, both of its audience and its often outcast, persecuted, and exploited female characters" (207). In the last few decades female writers in particular have gained not only popularity, but also prestige with their re-imaginings of the 19th century.[7]

Neo-Victorianism fiction's return to the past works with similar complexities and paradoxes as third-wave feminism, because they both inhabit a paradoxical position within sexualised Western consumer culture. They both contribute to, benefit from as well as criticise the politics and structures of the sexualised economies to which they belong. Gutleben draws attention to the genre's ethical motivations and argues that, by mainly functioning to fulfil the demands of the market, it is entirely unproductive: "A majority of these contemporary novels are totally bereft of any narrational or diegetic consideration about the present situation [and are] exempt from any other political responsibility" (169). HL have also addressed this inherent and inevitable fact of the marketability of neo-Victorianism. However, they mainly see it in television and film adaptations, particularly when looking at the screen adaptations of lesbian-centered novels by Sarah Waters.

What Gutleben's analysis lacks, is what HL, as well as Kohlke's work do draw attention to. It is neo-Victorian fiction's potential for self-consciousness and examinations of its own creations of the Victorians, as well as, most importantly, the way in which it rewrites the past, while including its own prominence and productivity in sexualised consumer culture. In her essay, *The Neo-Victorian*

[7] Such as Sarah Waters with *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) or *Fingersmith* (2002), A.S. Byatt with *Possession: A Romance* (1990) or *Angels and Insects* (1994), Sarah Hall with *The Eclectic Michelangelo* (2004), Rosie Garland with *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013) or *The Night Brother* (2017) and Emma Donoghue with *The Sealed Letter* (2008) or *The Wonder* (2016).

Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic Kohlke takes the standpoint that it should be neo-Victorian fiction's main aim to uncover and inform about the Victorian past while contributing to Victorianist scholarship. While she acknowledges that the genre comments "on our own cultural obsession with sex"; however, Kohlke also finds it to "reveal less about our forebears and more [about] the present-day sexual fantasies" (348). She furthermore insists that "we need to begin to ask not only what we know about sexuality, but *how* we know it and what 'knowledge' derives only from eroticised fantasies of the Other" (354, original emphasis).

In order to see how exactly the previously mentioned aspects manifest themselves within female-written neo-Victorian narration, it is important to explore third-wave feminists' approach to pornography. As previously mentioned, third wavers have quite a lenient approach towards sexualised consumer culture. Rather than fighting against it – like their predecessors might have done – third wavers prefer to participate in and take benefit from contemporary sexualised culture in order to 'change it from within'. With regard to pornography, there naturally is a certain paradox that needs resolving. Feona Attwood in her introduction to *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture* (2009) asks:

> How should we respond to forms of sexualization which may be profoundly contradictory in the way they mix up oppressive and emancipatory views of sex and gender, and how do we develop a critical language for the analysis of sexualization without reverting to 'pro' and 'anti' positions on pornography? Whatever stance we take, simply rejecting sexualization is unlikely to take us very far. (xvii)

Popular culture is a fundamental, inevitable part of women's lives today and third wavers recognise this. Third wavers hence both embrace and interrogate the contradictions which arise from the self-conscious and even pleasurable participation of women in a culture that both objectifies and dehumanises them. The paradox of simultaneously critiquing and partaking in sexualised consumer culture is explored in neo-Victorian fiction such as Belinda Starling's *DD* and Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*. Both novels trace the roots of the feminist issue of pornography by critiquing as well as exploring its liberational as well as abusive capabilities. This will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

4. The Journal of Dora Damage

"The Victorian Woman became her ovaries, as today's woman has become her 'beauty'."

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*

The following chapter exemplifies how feminist motives and current societal issues can be addressed in a female-written example of neo-Victorian fiction. I will examine Belinda Starling's 2006 novel *The Journal of Dora Damage* in detail, as well as draw links to other female-written novels of the genre that work with similar stock themes and motives in order to make their point. I will especially focus especially on the representation and function of pornography in connection with Kohlke's theory of "sexsationalism" (2008b) as well as the male gaze in Starling's novel.

4.1. Overview & Historical Contextualisation

Set in 1859 London, *DD* traces the story of the young eponymous heroine, Dora, who is forced to take over her husband Peter's book bindery due to his at first crippling and eventually fatal arthritic rheumatism. To save her "pattern young family" (*DD*: 7) from starvation, Dora soon finds herself working for a dangerous clientele: The Noble Savages. They are a club of bibliophile gentlemen who collect pornographic and "*ethnographic* [i.e. racist]" (*DD*: 181, original emphasis) anthropological works of literature as well as photography. Dora, a woman of the middle class, in true Victorian tradition, was raised by her governess mother to be an 'angel in the house' – for which she does not seem to be cut out.[8] Being suddenly obliged to read and bind books filled with sexual practices previously unknown to her, Dora has to compromise all the values she has learned – including her respectability and housewife identity – to save her family. This nonetheless enables her to explore and develop her own sexuality as well as become a woman

[8] There are a few instances in the novel were Dora explains her lack of housework-skills. She cannot cook very well, her washing is never as white as her neighbour's and her floors are sticky (e.g. cf. *DD*: 13, 126).

bookbinder with Pre-Raphaelite artistic talent.[9] As the novel progresses, Dora becomes gradually weary and disgusted by the increasingly vulgar and racist content the Savages give her and tries to break free from the web in which she has become entangled in. Yet, she is forced to remain in business, under the threat of the Savages subjecting Lucinda, Dora's epileptic five-year-old daughter, to a clitoridectomy.

As the title suggests, the novel is written as a journal, narrated by Dora herself. The journal is preceded by a prologue in Dora's voice and followed by an epilogue in Lucinda's, who is then writing posthumously in letter form about her mother's life in 1902. Dora's narrative opens with a "metafictionally inflected statement" (Kohlke 2008a: 202): "*This is my first book, and I am proud of it, despite of its obvious shortcomings*" (*DD*: 1, as in original). Writing autodiegetically, Dora is aware of her reader and often foreshadows within the narrative: "It would have been impossible for me to lie, but I did not know then whether a lie would have saved me" (107), or with sentences such as: "What sudden reversals were to befall me" (109), "It was only later that I wondered whether I should have taken it as a warning" (202). The narration, at times interrupted by letters addressed to Dora, furthermore, shows hybridity.

