

## The Social Worker, the Consumer, and the Prostitute: Escape from Domestic Ideology in the Victorian and Neo-Victorian Novel

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### ABSTRACT

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I have found that Victorian domestic ideology, as defined by literary scholar Catherine Hall, is often subverted by female characters within novels from the Victorian era. Specifically, I have examined feminine mobility as exemplified by Margaret Hale, of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and the female consumers of Émile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*. These fictional women and the ways in which they interact with their urban surroundings appear to be at odds with Sugar, the protagonist of Michel Faber's 2002 Neo-Victorian novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*. I have categorized these female characters into three archetypes: the social worker, the consumer, and the prostitute: each contains a way in which the woman can penetrate the public sphere. This work consults critical dialogues in the areas of gender and class in the Victorian era, as well as scholarly work investigating the implications of adaptation in the era of postmodernism in order to explore the consequences of gendered space in each novel. Through this examination, I develop the argument that while the women in these Victorian and neo-Victorian novels appear solely to prove the porosity of the barrier between public and private, I hold that they actually sustain a vital ideal of the bourgeoisie: constant aspirations toward upward mobility. With this argument, I hope to broaden the original historical discussion with a perspective founded in the intersections between class and gender.

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### KEYWORDS

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capitalism, gender, neo-Victorian fiction, space, Victorian fiction

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In Victorian novels such as Émile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, the effects of masculine urban space on the actions of the female characters is apparent. Additionally, the notion of domestic ideology, or the essentialist idea that a woman's place is in the home, pervades these novels, as well as most literature in this genre. However, the assumption that there is a hard and fast line between the private and public spheres deserves deeper exploration. In the novels discussed, the main female characters represent fantasies of feminine mobility in Victorian England. While it may seem that they are bound by domestic ideology, they actually subvert it by using traditionally feminine activities to penetrate the public sphere. Additionally, the method of ideological subversion changes in synchrony with the movement from Victorian works to the 2002 neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White*, by Michel Faber; where the original Victorian works follow the movements of the respectable bourgeois woman into the public sphere, *Crimson Petal* instead follows the journey of a prostitute from the streets into the homes of the elite. These examples of escape clauses in domestic ideology and how they allow women to move freely in public spaces will be studied in three archetypes: the social worker, the consumer, and the prostitute.

For the sake of clarity, I concur with the definition of domestic ideology developed by Catherine Hall in her essay "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," from her 1992 book *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*. Hall posits in this essay that the image of women as domestic beings was brought about by the rise of capitalism. Hall states that the class definition of the bourgeoisie was "built not only at the level of the political and the economic...but also at the level of culture and ideology" (75). She cites examples of this feminized standard, including the "angel in the house," referring to the ideal woman created in Coventry Patmore's poem of the same name. Hall argues that central to "those new ideas was an emphasis of women as domestic beings, as primarily wives and mothers" (75). I concur that the formation of domestic ideology within this context is deeply rooted in the class anxiety experienced by the new bourgeoisie. I will also conflate the terms "domestic ideology" and "separate spheres," as they represented the same ideas during this era.

## THE SOCIAL WORKER

The first archetype through which a female character subverts domestic ideology in order to move freely through public space is by acting as a caretaker, or social worker. This archetype is exemplified through Elizabeth Gaskell's character Margaret Hale, from the 1855 novel *North and South*. Margaret, a respected bourgeois woman, moves through the streets and workhouses of Milton through her actions as a social worker. She acts as social worker by seeking better working conditions in the factories, as well as attempting to protect her Mr. Thornton, a mill owner to which she is unconsciously attracted. The existence of characters such as this in the Victorian canon proves the porosity of the previously held strictures of domestic ideology. For example, Margaret Hale attempts to protect her love interest, Mr. Thornton, by shielding him from the worker's strike occurring below the railing on which they stand. This position of guardianship is one deeply entrenched within descriptions and illustrations of the feminine ideal. In John Ruskin's 1865 essay *Of Queen's Gardens*, the author assigns to women the trait of comfort, in that a woman can keep home "always round her." Similarly, women are described as "enduringly, incorruptibly good" and "wise", with "passionate gentleness" and "modesty of service" (Ruskin n.p.). Ruskin seems to be drawing upon classic representations of a noblewoman; additionally, this Ruskinian ideal encompasses the necessary attributes of a social worker. This classic hearkening draws an unconscious parallel between his contemporary social workers, the epitome of women of "service," and the noblewomen of centuries past.

