



Post-mortems:

*Representations of Female Suicide
by Drowning in Victorian Culture*

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Abstract

Het levenloze vrouwelijke lichaam gold in de negentiende-eeuwse Westerse kunst als een van de belangrijkste inspiratiebronnen. In deze periode verschenen er talloze geromantiseerde representaties waarin het lichaam van een dode vrouw centraal werd gesteld, zoals te zien op het voorblad van deze scriptie. Deze morbide fascinatie is door de feministische kritiek teruggeleid naar negentiende-eeuwse patriarchale ideologie: mannelijke kunstenaars en hun publiek zouden deze ultieme objectificatie van de vrouw sterk kunnen waarderen. Deze verklaring lijkt in eerste opzicht echter niet te stroken met de vele representaties van deze tijd waarin een vrouwelijk slachtoffer van zelfmoord te zien is. Zelfmoord wordt traditioneel gekoppeld aan autonomie, een associatie die het element van objectificatie lijkt tegen te gaan. Deze scriptie onderzoekt deze paradox vanuit een feministisch perspectief en focust zich hierbij op Victoriaanse representaties uit de periode 1840-1880 die de verdrinkingsdood van de stereotype ‘gevallen’ vrouw laten zien. Het doel van deze scriptie is tweeledig: ten eerste onderzoekt het hoe dit soort beeldvorming kan worden gerelateerd aan patriarchale ideologie; en ten tweede bekijkt het hoeverre dit terugkomt in geselecteerde werken van vier prominente schrijvers van deze periode, namelijk Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot en Thomas Hardy.

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Introduction

‘The death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world’.¹ These famous words written by American author Edgar Allan Poe in his ‘Philosophy of Composition’ (1846) seem to capture perfectly the morbid interest and delight that was taken in depictions of dead females during the nineteenth century. Elisabeth Bronfen, author of the influential study *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992) argues that pictorial representations of female death were so prevalent also in European culture at this time that ‘by the middle of the [nineteenth] century this topos was already dangerously hovering on the periphery of cliché’.² Indeed, the ubiquity of nineteenth century artworks in which the beautifully draped, dead body of a woman serves as a main focal point almost make it seem as if every self-respecting artist of the age felt obliged to take up this theme eventually.

In Victorian Britain, audiences and artists were similarly intrigued by representations of female death, a peculiar fascination which according to Brown amounted to a ‘cultural obsession’.³ This might be firstly related to the emergence of an obsessive interest in the theme of mortality, resulting in the Victorian death culture. This is often said to be inaugurated by Queen Victoria in 1861, the year that she lost her husband to illness. The way in which the monarch publicly displayed her grief for the late Prince Consort in the following years made her into an archetypical figure of chronic mourning, and has been believed to be a great influence on the development of the Victorian death culture.⁴ The Victorian obsession with the afterlife took shape in a fetishization of the dead body, giving rise to a popularity of producing relics of the dead, such as death-bed portraits and hair-loquets. In this way, the display of the deceased, both in real life as in the realm of art, took on new importance.⁵

Yet more importantly, the prevalence of representations of female death can be connected to the firm institutionalization of patriarchy in nineteenth century society and its ideology which propagated ideas of male supremacy. Second wave feminist scholars have

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven and the Philosophy of Composition* (San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1901), p. 27.

² Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 3.

³ Ron Brown, *The Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 154.

⁴ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 319.

⁵ Jolene Zigarovich, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 2012), p. 4

discussed this link in detail. Bassein, for example, investigated the annihilation of the female in the works of Poe and concluded that his ideas on the ‘most poetic topic’ were necessarily derived from patriarchal ideology, by representing women continuously in ‘victimized and subservient position[s]’.⁶ She consequently called out for the radical need to exorcise ‘all that Poe has done to relegate women to the world of the dead’.⁷ Dijkstra drew similar conclusions and placed such representations within the patriarchal cult of invalidism, which glorified female passivity, especially in illness and death. In this light, the nineteenth century idealization of inanimate women can be seen to have evolved from patriarchal anxieties to enact complete control over women’s bodies, as it denounced female agency and therefore entailed their ultimate objectification.