According to Starling herself, the novel is founded partly on reality. Most notably, the pornography-consuming gentlemen's club The Noble Savages is, in fact, based on the so-called 'Cannibal Club'. This was an association whose members – including Algernon Charles Swinburne, Sir Richard Burton, Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton) and Sir James Wilde (Lord Penzance) – "supported research and enquiry into outdated scientific practices and behaviours devoted to securing their place in the world [, as well as being] the most prolific producers and consumers of pornography" (Starling: 446).

Starling's novel shows more than a few parallels with Waters' equally neo-Victorian *Fingersmith.*[10] This is more than postmodern self-consciousness, it also indicates "a significant but still germinal neo-Victorian literary trend to engage intertextually with contemporaneous neo-Victorian works as well as nineteenth

[9] For example, gold-tooling at the centre of a "dark-green [cover] with scarlet silk doublures […] a beguiling Venus extracting a myrtle leaf and some berries from the garland binding her hair" (*DD*: 160)

[10] The biggest difference between the two is that Waters' work explores the intersections between pornography, gender and social class with lesbianism, rather than heterosexuality.

century texts" (Kohlke 2008a: 201). Firstly, according to the epilogue, Dora in the end chooses female partnership – similar to *Fingersmith's* Maud and Sue. However, Dora does so not out of any sapphic inclination, but out of a proto-feminist sentiment, having learned from experience that she would "rather have no one than an unsatisfactory lover" (*DD*: 443). Secondly, after her former benefactor's death in Africa, Dora moves from London to Kent with his wife and son, leaving her shop to the meanwhile married couple, gay Jack and fallen woman Pansy. Sir Knightley's book collection is donated to the British Library, "who were possibly too confounded by its contents to refuse" (*DD*: 443). This evokes "shades of Henry Spenser Ashbee, who also modelled for Maud's uncle, Christopher Lilly, in *Fingersmith*" (Kohlke 2008a: 201).

In her 2013 paper *Those Very 'Other' Victorians: Interrogating Neo-Victorian Feminism in The Journal of Dora Damage* Caterina Novák claims Starling's novel to be "one of the most detailed and outspoken depictions of Victorian sexuality in recent years", which paints "an exaggerated picture of sexual deviance smouldering under a thin veneer of repressed respectability" (114). Kohlke, in her review of the text, sees "Starling's [*sic*] novel […] as exclusively crafted as Dora's finely tooled leather covers" (2008a: 201).

The novel follows well-known tropes of neo-Victorianism such as "the oppressed woman, sensationalised sexuality, threats of madness, Gothic villains [and] slavery" (Kohlke 2008a: 201). Starling, though, manages to reuse these themes in new, and unanticipated ways. Female domesticity in particular, as Kohlke points out, is utilized as an emblem for the work Dora does to save her family, as well as used to draw attention to current issues surrounding it: "Dora's inept housekeeping, her endless futile fight against all-pervasive dirt, not only comes to stand for the 'dirty' business in which she engages, but also resonates strongly with the stressful place and conflicting multi-task and balance[s] often irreconcilable demands of career and family" (Kohlke 2008a: 201).

4.2. The (Un-)Binding: (Re-)Transformation of Body vs. Self

The body and form of the text closely correlate to the titular heroine's body. The journal Dora writes her memoirs in, is in fact the first book she ever binds – for training. It is bound in an old dress she wore during her courtship. The "act of opening the book thus becomes equated with the act of undressing the narrator" (Novák: 119). The published book's cover adds even more substance to this argument, as it depicts a female torso from the back, tightly laced into a corset (exposed to the reader's gaze), subtitled "Bindings of Any Kind". This instantly "hints at risqué sexual practices with sadomasochistic overtones, implicitly conflating the body of the book with the female body of the titular heroine" (Kohlke 2008a: 196). (cf. HL: 108) The design of the Bloomsbury publishers, furthermore, "highlights the ambivalent relationship that is established between the nineteenth-century narrator and the twenty-first-century reader" (Novák: 119). However, not only does the entire design of its cover hint at the reader 'unclothing' the secrets that lie within the book by opening it, "Damage's Bookbindery"[11] also suggests the damage the book might do to its readers, long before Dora becomes – in many ways – 'damaged goods'. As a result, the novel at the same time invites the reader to voyeuristically enjoy the insights of the Victorian sex trade as well as criticises this sexsationalism and objectification of women. The reader is from the onset of the narration put in an ambiguous position.[12]

As a matter of fact, the very name of the novel's heroine already carries equivocality, as there is more significance aside from a harmonic-sounding alliteration. Dora shares her first name with the patient of Sigmund Freud's first case history: "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria", also known as: "The Case of Dora". Freud's analysis, published in 1905, describes his approach to dealing with a young female patient, Dora. She suffers from a range of symptoms, including depression and convulsions, which Freud chooses to sum up under the term of "*petite hystérie*" (Marcus: 58, as in original). Starling's Dora, however, is the exact opposite of Freud's Dora. For one, she does not suffer from mental health issues and, in fact, is in very good health (for example, she does not contract the

[11] The very word "bindery" shows connections to the contemporary; in Victorian times, this word did not exist in Britain, as it is originally American. (cf. *OED*: "bindery") In fact, Dora hears the word for the first time from her American ex-slave lover, Din (cf. *DD*: 258).
[12] The novel's ambiguity and its effect will be discussed later on in more depth. (cf. Chapter 4.3.)

cholera of which her mother dies, she can go without eating for days and is both mentally and physically resilient). Dora Damage also has very strong – feminist – opinions on doctors, mental health institutions and the concept of 'madness' of her time: "men don't often get locked up, not for madness, even though there are more mad men than women. Madness is a female word. 'It's a madness' they say, like it's a governess, or a seamstress, or murderess. There's no male equivalent, no such word as 'madner'. I should start saying it, but then they might lock me up" (*DD*: 11).

Moreover, *DD* shows aspects akin to a coming-of-age novel, as it gives an intimate insight into the married life of a young, lower-middle class Victorian mother, who due to her courageous fight to save her family and existence also attains sexual independence. Starling's Victorian heroine virtuously undergoes a dramatic transformation, which in the end enables her to come out on top, despite setbacks and numerous obstacles she needs to overcome. There are many aspects of interest in *DD*. For one, most obviously, Starling works with the neo-Victorian stock theme of sexuality in connection with female oppression and all that comes with male (sexualised) superiority. Hence the following chapters will focus on the sexsationalised character of the novel as well as the sub-aspect of the male gaze and how it is represented.