While the role of caretaker seems limiting in regards to the spaces it allows women to move through, it actually opens up access to the less favorable neighborhoods. Margaret is often seen at Mr. Thornton's factories, acting under the guise of protecting its workers from occupational hazards and dangerous working conditions. During a climactic scene in *North and South*, Margaret steps between Mr. Thornton and the rioting crowds, attempting to assert her ubiquitous feminine righteousness to still the crowds and stop the strike. She refuses to leave Mr. Thornton, though "if she had thought her sex would be a protection,—, if with shrinking eyes she had turned away from the terrible anger of these

men, in any hope that ere she looked again they would have paused and reflected, and slunk away, and vanished, she was wrong” (Gaskell 177). She is struck by a rock thrown by the rioters, and faints. This failure of her feminine charm to bring reason and composure to angry men is interesting in regards to her surroundings. Unlike the other novels, Margaret is living within an industrial town, with arguably fewer class and gender preconceptions than the urban settings of the other novels. The feminine archetype of caretaker, then, holds less power outside of the world of the urban center than it does within. This failure of domestic ideology to save a woman from bodily harm supports the idea that domestic ideology itself cannot extend as far as many critics have given it credit for. The movements of this woman through public space are punished corporally, proving that her feminine charms are not enough to sway rough male workers.

In an article about the differences between housekeeping and social obligations as relating to Victorian women, Pamela Corpron Parker outlines the difference between what gentleman Henry Lennox calls “ladies’ business” (42) and “woman’s work” (247). That is, the difference between Ruskinian fantasies of order and comfort and the woman’s work of social rescue. Margaret often visits the home of Bessy Higgins, a young woman whose lungs have been ruined due to factory work. Margaret’s interventions in the Higgins household, while philanthropic in nature, are sometimes less than sentimental due to their overtones of condescension (Parker 328). However, Margaret’s actions at the mill strike feel less like condescension and more like impulsiveness and romantic dramatization.

Margaret’s actions, both at the mill and in the Higgins home, seem to both subvert and uphold the sentiment of domestic ideology. In order to dissect this complex issue, it may be valuable to introduce some background knowledge in regards to the scholarly dialogue surrounding domestic ideology. Domestic ideology, as discussed here, emerged as a distinct entity during the Industrial Revolution, congruent to the sentiments expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft and others like her. According to Randi Warne:

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked not only by the ‘science/religion’ debate occasioned by Darwinian thought and its consequences, but also by two corresponding social developments, the demarcation of human community into ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres with the rise of the industrial state, and the ideological gendering of those arenas in the prescriptive doctrine of ‘separate spheres.’ (255)

The industrial nature of the public sphere insures its masculinity; it was created by middle class men—though lower class women did work there—just as the domestic sphere was a place for a woman to thrive. This is another indication that the question of class in regards to urban female mobility should not be ignored.

Much of the prevalent literature discussing domestic ideology in Victorian novels has relied on and perpetuated historical biases and projection of the present upon the past. This blurs the actualities of the position of women in society. John Ruskin described the ideal woman in terms of the home: “wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her” (n.p.). Elizabeth Langland claims not only that women are bound to the home by domestic ideology, but also that they propagate that same dogma by their treatment of their daughters and female servants (291). She counters the previously held critical view of “women as victims passively suffering under patriarchal social structures; it equally subverts the idea that they were heroines supporting unproblematic values in dealing with issues of gender and class” (291). She also explains that etiquette manuals written for women were used to “consolidate a public image within the middle classes... they helped construct an identity for a group that might otherwise seem bound together only by Carlyle's ‘cash nexus’” (293). While it is true that for the most part, middle class women were in charge of making their household as welcoming and pleasing as possible, I contend that the women were neither victims nor heroines; they were simply a part of a tumultuous middle class, affected by the rise of capitalism and the changes imposed upon class structure during this period. Margaret Hale exemplifies this bourgeois anxiety; during her public forays, she often worries about the image she presents to the world, especially in regards to her class.