In the 1990s, Bronfen took a psycho-analytical approach in trying to answer the question why nineteenth century representations of female death were experienced as aesthetically pleasing. The pioneering research she carried out resulted in the aforementioned work *Over her Dead Body*, which has become one of the most prominent studies in the field. According to Bronfen, the morbid nineteenth century obsession with these representations can be explained by the way in which they position the male viewer in a survivor-perspective. This triggers feelings of masculine superiority and immortality, as death is placed with the gendered Other, away from the (male) self. Moreover, Bronfen ties into Dijkstra’s reading by using a post-Freudian perspective when reading the living female body as a site of ‘superlative alterity’,⁸ causing patriarchal fears of castration, and on the other hand, defining the female corpse as an object males are able to fully control and dominate.

Yet these interpretations beg the question how then to approach one particular sub-genre of these representations, namely those in which female death is depicted as self-chosen. Suicide has been traditionally linked to notions of agency and autonomy, or ‘writing the self’,⁹ associations that seem to oppose the elements of control and objectification that have been used to explain the popularity of the theme of female death in nineteenth century art. Yet a strong interest was taken in female self-murder in the nineteenth century,¹⁰ and representations of women in the act of committing, or having committed suicide were ubiquitous in Victorian culture. The dominant image in this discourse was that of the fallen

⁶ Beth Ann Bassein, *Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature* (London: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. xi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

¹⁰ Margaret Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences: Women’s Suicide’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 71.

woman drowning herself, and from the 1840s to roughly the 1880s an iconography evolved around this theme. The figure of the drowned woman consequently became an essential trope of ‘a new iconographic vocabulary’¹¹ in the visual arts, and a narrative was constructed around these representations that was retold again and again in literature of the time. Alexander has rightfully observed that the Victorian fascination with these drowned, female suicide victims is ‘often mentioned in passing, but rarely explored’.¹² Questions arise such as why these fallen women needed to be dead to be idealized, and in what way the nature of their deaths (the element of suicide) attributed to the appeal of this theme. These issues need to be explained from a feminist point of view. Using Bronfen’s delineation of the gendered nineteenth century survivor-complex in combination with feminist analysis, this thesis intends to uncover the ways in which the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning from 1840 to 1880 can be seen to be shaped by patriarchal ideology, and to what extent this surfaces in prominent works of literature of the time.

The works of feminist critics such as Bassein and Dijkstra have provided the foundation for this investigation. Though they do not elaborate on the theme of female suicide, their readings are still essential to the purpose of this research, and will to some extent resound here. Their studies have indicated the way in which representations of female death can be linked to a patriarchal tradition aiming to control and objectify women. Though dating from the 1980s, this research is still relevant as women today still suffer from (sexual) objectification in the arts and the media. It answers to one of the main responsibilities of feminist criticism, namely to uncover and raise awareness of the sexual politics of patriarchy. By analyzing the representation of women in a neglected sub-genre, this thesis adds in a different way to this body of work, whilst still adhering to this important task of feminist research. This thesis will draw more heavily on Bronfen’s *Over her Dead Body*, which is still considered to be an authoritative text in the field today, as recent studies on representations of female death continue to build on Bronfen’s theories.¹³ This thesis follows that tradition, but takes on a new approach by applying her ideas to representations of female suicide. Bronfen

¹¹ Lynn Alexander, ‘Hearts as Innocent as Hers’: The Drowned Woman in Victorian Literature and Art’, in Lisa Dickson and Maryna Romanets, eds., *Beauty, Violence, Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 67.

¹² Ibid., p. 66.

¹³ See for example, *Death Becomes Her: Cultural Narratives of Femininity and Death in Nineteenth-Century America*, eds., Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), *Women and Death: Representations of Female Victims and Perpetrators in German Culture 1500-2000*, eds. Helen Fronius and Anna Linton (Rochester: Camden House, 2008), Joanne Clarke Dillman, *Women and Death in Film, Television and News: Dead But Not Gone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Lisa Dickson and Maryna Romanets, eds., *Beauty, Violence, Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2014)

only briefly considers cases of self-destruction, and thus does not provide an in-depth analysis of this subgenre. Critics that have worked with her ideas more recently predominantly maintain this focus.¹⁴ The prevalence of representations of female suicide in nineteenth century culture therefore is left largely unexplained. More research into this theme is thus required, and this thesis can be seen to take the first steps towards gaining a deeper understanding of this issue. With its specific focus on the themes of gender and suicide, this thesis moreover covers a subject that has been left under-researched. McGuire has rightfully noted that most studies into the representation of suicide seem to evade questions of gender, and that only a minority of scholars has addressed this topic in-depth.¹⁵ This thesis, however, proposes that gender issues play a crucial role in how knowledge of suicide is constructed, and that this also surfaces in representations belonging to this particular genre.