4.2.1 'Sexsationalism' and Pornography in Dora Damage

Marie-Luise Kohlke in her 2008 paper *The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic* focusses especially on an erotic and sexual interest contemporaries have in neo-Victorian fiction. She criticises it as an "arrogant attempt to repossess the Victorian age through sex" (2008b: 7). Because, while we "project […] illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress" (2008b: 2). Kohlke furthermore points out that the "neo-Victorian novel exoticizes, eroticises, and seeks to penetrate the tantalising hidden recesses of the nineteenth century by staging a retrospective imperialism" (6). In other words, the sexsationalist aspect of a neo-Victorian novel is for contemporary readers to voyeuristically pry into the Victorian's private, as well as their often wrongly stereotyped prudish sex life.

To make her point, Kohlke refers to male-written novels, namely *The Crimson and the White* (2002) by Michel Faber and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in which "neo-Victorian fantasies repeatedly take on curiously antiquated overtones of imperialist adventures by would-be conquerors of exotic female 'others'" (2008b: 6). In both novels, the female characters are often represented as being sensual, mysterious and even 'Oriental': "Her eyes alone, even if she were wrapped up like an Arabian odalisque, with nothing else showing, would be enough to declare her sex" (Faber: 26 as in Kohlke 2008b: 6). Fowles, on the other hand, also draws on the 'African slave imagery' as being specifically appealing when his protagonist chiasmatically views the enigmatic female as "proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal" (Fowles: 301). Kohlke therefore synthesises: "The role of sexual fantasy in asserting power over the subjected, exploited female, colonising her so to speak, while simultaneously enacting the deconstruction of any such desire, balances reactionary and liberationist impulses" (2008b: 8). Belinda Starling reverses these motives by, for example, creating a female character that defies the stereotype of a woman easily submerged and sexualised by her appearance: "I would never look like a lady, besides […]: I had no waist or hips to speak of, my arms were more built up than Jack's, and I'd never seen a society lady with my snub nose, my grey eyes, my brittle hair" (*DD*: 78).

As Starling's *DD,* most often mentioned in scholarly discourse about the manifestation of the representation of female sexuality within neo-Victorian fiction through pornography is Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). Both novelists return to the 19th century's pornographic trade not only to look for the roots of today's sex trade (a very key feminist concern), but also to interrogate women's role in and relationship with pornography. In doing so, both novels also critically reflect on the textual politics of their own sexualization. As Nadine Muller in her essay *Sexual f(r)ictions: Pornography in Neo-Victorian Women's Fiction* argues, Starling's *DD,* as well as Waters' *Fingersmith* both:

> not only vividly re-imagine the pornography trade during the second half of the nineteenth century but, adding to their sexsationalism, they also centre around their heroines' encounters with and creation of pornographic works, thus exploring women's roles in the male-dominated marketplace in which these publications were and have since been created and circulated. (116)

Pornography as such, takes on a rather new tinge within third-wave feminism. As previously explored, third wavers are willing to interact with and partake of sexualised consumer culture. This results in pornography and its production can – if done willingly – be aligned with feminist motives. In *Fingersmith* this notion is more openly adhered to, because Maud actually becomes a producer and writer of pornographic literature, which enables her to live her life independently. In *DD*, however, this is not the case. Dora, due to circumstances beyond her control, becomes entangled in the web of the pornographic book trade. She does not choose to deliver to this market. In the end, it is pornography that leads her to have a very distorted perception of sex and sexuality, which in turn causes her to yearn for freedom. In Starling's novel, pornography quickly turns into something vulgar, utterly racist and dehumanising – especially to women. Dora learns to use and manipulate the trade brought to her in order to save her family. She falls victim to the Noble Savages and Charles Diprose but manages to stay unsullied by and safe in the end. She remains a woman of decency and never completely betrays her virtue.

The beginning of Starling's narrative is shaped by Dora's sexual inexperience as well as her first impressions of the pornographic material she is to bind for the Noble Savages. Her "upbringing and society had not prepared [her]" (*DD*: 163) for the material she is confronted with. Although not a virgin like Maud, Dora is sexually inexperienced, and her perception of sex and sexuality becomes increasingly marked by the material she reads. Her marriage, like her upbringing, does not encourage any kind of sexual interaction except for the purpose of reproduction. Consequently, Dora and Peter have had intercourse three times in five years of marriage, once on their wedding night, when their daughter was conceived, and twice thereafter, each time preceded by Peter "wait[ing] outside the door barking instructions at [her] to scrub [herself] all over with carbolic soap and baking soda" (*DD*: 24).[13] Having had a child and believing Dora to be "a convulsive" (*DD*: 24) due to her expressions of pleasure during sex, Peter cannot see a reason for a fourth sexual act. Dora explains:

[13] This could be Starling's tongue-in-cheek attempt to refer to Victorian author and art critic John Ruskin's account of his wedding night with Effie Gray. As he supposedly "suffered a traumatic shock […] when he discovered that Effie had pubic hair"(Luytens: 156), because his wife did not reach his expectations of "idealized notions of angelic femininity and from the smooth female forms familiar to him from Greek statuary and paintings" (Kohlke: 2008b: 3).

> I remember suggesting a third time, […] to which he replied in wonder, 'What do you want to be going and doing that for?' as if I had suggested to steal a hot air balloon and see if we could fly to the moon. It was a wrongful disposition for a respectable wife and mother; I learnt to acquire an appropriate aversion. (24)

Naturally, Dora's first encounters with pornographic material "result in a problematic relationship between the contents of these publications and the world as Dora experiences it" (Muller: 123). With this very naïve and uninformed initial approach to relate to the narratives, Dora at first believes that the sadomasochistic illustrations are: "love unromanticised, but for that reason, possibly more authentic" and continues to explain that she "had not known that men could feel this way about women [, suddenly feeling] gratitude to the images [she] was seeing for helping [her] make sense of foundlings and baby-farms and fallen women" (*DD*: 162). In this scene, pornography is represented as supposed reality, which eventually becomes the establishment, representation and reinforcement of women's subordination to men (cf. Muller: 123). Dora relates to fallen women and baby-farms, which shows her initial opinion that even if the forbidden sexual act (outside of wedlock) becomes pleasurable for the woman, in the end, it is her who has to suffer and bear the consequences.