Amanda Vickery succinctly summed up the use of domestic ideology as an archetypal structuring of middle class women's place in Victorian society. She states that the "foundation of the separate spheres framework was established through a particular reading of didactic and complaint literature, ensuring primary research was rarely designed to test the reliability or significance of this sort of evidence" (385). However, her argument does not question the validity of domestic ideology, but rather its formation and the discourse surrounding its study. Many scholars seem to conflate the establishment of the separate spheres phenomenon with the industrialization of England: "change in the history of middle-class women rests on a tale of female marginalization resulting from early modern capitalism" in most literature (401). Rather than presenting domestic ideology as an inevitable result of the introduction of exploitative capitalism in England, I believe that it is more productive to examine the consequences of capitalism upon the middle class, which experienced great turmoil during this time.

While it seems that capitalism itself prevented bourgeois women from working outside of the home, it is actually possible that these bourgeois women seem to have inflicted this restriction upon themselves, possibly due to the anxiety of being associated with a lower class. Since this barrier between the domestic sphere and the city streets is self-created, it can be more easily breached. This is especially true of penetrative methods considered traditionally feminine, such as shopping and charity work. The anxiety of being confused with a lower class woman is diminished while engaging in these behaviors, as lower class women were not given to such activities. This view gives more agency to the middle class woman as an individual. While there were certainly outside forces acting upon these women, creating anxieties and structures of propriety to adhere to, these women were also self-aware beings, wishing to create a solid middle class identity for themselves and their families.

Margaret's delicate class position, combined with the visibility created during her scene at the riot, creates through her actions a Victorian representation of Lady Godiva. Legend has it that Lady Godiva "rode through the streets not only unarmed but naked" (Mermin 16) for the good of her poor constituents. This overexposure creates vulnerability

not only in regards to Lady Godiva's bodily safety, but also to her sense of propriety and reputation. Placing Margaret in dialogue with this myth brings forth similarities between their public performances. Margaret feels shame after her exploit: "I, who hate scenes—I, who have despised people for showing emotion—who have thought them wanting in self-control—I went down and must needs throw myself into the melee, like a romantic fool!" She worries about how low she has fallen due to her defense of a man "as if he were a helpless child" (Gaskell 186). This exposure of woman as social worker—or caretaker—is a double-edged sword, then, and founders in uncouth towns such as Milton. Her shame is not at the response of the crowds, nor even at her failure to tame the riot, but at her own actions, which fall far out of line with what was acceptable of women in public at that time. I believe that her response to her own actions shows the influences of class anxiety on women moving through public space.

## THE CONSUMER

Margaret Hale also exercises her freedom to explore public space through the pretext of purchasing items to improve her new home. While out on her own in the streets of Milton, Margaret sees the city crowds for the first time. Her response is not one of alarm, but of wonder. She assumes the role of the spectator, carefree, yet still interacting with the townspeople, who would "comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material" (Gaskell 72). There is a reliance upon the "womanly sympathy" that can unite two women in their "love of dress" (72), which allows Margaret to continue on her way without fear of disgrace. This shared love of fabrics and fashion stands at odds with Nord's readings of the public space; perhaps, it seems, there is a difference between the fashionable streets of London and those of industrial towns to the North.

The love of fashion creates a distinct sensuality allocated to the shopping space, especially in Émile Zola's 1883 novel, *The Ladies' Paradise*. *The Ladies' Paradise* is set in Paris, a city often placed in dialogue with London. The differences in culture between London and Paris—namely, a looser set of morals and a lessened reliance on class position—allow for a specific type of sensual freedom for women, especially within the

Parisian department store. Descriptions of fabrics are sumptuous within the department store, with “satiny Peking fabrics as soft as the skin of a Chinese virgin” (Zola 252). Several descriptions are repeated throughout the novel, maintaining the feminine ambiance within the store. According to Elizabeth Carlson, stores and shopping centers were “understood to be a safe feminine space, where bourgeois women were encouraged to go without chaperones” (125). Both Margaret Hale and a barrage of Émile Zola’s female characters flock to department stores in search of entertainment and fashion. The decidedly feminine atmosphere of the shopping center reduces the anxieties of solitary public appearance, allowing women to travel without chaperones.

In Walter Benjamin’s 1935 essay “Paris: the capital of the nineteenth century,” he relates the position of *flâneur* to that of the bourgeois consumer. The very idea of the *flâneur* is decidedly important in this world of chaperone-less perusing, shopping, and sensual consumption. *Flânerie* refers to “the practice of strolling idly in urban centers” (Shaheen 923). Shaheen goes on to explain that though the *flâneur* was generally considered a male figure, women were capable of such pastimes, as well. The *flâneur* was also a major performer of the male public gaze. Deborah Parsons asserts that the female *flâneur*, or *flâneuse*, gazes not upon men, but instead whose “gendered gaze became a key element of consumer address” (420). Benjamin considered consumption the ultimate goal of the *flâneur*, calling the department store “the *flâneur*’s final coup” (Benjamin 85). This relationship between *flânerie* and consumption allows us to look at the uninhibited gaze of the shoppers in *The Ladies’ Paradise* from an established critical standpoint.

According to Deborah Nord, the Victorian city can be thought of as a theater, “a society that regarded the metropolis as a stage on which to perform and witness its own civility, grandeur, and ebullience” (20). This theater attracted unwanted attention, creating necessary spectators out of all who wandered those urban streets. This evokes fear of the “male gaze”, that voyeuristic act implying objectification and lust toward the viewed (Mulvey 442). The role of spectatorship forced upon the pedestrian lends a threatening air to urban space. This threatening atmosphere falls away within the doors of the department store, which was a space deliberately feminized so that a woman can safely lay her licentious gaze



upon the newest gloves, garters, and dresses. The very act of quoting prices of lace is enough to “arouse desires,” working the consuming women into enough of a frenzy until the women begin “buying lace by the handful” (Zola 75). The safety of the department store is insured by its very conception and creation. Benjamin stated that the “crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the *flâneur*. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these went into the construction of the department store, which made use of *flânerie* itself in order to sell goods” (84). The decentralization inherent in crowds is what creates safety, as well as allure, drawing in the gaze through the carefully crafted veil.

Within the department store *Au Bonheur des Dames*, a woman may safely experience unabashed lust for consumption. This is perfectly exemplified by Mignot and Madame Desforges during the first sale at Octave Mouret’s department store. Mignot and another salesman who works in the glove department are said to have a rivalry over pretending to flirt with the ladies who come in to buy gloves. Mignot has already sold Madame Desforges “a dozen pairs of kid gloves,” as he woos her by leaning forward with “his pretty baby face, rolling his R’s like a true Parisian, his voice full of tender inflections” (100). The two are surrounded by “flat, bright pink boxes.” The overtones of genitalia present within the boxes adds to the sexual imagery of commerce within the department store. Mignot slides gloves on and off Madame Desforges’ hands with a “long, practiced and sustained caress.” The description of the smell of the gloves is somewhat carnal: “that animal smell with a touch of sweetened musk” (101). The sensuality of the buying process is unmistakable here; the department store encourages women to find their inner sexual beings within the building, and to let those beings run free. While still technically within a public space, women are allowed to express unchecked desire without the risk of being seen as improper or common due to their capitalistic diversions.

This sensuality of buying seems to more heavily influence female members of the middle class. While “mass retailing gave way to stores expressly directed at a lower-class clientele, the principal firms like the Bon Marché remained middle class institutions. The bourgeoisie more so than the working classes were the beneficiaries of the revolution in