Dora – in contrast to *Fingersmith's* Maud, who becomes spatially confined by Briar – becomes imprisoned by her social status, her role as a middle-class wife. The material commissioned to her bears no relation to her actual life; it seems irrelevant and utopian to her at first. Knightley's texts nonetheless make her loathe herself and make her "angry at [her] ignorance [and that the books] led [her] into the dark caves of sin, and left [her] there in torment and confusion" (*DD*: 164). The initial confusion and shock about the text's nature, soon wears off and Dora starts thinking that it "felt curiously normal […] now to be doing this" (*DD*: 185). Becoming more curious about the nature of the texts she has been reading, she starts to reflect on her own world, her marriage and sexuality and comes to think: "What a disappointment I must have been to my husband, for not being a docile and willing conduit, a physiological sewer to the pouring-forth of his mighty Jupiter Pluvius" (*DD*: 186). What Dora does not consider here, is her husband's own sexual inexperience and restrictiveness and the fact that he probably never even considered her desires and satisfaction.

Peter Damage, though seen as the central figure in patriarchal Victorian society, increasingly moves into the background, as the narrative continues. Initially very conservative and outspoken about the duties of women, his presence and character continuously decline as his illness – and laudanum addiction – worsens. Early on in the novel, Dora still asks herself: "Was I unsexing myself, or worse, him?", only to conclude that he "had already unsexed himself. He was impotent. And we had nothing to lose" (67). No matter how unbearable her husband becomes, Dora remains at his side, caring for him – remaining an 'angel in the house' for him and attending to his needs. Later in the novel, Dora gives an eye-opening insight into her true feelings for him:

> I was sorry for him. His manliness had all but gone from him; he could only watch as his wife made an admirable living from his business, working on material to which he felt she should not be exposed and from which he could not protect her, and which further served to remind him of his failure as a real man. My husband had become a molly, a milksop; but it was not his fault. (198)

Dora virtuously cares for her husband until his last breath, true to the vows she made when marrying him. Only after her husband's death, does she start to explore her own sexuality. Hence, Starling's heroine remains unsullied and pure, despite the nature of her business – into which she is, after all, forced.

Pornography in Starling's novel has little or nothing to do with female sexual pleasure or satisfaction. This becomes clear when Dora reads the first book she is commissioned; Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Here she learns, that every woman should be aware of the angle at which she is most beautiful at during the sexual act, which means, that the woman has to consider how she is the most attractive while being beheld by a man. Dora's initial response to this is that: "I had never beheld these parts of my body in this way, unfamiliar as they were to me as far-off parts of the globe, for the first time in my life, I started to wonder about my best angle" (160). On the same page, there is more evidence that Dora is not in tune with her body: "Another book […] mentioned in passing an extraordinary, magical place, called the Clit-oris. The author was unspecific as to its exact co-ordinates, but it sounded as if it should be in Africa" (160). Here, the central symbol for female sexual pleasure "functions merely as an exotic item of male pursuit and satisfaction, much like the far-off colonies" (Muller: 127). In fact, as Muller points out, in Starling's novel, any "sexual power or liberty women imagine they possess through the enactment of heterosexual […] practices is […] merely subject to and created for

the satisfaction of male desires, and is therefore of an artificial and degrading, rather than an emancipatory or liberating, nature" (127).

In *DD*, Dora's journey to become an independent, free woman while remaining upstanding in Victorian society as a working woman propels the plot to its natural climax, namely the sexual union of Dora and Din. Yet the consummation appears rather unspectacular with Dora lying on the floor, "amongst the paper shavings and leather parings" (*DD*: 362) of her workshop, being rendered immobile. This, in turn, seems as though the "erotic build-up appears no more than a means of game playing with the reader" (Kohlke 2008b: 6)[14]. The reason for this is nevertheless Starling's intentional representation of pornography and the effect it has on her heroine. Dora is convinced that sex must be carried out as represented in Knightley's texts, soon realising that the 'knowledge' she has gained is not applicable to reality. This revelation comes to her after a rather pitiable, if not comical, first attempt to have sex with Din:

> 'Forsooth,' I suddenly remembered, relieved that the last year's toil had not been in vain. Then, 'Verily sir, a mighty one.' […] I thrust myself forward and tilted the crown of my head towards the floor, and arched my back dramatically, but it was all wrong […] Our skulls clunked together and our temples throbbed. 'A tremulous shudder' […] and two or three long sighs, followed by the critical, dying 'Oh, oh!' That was it. I tried all those, in turn. (*DD*: 361)

This close encounter lets Dora see "nature's grand master-piece [*sic*], [for the first time], only his seemed to be wilting" (361). It naturally leaves her embarrassed, rather than satisfied. She admits: "I'd read of too many fictions to feel anything other than fictitious myself right now" (362). The final act can, in the end, only be carried out because Din takes over the lead and tells her "not to move. You may only move when you can't help but move, but not before" (362). As Muller observes, "only when the neo-Victorian heroine disregards pornographic narratives and gives in to her own desires [is she] able to find equality and sexual pleasure which are not staged or performed, but which are "as involuntary as fainting" (*DD*: 362 in Muller: 127). Sexual pleasure, nevertheless, is both inexpressible and intimate. As a result, her most private moments with Din (which are neatly embedded in a set of printed ivy-leaves, as if the narrator wanted to protect, as well

[14] This seems to be a theme often followed in neo-Victorian literature. In A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, "the unions of the two sets of nineteenth and twentieth century lovers, whose romances develop in parallel, take up a minuscule amount of text compared to the long drawn out build-up of attraction and seduction" (Kohlke 2008b: 7).

as make these passages stand out) are left without a label or description. Dora only recounts: "I do not have a name for what we did […] we did it, wordlessly and without name" (*DD*: 362). It is essential, furthermore, that these sexual encounters teach Dora: "more over those five days about the inner workings of our hearts and bodies than […] over a year of binding erotic texts" (372).

In Starling's novel, pornography "distorts women's sense of self and estranges them from their own bodies and desires" (Muller: 124). Furthermore, it is psychological evidence of violence against women, because pornography not only clearly deforms Dora's sense of self and estranges her from her own body and desires, but also functions as a form and promotion of physical abuse of and factual violence against women. One of the books Dora has to bind for Knightley, *The Lustful Turk* (a genuine piece of Victorian pornography, published in 1828), is of specific relevance to the narration, because it keeps reappearing throughout. The problem with this book, is, as Muller points out, that "the pleasure which the Dey's women feel following acts of extreme violation appears to Dora not as a dubious sanctioning of rape, but instead – as the text intends it – a pain to which men must subject women in order to introduce them to the pleasures of sex" (124).