marketing before the First World War” (Miller 165). In *The Ladies’ Paradise*, Octave Mouret often thinks of ways to entice middle class women to spend all of their husband’s money; his “sole passion was the conquest of Woman” (Zola 234). This admission has a double meaning, as he can conquer women through sex and through their husband’s money. He manipulates every aspect of the store to tempt women to buy: “His tactics were to intoxicate her with amorous attentions, to trade on her desires, and to exploit her excitement” (234). One woman who is not in charge of the purse strings in the family, Madame de Boves, is so moved by Mouret’s designs that she shoplifts from *Au Bon Marché*. Mouret’s friend De Vallognosc reprimands him that he “shouldn’t tempt poor, defenseless women like that” (265). The implication, however, is clear: women have less self control than men, and though losing control and buying more than one can afford is good, too much liberation is bad and should be shamed. The motivations for this extravagant spending are exemplary of the middle class obsession with status; these women want to dress themselves, their families, and their homes in the trendiest fashions in order to maintain (and possibly improve) their reputation.

## THE PROSTITUTE

*The Crimson Petal and the White* complicates the historical argument established in regards to the Victorian novels. Through its position as a neo-Victorian novel, published in 2002, *Crimson Petal* both critiques the Victorian era and projects our contemporary views onto it. *Crimson Petal* can be looked at in contrast to the other novels not only because of its stance as a neo-Victorian novel, but also its position as a novel in which the narrator is a woman who is herself a prostitute. As a prostitute, Sugar is therefore supposedly free of the anxiety of being accused of impropriety. However, her status as fallen woman is different than most. She was raised in a brothel, and therefore never had anywhere farther to “fall.” This difference becomes interesting in the scope of her rise from the streets into the home of William Rackham. While we have previously explored women of rank and reputation penetrating the public sphere through philanthropy and consumption, here we see Sugar rising from the proverbial gutters through what might be

simultaneously the most (degradingly) feminine and unladylike act: prostitution. She is entering a space not meant for women of her rank and profession, the middle class. While *The Crimson Petal and the White* seems to stand at odds with the Victorian novels studied, it actually upholds the bourgeois ideal of independent upward mobility, an undercurrent running through each work.

The stark distinction between public and private space is addressed clearly in *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Sugar often sits outside of the home of William Rackham, her customer, lover, and benefactor. The home is guarded by tall metal gates, within which live Rackham's wife, Agnes, and his daughter. Sugar infiltrates the safeguarded home through the guise of a governess. She is, however, still engaging in a sexual relationship with Rackham, which smoothes the transition considerably through the commerce of sexual transaction. However, her permeation is never completed. Clara, a maid at the Rackham house, suspects Sugar of her true history: "From the moment the woman set foot in the house, Clara could smell it on her: the stink of badness. This self-styled governess, with her highly suspect walk and her slut's mouth— where on earth did Rackham find her? The Rescue Society, maybe. One of Emmeline Fox's 'success stories'" (590). It seems that though Sugar can change her clothing and her demeanor, her inner sinfulness will never fully leave her. Cheesman, the Rackhams' driver, knows Sugar's true identity, and the circumstances surrounding her new role as governess; "to him, she'll always be William's whore, never Sophie's governess" (543). There is a sense of essentialism present in this novel. While a woman can change her appearance, she can never change what she is inside.

In placing *The Crimson Petal and the White* in dialogue with the Victorian novels, the Rescue Society quickly becomes an interesting concept. Mrs. Fox, another example of the social worker archetype, "rescues" prostitutes from the streets and helps them find respectable work. This work seems damning in regards to reputation, since Mrs. Fox must interact with fallen women in the slums of London. During a discussion regarding Mrs. Fox's occupation, Bodley, a friend of William Rackham, ponders, "Can a woman who works with prostitutes be virtuous?" His friend Ashwell replies, "Surely the prime requisite,

hmm?” These men do not think less of Mrs. Fox due to her interactions with prostitutes. Rather, they consider her work, and call her “God’s deputy in a bonnet” (152).

Interestingly enough, the reader is never allowed to be present during Mrs. Fox’s outings with the Rescue Society; the only mention of this work occurs during the discussions of others. Learning about Mrs. Fox’s work through the frame of gossip seems to act as a distancing mechanism, as well as an agent to build interest in the interactions between Mrs. Fox and the prostitutes. This work also upholds the mammon of upward mobility; Mrs. Fox’s Society represents the fantasy of pulling fallen women out of the lowest echelons, allowing them to become respectable, responsible, and productive members of the working class.

Sugar’s movements in public, much like those of Mrs. Fox, are both liberated and self-contained; she moves freely through both her own low-class neighborhood and the nicer areas of London through her practiced bourgeois mannerisms. One scene involves Sugar watching William Rackham’s family from the street directly outside of his gates; she follows William and Agnes as they go to dinner parties, a silent shadow keeping watch. She “walks the peripheries for as long as she can bear, growing colder and colder” (Faber 372). This image of Sugar as a dark shadow stands at odds with Agnes’ name for her, “the woman in white,” (311) and allows us to look at the implications of the light and dark imagery surrounding her. Sugar is a woman without morals, who curses God and sleeps with men for money. This combines with her *flâneuse*-like habit of wandering and gazing and places her firmly into the realm of shadows; she cannot be a creature of the light due to her immorality. However, Agnes, an angel in the house if there ever was one, sees Sugar at a distance, standing on the other side of the Rackham house’s gates, and thinks that she is her guardian angel (311). Why would a woman who so firmly upholds all that is right and good and feminine in Victorian London want a whore as a guardian angel? Perhaps it is Agnes’ furtive desire to escape, to ascend above the trappings of her marriage, home, and dependence upon her husband that causes her to place Sugar’s ethereal, solitary figure in high esteem.

## INTERSECTIONS OF CLASS, SPACE, AND GENDER

These three archetypes of female mobility stand alone as proof of the porosity of domestic ideology; however, the usefulness of these examples increases tenfold when we examine how the historic milieu of these novels may affect the mechanisms of mobility occurring within. The main limiting factor placed upon female mobility in urban spaces, such as London, is the preservation of propriety and reputation, especially among women of the bourgeoisie. This is due to the inherent instability of their class position, since this position was newly created by capitalist progression. Movements within public spaces such as London and Paris can be explored using Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon. Within a crowd, the urban spectator remains "anonymous and invisible, always an observing eye whose own presence is suppressed" (Nord 25). But while this seems to place the spectator in the central vantage point, and therefore possessing the power of inspection and analysis, Foucault himself stated that the Panopticon instead abolishes "a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect" (201). Each member of the crowd is simultaneously isolated and blurred, allowing one to view the city as a whole as a muted image. This idea of the panoramic view of the spectator can be applied to the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* may walk in public spaces, gazing upon the scene while simultaneously distancing himself from the people. While Susan Buck-Morss understood that the prostitute might be seen as the female equivalent of the *flâneur*, one may also see the *flâneuse* as a female shopper. Both the prostitute and the female consumer are able to gaze lustfully at the items they desire (be they textiles or the money in men's pockets). *Flânerie*, then, is one underlying force that allows feminine mobility through public space in these novels.

Certainly the women consumers in *The Ladies' Paradise* are lustful; however, this freedom to express lust might be equally or more available to the women of Paris through the historically open stance on sexuality in France. According to Sharon Marcus' *Apartment Stories*, which surveys the connections between space and society in Paris and London, Paris was more open sexually due, in part, to the construction of its homes. The image of Paris concurrent with the Victorian era is one of a city "of permeable apartment

buildings” (Marcus 3). This permeability creates a cohesive view of the urban space itself as the interior, rather than exterior. Perhaps this lack of a true, private interiority is the cause for the looser parameters regarding the repercussions of women’s actions upon their reputations.

Nancy Armstrong’s work *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* takes a Foucauldian stance on the position of the female character in the Victorian novel. She posits that “sexuality is a cultural construct,” “written representations of the self allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality,” and, most importantly, that “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman” (22). Using Foucault’s view of discourse as power, it is not hard to see her argument; the strong focus on women and propriety in Victorian novels unintentionally places them at the center of the novelistic dialogue. However, her argument that fiction is used both “as the document and as the agency of cultural history” (23) stands at odds with the reading of Foucault’s views on ideology, according to May (274). This work is vital to uncovering the use of women as a tool of discourse within novels, the echoes of which can be seen throughout the canon. Women are shown at home and in public, always restrained by propriety and societal expectation. In *The Ladies’ Paradise*, a war of reputation occurs between the girls in two departments; one “spoke of their neighbours with the shocked air of respectable girls” regarding their transgressions, “and facts proved that they were right... Clara was taunted with her troop of lovers, even Marguerite had, so to say, had her child thrown in her face, whilst Madame Frederic was accused of all sorts of concealed passions” (122). One department store worker is fired for kissing a boy, proving the strictness of reputational defense. This is true of our two Victorian novels; however, the neo-Victorian position of Faber’s novel complicates this interpretation.