DD brings this subjectification of women by men onto a whole new level when Starling draws on an instance from the real Cannibal club. In 1863, Richard Burton promised his fellow Cannibal member, Frederick Hankey, to bring back human skin from his next trip to Africa, so that Hankey could have his Marquis de Sade texts bound in it (cf. Sigel: 50) – where reality's Burton failed, neo-Victorian fiction's Knightley succeeds. When Dora is required to bind a book in an unknown material – no questions asked and unaware of its contents – she soon finds out that the material is, in fact, "the skin of a woman from the colonies whom Knightley 'saved' from being burned on her husband's grave" (Muller: 124). This is a fate that Dora almost shares with the colonial woman when she is kidnapped by Diprose and, instead of receiving a clitoridectomy – as she is made to believe – gets the Noble Savages' coat of arms tattooed on her buttocks. Her skin is intended as the cover of "Volume Two" (*DD*: 408). Here, "illustrations of pornography as physical violence and as an objectification of women merge as Dora is intended to become both a figurative and physical part of Knightley's collection" (Muller: 125).

As Dora is thus not only part of but also victim of the pornography trade, she realises that she is not "a free agent in respect of her employment" (HL: 133). Even

when she tries to find her business elsewhere and wants to cut the ties binding her to Holywell Street (the actual Victorian high street for the pornographic trade), Diprose informs her that she has "no choice over what [she does] and [does] not bind" (*DD*: 220). In Victorian times, even if done involuntarily, printers as well as writers of pornography still become passive accomplices to a trade that was, in fact illegal.[15] Dora, left without much choice, learns to distance herself from the content she is confronted with on a daily basis and soon "admits that, because their words have lost meaning to her, the texts themselves are, dangerously, also void of any relationship with reality" (Muller: 125). To Dora, the works become something that only concerns the upper classes, to which she does not belong. She synthesises: "My world became tinged with unreality; such literature placated with its tone, written with such levity, good humour, civility and incoherence. It came to be endearing, childish, and meaningless" (*DD*: 163).

Caught between two worlds – being a resourceful, virtuous, loving mother and wife while at the same time feeding her family with the money she makes nurturing an illegal business – Starling's heroine manages to stay pure at heart and manages to come out on top with her head held high – despite all the odds. She can only achieve this, however, with the help of Din, who not only becomes the man to liberate her sexually and aids her to disestablish the male-female power relationship (more on this in the following chapter). Din is also Dora's hero who saves her life and retrieves her beloved daughter, only to disappear into the night – never to be seen or heard of again. This plot fits in perfectly with what Kohlke describes as being typical in "neo-Victorian sexsation, [as it] artificially inflates desire only to reveal the impossibility of its sustainability and satisfaction in reality" (2008b: 6).

Thinking in emancipatory, feminist terms, even though Dora takes matters of her life and the future of her family into her own hands, she is still significantly dependent on men. Diprose 'charitably' gives her the first materials so she can bind the first books for him to sell to the Savages. Knightley sees Dora as his '*magnum opus'* and by making her his Mistress Bindress, continuously gives her presents and fine foods, as well as medical support for her epileptic daughter and rheumatic

[15] Pornography became illegal after the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which "not only outlawed obscene publications but empowered police to search premises on which obscene publications were kept for sale or distribution" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Obscene Publications Act").

husband. When her life is at stake she depends on Din, who liberates her in numerous ways. In the crucial climatic scene at Knightley's house, where Diprose wants to murder Dora in order to use the skin on her freshly tattooed buttocks for a new book, Dora is helped by both Din and Knightley to free herself from Diprose and the pornography trade. Because she is saved by men, as the novel reveals in its final pages, Dora does not end up as another book on one of Knightley's shelves. Instead, she authors her "own body [i.e. book]" (*DD*: 392), *The Journal of Dora Damage*, which is a text – as she clarifies on the first pages – that does not prescribe a life, but one that a woman must complete herself: "*[The] pages of the […] book start off blank, and await inscription by the lending of a life of free will according to personal inspiration*" (*DD*: 1–2, as in original).

Nevertheless, *DD* functions as a commentary on contemporary sexsationalist consumer culture and focusses on issues regarding pornography, which becomes most obvious in Lucinda's afterword to her mother's journal. Here she affirms that Dora must have foreseen a "pornification" (cf. Nikunen et. al.) of culture: "My mother must have known […] that all the abolition of Holywell-street would achieve was the migration of a handful of pornographers into other premises, and an easier thoroughfare for vehicles and pedestrians to navigate" (*DD*: 445). Starling's novel sets itself apart from other sexsationalised neo-Victorian pieces, because aside from there being the exaggerated depiction of the Savages, there is also a:

> sheer quantity and range of sexual tastes and practices featured in the text, transform[s] it into a veritable freak show of Victorian sexual deviance: hetero- and homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, sodomy, rape (followed by a botched abortion [in case of Pansy, the maid]), and the threat of child abuse and genital mutilation future along Peter damages near pathological aversion to sex unhygienic grounds. (Novák: 120)

Whereas other neo-Victorian works might offer 'sneak-peaks' into the private lives of the Victorians, *DD* provides such an excessive amount of sex[16], which is "more likely to cloy than to satisfy the reader's appetite for voyeuristic enjoyment" (Novák: 120).

[16] Aside from the one's mentioned, the narrator gives numerous examples of Victorian euphemisms for sex, which most likely strike the modern reader as ludicrous rather than lascivious. For example: "*gamahuching, kirkydoodling bagpiping, lallygagging,* or *minetting*" (*DD*: 163, original emphasis).

4.2.2. Overcoming the Male Gaze in The Journal of Dora Damage

In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre understands the term *le regard*, the 'gaze' or the 'look', as the battlefield for us to continuously define and redefine ourselves. Because the gaze of the 'other' objectifies us outside of our control and hence makes us become aware of ourselves while losing our freedom as a subject, "insofar as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved" (Sartre: 110). Michel Foucault extends this power dynamic of the gaze and associates it with surveillance, arguing that the gaze is a perfect medium for dominance. To him, the gaze becomes the ever surveying and observing "speaking eye" (Foucault: 114), which in turn gains power through knowledge.

Laura Mulvey puts the theory of the gaze into feminist perspective. Especially focusing on film theory, Mulvey in her argumentation draws on the Freudian concept of scopophilia, which is "one of the component instincts of sexuality [and is therefore] associated […] with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey: 8). Freud particularly focusses on children in his examples and on their "voyeuristic activities […] their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden" (Mulvey: 8). Mulvey argues that in cinema, the gaze is used for male subjects to further express their mastery over female objects, in that "the male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure" (11). This results in the female becoming simultaneously immobilized as well as idealized whenever the "spectator [comes] in direct scopophilic contact with the female form [which is] displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male phantasy) [and eventually results in] him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis" (Mulvey: 13). Neo-Victorian fiction in itself is branded by scopophilic notions, because – as previously asserted – neo-Victorianism takes a liking to peeping into the private lives of the Victorians and is, to some extent, so marketable because of this. It is this suppressive, objectifying aspect to the male gaze, which will be of importance for the future analysis of *DD*.

In *DD* Starling makes use of the male gaze in unexpected ways. In the beginning of the novel, when Dora walks the streets of London by herself, she recounts feeling conspicuous on her own: "I was stared at with impunity, especially by the men" (53). Dora here is subjected to the male gaze, feeling insecure,

continuing to compare the gaze of men with how women look at her and wonders if she is being judged: “Women are experts of the cross-gaze; why do men have to look directly? Was I overdressed in my finest, or not smart enough? Did I look like a lady’s maid who had done away with her lady, or a prostitute, even?” (53) and continues in the same stream of thought: “For, unaccompanied, I became a public woman […]. Oh, for an escort on to whose arm I could cling, to allay my fellow street-goers’ curiosity and render me invisible” (53). This early in the novel, Dora feels very ill at ease being on her own – without male protection, she would rather be invisible on the arm of a man.

In another instance, Dora comments even more on the inherent gender inequality of the 19th century. When Peter announces that she is “most fortunate to be married to a modern man like [him]self,” because, in his conservative mind, “Most members of the weaker sex are never permitted to be seen beyond the confines of their houses” (97). Dora, being a submissive wife, does not contradict him directly; to her readers, she however explains: “But he was wrong. A woman's life could never truly lack visibility, no matter how low or high her rank: women who went to market were exhibits; women who never went to market where exhibited at balls and parties instead” (97). This quote exemplifies that, in *DD*, women of the time, no matter their position in society, were all equals when it comes to being subjected to the objectifying male gaze.

As the narration continues, Dora becomes braver and eventually gets accustomed to being by herself on the streets and grows to be more daring. Her typically female ‘cross-gaze’ and seeing things ‘out-of-the-corner-of-her-eye’ keeps returning throughout the novel. Noteworthy is also Dora’s first encounter with Sir Knightley. She meets him in his voluptuously decorated office and takes in – in a quite sexualized manner – every detail of his appearance, only to realise that she was behaving improperly: “But there I was, looking too long; I dropped my gaze” (101).

The most significant male gaze evidenced within the novel is Dora’s employment. As HL point out, “the male gaze is harnessed to racial and sexual violence and cloaked in the guise of science” (131). The Noble Savages’ fascination with Dora lies in their desire to watch her read their pornographic material. By officially being a club of ‘science’, the Savages of Starlings novel, as well as the factual Cannibals – all scholars, politicians, scientists, artists, and imperialists –

"contributed to the ethos of British society that argued for immutable difference, and they used this ethos to create the hierarchies of the empire. Their fascination with these distinctions helped construct sex and race as biological categories […] [T]he pornographic investigation of sexuality did not preclude the scientific; instead, they complemented and intensified each other" (Sigel: 79–80).

In Starling's novel, women, too, can become "participants in the commodification of others" (HL: 132). For one, Dora's landlady Mrs. Eeles – a satirical version of "a Miss Havisham in black" (Kohlke 2008a: 197) – has a weakness for child necrophilia. Equally, the anti-slavery society presided over by Sir Knightley's rebellious wife – Lady Sylvia Knightley – "exploits its freed slaves by exhibiting them in the semi-nude for sensual delectation and in order for the ladies to indulge in rape fantasies during private gatherings" (HL: 132).[17]

If not in a literal sense, then certainly by the way they can display their perverse and obscene sexual fantasies to Dora through the texts they commission to her to bind, the Savages, however, administer the highest level of oppression through the male gaze. For, as a rule, Dora reads the texts in order to decide on a suitable design. From the moment of her employment by Knightley, it becomes clear that Dora is an object of his, as well as the group's, gaze (cf. *DD:* 106–7). Knightley introduces her to the club as his "magnum opus. What a woman we have made of you!" (*DD*: 235).

Abducted in the middle of the night and brought to Knightley's house, Dora realises when catching "a glimpse of a long, hazy room, a shining table, men in jewel colored velvets" and thinking, "[t]hey were all here, I knew, for I had read their diaries, their letters, their stories, and they knew it too, as they watched me watching them" (*DD*: 239–240) that her professional service was actually, and had been from the start, a sexual one. She then "feels disempowered by her own gaze (HL: 132): "It felt tremendously improper for me to witness this male occasion; it somehow felt more shameful than anything I had seen in any book to date. But I could not avert my gaze, and the men within, too, stared back out at me" (*DD*: 239). This scene fits Mulvey's description of a scopophilic regime perfectly, as the

[17] For the English abolitionists' 'prurient gaze' see Colette Colligan in "Anti-Abolition Writes Obscenity: The English Vice, Transatlantic Slavery and England's Obscene Print Culture." in *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography 1800–2000*, edited by Lisa Sigel, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 67–73.

"determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure […] in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed. [The] woman […] holds the look and plays to and signifies male desire" (19). While Dora, in this scene, is the spectator – looking *at* and *in* – she can never be "the subject of the active and possessive gaze" (HL: 133), because she has already been objectified and possessed in the Savages' imagination. Hence, there "is no possible interchange, only the subjugation of the one by the gaze of the others" (HL: 133).