The temporal differences between the two Victorian novels and *The Crimson Petal and the White* contribute to the differences in the navigation of space. In contrasting neo-Victorian writing with that of the Victorian period, it is relevant to examine the lens with which we are viewing and representing the past. One glaring historical bias present in *The Crimson Petal and the White* is that “the retrospective sexual liberation of the nineteenth

century becomes disturbingly infused with preferred ignorance—or deliberate denial—of our own culture’s complicity in free market systems that enable continuing sexual exploitation and oppression” (Kohlke 2-3). This sexualization of the past seems to be a projection of unconscious present-day anxieties into historical fiction. As Kohlke sums up, “Coming to ‘know’ the secret sex-lives of the Victorians may thus become a means of ‘un-knowing’ our own” (3). While I agree with this reading, I would like to add that we may also project our own emotions regarding public and private spaces onto the past. Postmodern views of public space highlight the need to detach oneself from one’s surroundings (Drzewiecka and Nakayama 21). This disorientation can clearly be seen, even from the opening lines, in *Crimson Petal*: “Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before” (Faber 3). Fredric Jameson’s critique of postmodernist representations of history merges perfectly with this progression of thought; it is problematic to approach history with “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” without impetus to find out what actually happened in that past (Jameson 18). *The Crimson Petal and the White*’s position within the neo-Victorian genre must be analyzed in order to fully understand the development of the prostitute archetype within this frame. Postmodern adaptations of Victorian literature are inherently different from the original works, and should be treated as such.

The question of genre remains in contest, at least between the two original Victorian novels. *The Ladies’ Paradise* features the subtitle “A Realistic Novel,” whereas Gaskell’s *North and South* is often categorized as an Industrial novel in the romantic vein. Life is idealized and made dramatic in Gaskell’s *Milton*; the tale is driven by the plot, and it occasionally borders upon the ridiculous. On the other hand, *The Ladies’ Paradise* is focused on character development, with plot taking a lesser role. This is important due to the differences in motivation to permeate the membrane separating public and private space. Margaret’s motivation to protect the Higgins family and Mr. Thornton is supposedly due to her innate feminine goodness; however, this is clearly an idealized version of woman as social worker. By contrast, the women featured in *The Ladies’ Paradise* act out of greed

and desire; while they are performing feminine actions, their motivations place them at odds with traditional feminine attitudes.

Throughout academic study of Victorian literature, domestic ideology and the limiting effects of gendered urban space have been conflated and taken for granted. Through deconstructing the fantasies of feminine mobility present in *The Ladies' Paradise*, *North and South*, and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, one can pinpoint exactly how various nuances of culture affected the ability to move within public space. By placing the loci of each example within the bounds of the three archetypes (social worker, consumer, and prostitute), it is easy to see the porosity of the boundaries between gendered public and private spaces. Similarly, by studying the three novels at odds with each other from a critical perspective, one may easily find the influences of time and culture upon the writing of these novels. While it may appear that *Crimson Petal* stands at odds with the two Victorian novels in both motivation of feminine mobility and historical influence, all three uphold one ultimate capitalist principle: upward mobility. The postmodern obsession with self-sufficiency is clearly instantiated in Sugar's constant struggle to rise beyond the slums and brothels, and is in complete agreement with the bourgeois ideals shown in the Victorian novels. Through studying the three novels contextually and in comparison with each other, the struggle of the bourgeois mentality to reconcile the need for upward mobility with the desire for morality and propriety becomes apparent. No matter the historical frame, it appears that the novel continues to exemplify the omnipresent power of capitalism. While female characters can escape the domestic private sphere, they cannot escape their predilection toward bourgeois ideals.



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