What HL do not consider, however, is that Din – Dora's African American ex-slave employee and lover, who was conversely subject to the female gaze of Lady Knightley and her fellow ladies – not only leads Dora into sexual freedom, but also frees her from the male gaze by helping her see herself. During sex with Din, Dora learns "that it is not just the men who like to look" and when Din literally shares his view *of* Dora *with* Dora, "look[ing] back into my eyes as if he could transfer the image to me that way" (373), Din disestablishes the power relations associated with their identities between him as a black man and her as a white woman and later – as previously explored – also saves her life in true heroic manner. Due to him, Dora does not end up as a book on one of Knightley's shelves and instead writes her own. This she describes in the prologue of her journal:

> [The] pages of the […] book start off blank, and await inscription by the lending of a life of free will according to personal inspiration and divine grace. And the more one's destiny is pursued, the more brilliance the book acquires, until the binding far surpasses any hide, cloth or paper binding ever produced in the finest ateliers of Paris or Geneva, and is finally worthy of joining the library of human knowledge. (*DD*: 1–2)

In Dora Damage, women can overcome – rewrite – the male gaze. However, pornography – in every shape or form – remains a mode of male objectification and oppression of women in order to reinforce male sexual desire, which stands in contrast to third-wave feminist theories and hence also raises the question which effect Starling's narration has within the self-conscious critique of the neo-Victorian genre. This question will be further discussed in the following chapter.

4.3. Neo-Victorian Parody?

Caterina Novák in her paper *Those Very 'Other' Victorians: Interrogating Neo-Victorian Feminism in The Journal of Dora Damage* draws on Gutleben's argumentation – previously mentioned in this paper – about the presence of neo-Victorian stock themes that do not belittle the genre. For Novák, "the near ubiquity of certain key tropes is by no means a disadvantage, providing as it does a rich breeding ground for intertextual allusions and metatextual self-parody" (114). Starling's debut novel, to Novák, offers "a rich source of amusement [and also] contribute[s] to the ongoing discussion of the gender politics of neo-Victorian fiction" (115). While it has been established that *DD* can be read as a feminist neo-Victorian novel, it is interesting to see whether the narration also acts as a parody of the entire genre – in that it self-consciously 'over-exaggerates', satirises and comments on many of its main characteristics, while simultaneously "offering an important contribution to the debate surrounding its feminist political credentials" (Novák: 115).

Novák further argues that by using sexsational elements, *DD* "[i]mplicat[es] its readers in voyeuristic enjoyment of Victorian perversion [and] constitutes a self-consciously parodical interrogation of the feminist politics of neo-Victorian women's fiction more generally" (114). For one, the form of the narration, as well as a few instances where the autodiegetic, eponymous narrator, is aware of her potential reader, shows a certain self-awareness and self-consciousness of the novel (cf. chapter 4.1.). Starling's novel, therefore, might be seen simply as "a feminist attack on Victorian hypocrisy and on a social system which fostered an ideal of femininity that denied women access to meaningful economic occupations and sexual agency" (Novák 114) through the mode of neo-Victorian fiction. On the other hand, the novel can also be perceived as a parody on the entire genre. Because it 'feeds' almost too excessively into the previously mentioned appetites of neo-Victorian readers and simultaneously refuses to do so, the novel can also be interpreted as a "commentary on contemporary debates, and as a critical revaluation of the validity of offloading such concerns onto the Victorians" (Novák 114).

Gutleben in the introduction to his work about neo-Victorianism already raises the question whether, in its compulsive return to the past, the entire genre is in fact pastiche – "pure imitation" (Gutleben: 8) – or already parody. As we have seen in

this paper, neo-Victorian fiction, which has since even developed into the "neo-Victorian project" (cf. BSG) is much more than a simple imitation of its long-gone Victorian model. To continue to explore whether Starling's novel, in particular, is a neo-Victorian example of parody, a proper definition of what parody in literature is required.

Linda Hutcheon in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* defines it as follows: "[p]arody is a perfect postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies", thus allowing "an artist to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it" and offering "a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1991: 11, 35, 26). It is important to note that parody, to Hutcheon, is not necessarily comic.

Aside from there being quite a few obvious parodic, even comical, instances in *DD*[18], the main "finely honed irony of Starling's novel lies in the fact that its heroine becomes both a skilful manipulator of, and profiteer from, the very gender, class, and race based injustices of Victorian society she abhors" (Kohlke 2008a: 197). There is, thus, no real straightforward reading of the novel's heroine – or for that matter any woman in the narration. It is left up for debate and interpretation whether Dora is a victim or a victor over Victorian patriarchy – precisely because she "remains implicated in and indeed profits from the gender- and race-based injustices she sets out to combat" (Kohlke 2008a: 197 in Novák: 116–117). This in turn, also aligns with Hutcheon's argument that parody is a form of "textual dialogism [which is] one of the major forms of self-reflexivity" (1985: 22, 2). *DD*, according to Novák, takes this definition to a new level, because it includes its own critical commentary by criticizing and profiting from the exploitative business Dora is in (cf. 131).

Nonetheless, this is not the only ambiguity of the narration. As Novák points out, there is a prevailing "playfully parodic subversion of neo-Victorian discourses [which] becomes apparent in the inconsistency with which [*DD*] approaches central themes" (117). To her, especially the "overtly feminist perspective of the narrator

[18] There are, for example, names very carefully chosen, such as Lord Glidewell, a member of the Noble Savages and Judge. He has a habit of masturbating while being choked. In the end, he does not 'glide very well', as he is not able to free himself from the silk rope which strangles him – his sexual preference kills him in the end (cf. *DD*: 426–427).

clashes with the markedly conservative elements of the plot" (117). This observation has been made previously in this paper as well. Even though Dora initially seems very courageous, independent and resourceful – which she no doubt is, to some extent – she, in the end, is always helped and saved by men. Especially in the novel's climactic scene, "the heroine is unexpectedly cast as a damsel in distress who has to be rescued by her African-American lover" (Novák: 117). Thereafter, Dora and Lucinda are brought home safely by Din and Dora is protected from prosecution of murdering Diprose by Sir Jocelyn.[19]

Din's character, especially, occupies an extraordinary position in relation to the entire narrative. On the surface, of course, he is the strong man that saves Dora not only from the male gaze, the hands of Gothic villains but also from sexual frustration. His presence and centrality, however, carry more meaning than that. As a typically neo-Victorian attempt to be politically correct, it is Din's presence that makes Dora become aware of the bigotry and racism that the Savages' pornographic works also convey. She admits: "the presence of the stranger [Din] was forcing me to accept the transgressive nature of my business" (*DD*: 176). As Muller points out, Starling uses Din's character and his recollections of life to turn a "critical gaze upon her reader" (126). For example, when he recounts to Dora how Lady Knightley's Lady's Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery abuse him and other former slaves by way of bizarrely perverse role plays, enacting rape fantasies, Dora keeps interrupting him with impatient questions:

> "What else did they do?" But he would not answer. He simply sat and smiled. So I moved slightly closer to him. A question burnt my lips; I did not know if I dared ask, until it spoke itself for me. "Do they touch you, Din?" I said quietly. He paused, and held my gaze, still grinning. "Oh, Lord do they touch me!" He whistled through his teeth. (210)

Muller sums up this scene as Din playing as much with "Dora's evident anticipation of his story's sexual details as with ours, forcing us to face not only Dora's complicity in the pornography trade but also our contemporary desire for neo-Victorian fiction's 'politically correct' yet sexsational critiques of the past" (Muller: 126).

[19] Additionally, the novel suggests that Din sacrifices himself for Dora in subsequently returning to America, so that the murder of Diprose could be blamed on a runaway ex-slave. Dora and Din's entire love affair undermines its overt critique of Victorian racism, because the novel "inevitably recycl[es] the black man/white woman fantasy it critiques" (Kohlke, 2008a: 198).

Another parodic element to the narration is Dora's conscious decision to move away from London with her daughter and Knightley's cast-off wife and son, to live together "comfortably without the need to seek out a man on whom to depend, by whom to be owned" (*DD*: 431). However, as the reader learns in the epilogue narrated by Lucinda in 1902, this decision can also be reinterpreted as if "neither of them quite got over the men they loved but could not have" (*DD*: 442). The novel hence initially displays a very modern-minded, feminist and emancipatory mindset, which is, in the very last instance questioned.

Even more significant, however, is "the extent to which *Dora Damage* appears to invite an approach that focuses on its inconsistencies, self-consciously drawing attention to what ostensibly constitutes its "obvious weaknesses"" (*DD*: 1 in Novák: 118). In *DD*, the reader is in fact alerted to its inherent ambiguities, both in its opening and closing passages. Initially, Dora notes that there are two possible interpretations: it is either a "*serious*" book or it will "*jump out of my hand, waggle its finger at me and tease me about the events I am trying to make sense of*" (2, as in original). In the end, Dora clearly describes her work as "a mockery" (425).

In light of the above-mentioned contradictions, it hence does not come as a surprise that critics seem divided about the novel's political stance either arguing that it "contains little in the way of implicit engagement with present-day issues" (Kohlke 2008a: 200) or that it, on the contrary, "probe[s] the continuity of sexual and social configurations in the present" (HL: 107) and especially focuses on the feminist issue of pornography (cf. Muller).

Mentioned here are but a few examples of why *DD* can be seen as a parody[20] of the "very neo-Victorian trends to which it at the same time adheres" (Novák: 131). *DD* is speckled with anachronisms and exaggerations and "confronts the

[20] Also, as a side note, it is interesting to return to Burstein's satirical manual on how to write neo-Victorian fiction. Starling's novel ticks off more than half the boxes. Most notably, for example, both Dora and Lady Knightley are clearly characterized as being sexually frustrated. Both are, nonetheless, lucky enough to find fulfilment through other men. Secondly, following Burstein's third point: "All heroes and heroines are True Egalitarians who disregard all differences of Class, Race, and Sex. Heroines, in particular, are given to behaving in Socially Unacceptable Ways, which is always Good." Dora enters in a love affair with an African American ex-slave, not batting an eyelid at his skin colour – instead, she finds herself increasingly critical of Knightley's racist books. Also, she employs Pansy, without reservations about her past and the fact that she has already been branded a 'fallen woman'. Lastly, Dora also does not seem to have an issue with Jack, her apprentice, being gay. All this makes Dora a very 'modern', politically correct and open-minded heroine. (cf. Burstein)

possibilities and pitfalls of politically engaged neo-Victorianism, highlighting the double act of appropriation that it performs in adapting the Victorians to its own political *and* commercial ends" (Novák: 131). Starling in her novel, self-consciously reflects on the conflicting demands neo-Victorianism still faces to this day, caught between marketability, historical authenticity and its political agendas. By parodying and 'over-using' established neo-Victorian stock themes as well as creating a Victorian middle-class heroine that breaks free from the restricting, ancestral home, by her own means Starling draws attention to the underlying "tensions and contradictions […], calling for a self-critically metatextual dimension within neo-Victorian feminist fiction that denies itself a sense of smug satisfaction at our supposed superiority over the Victorians, or at the success of such writing's political mission" (Novák: 131–132).

5. Conclusion

"Victorian literature unites its readers, now as then."

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn,

Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009

As shown, neo-Victorian fiction has made substantial progress since its early days in the middle of the last century. From early scholarly approaches at the beginning of this millennium and initial disagreements regarding what this newly emerging mode of historical fiction actually is, the contemporary approach to writing fiction set in the 19th century has now developed into a project of its own. This is not only facilitated by the marketability of the Victorian aesthetic but also proves to be politically motivated. The success of female writers within the genre in particular has substantially worked towards a new 'image' of historical fiction – attracting scholarly attention and being granted a seat at the table of prestigious literary awards.

Setting narratives in the 19th century, when the concept of feminism was born, naturally calls for feminist approaches to this particular type of historical fiction. In particular, recent third-wave feminism's doctrines and theories prove to be very closely aligned with neo-Victorianism, as they both interact with contemporary sexualised consumer culture, in order to simultaneously play an active role in it and criticise it from within.

Belinda Starling's 2006 novel *The Journal of Dora Damage* is a particularly interesting case of neo-Victorian fiction because it re-uses many already established neo-Victorian stock themes while still managing to reimagine them in unexpected ways. Starling's debut novel manages to overtly address many still current issues such as female oppression and dehumanization though pornography and her Victorian heroine develops substantially throughout the narration. However, in the end, that seemingly 'modern' heroine can only make it as far by men helping her. This, especially gives *DD* a parodic character, which in turn raises the question to what extent neo-Victorianism can actually reach its ambitious goals of re-imagining and shaping the future by returning to the past – or whether, feminist female neo-Victorian writers after all, despite their best efforts, only feed into the oppressive patriarchal society trough sexsationalised desires of pornification culture.

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