This thesis can be embedded in the large existing body of work investigating representations of female death in general. Over the past ten years, numerous studies have been published which can be seen to make up a network of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary discussions of this subject. These investigations thus differ from choice of medium, ranging from literature,¹⁶ to film and television,¹⁷ and address different cultures and time-periods. This thesis can be placed within this broad spectrum of studies conducted recently on the themes of representation, women and death. Moreover, its focus on the Victorian iconography revolving around the drowned woman falls in line with recent publications that also take this figure as a case-study, such as Alexander's article 'Hearts as Innocent as Hers' (2014), which provides an overview of the iconographic trend in Victorian literature and art, as well as Saliot's current book-length study *The Drowned Muse* (2015), which investigates the equivalent, French fascination with drowning women, more specifically with the mythical figure of l'Inconnue de la Seine.

The thesis is structured in two main parts. The first part, consisting of three chapters, seeks to answer the first half of the central research question, namely in what ways the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning can be seen to be shaped by patriarchal ideology. This requires a contextualization of the subject, given in Chapter 1. This chapter

¹⁴ See above.

¹⁵ Kelly McGuire, *Dying to be English: Suicide Narratives and National Identity, 1721-1814* (London: Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited, 2012), p. 13.

¹⁶ See for example, Deborah S. Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007)

¹⁷ See for example, Joanne Clarke Dillman, *Women and Death in Film, Television and News: Dead But Not Gone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Deborah Jermyn, 'You Can't Keep a Dead Woman Down: The Female Corpse and Textual Disruption in Contemporary Hollywood', in Elizabeth Klaver, ed., *Images of the Corpse: From the Renaissance to Cyberspace* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)

studies Victorian attitudes towards suicide in general and argues that the prevalence of representations of female suicide can be linked to patriarchal anxieties of the time. It shows how a myth was constructed in both scientific discourse as well as in the media and arts that defined suicide as essentially a female phenomenon in order to stabilize male authority. The conventional narrative of the fallen woman, resulting in her suicide by drowning, is placed within this tradition. Chapter 2, 'Ophelia, water and femininity', aims at investigating the roots of the iconography by looking back to the Shakespearean figure of Ophelia and at examining the aesthetic appeal of the image of a drowning woman to nineteenth century audiences. This part draws on Gaston Bachelard's ideas about the ties between water, femininity and the artistic imagination, delineated in his work *Water and Dreams* (1942). Chapter 3, 'Death becomes her', turns to the feminist analysis of iconographic Victorian representations of the drowned woman, focusing on the male spectator and issues of scopophilia. It explains Bronfen's theory of the gendered survivor-perspective in more detail and aims at establishing in what ways this iconography might be seen to be shaped by patriarchal ideology.

The second part of this thesis has a more literary focus, and takes on the question in what way prominent Victorian works of literature responded to this iconography in representing the fallen woman and her death by drowning. These readings will be extended to reflect upon the feminist sensibilities of these authors. Four canonical novels have been selected for this purpose, all which fall within the chosen time-period and feature a fallen female character who either commits suicide by drowning or contemplates doing so. Chapter 4, 'Resuscitations', studies two novels belonging to the latter category, namely Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). By allowing their fallen heroines to live on after their suicide attempts, these authors seem to deviate from the conventional narrative that prescribed death for the sexually transgressive female. This chapter reads the alternative endings of these two novels from a feminist perspective, aiming to establish to what extent these novels break from the patriarchal tradition of representing the suicidal fallen woman, and in what ways they still adhere to it. Chapter 5, 'Post-mortems', applies a similar question to two later novels, namely George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), works in which the central female character does commit suicide by drowning. The final chapter will study these two fictional cases of self-destruction, and investigate in what way these deaths can be placed within the tradition or resist such a reading.

I

Contexts

The morality of the act of *felo-de-se*, or self-murder, has long been the subject of debate. Battin has argued that though today a ‘largely monolithic view’¹ of suicide exists, attitudes towards self-destruction have been strongly divided, a polarization that Goethe wonderfully captured in the dialogue between his characters Albert and Werther in his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1787). Whereas the former considers suicide as the greatest act of cowardice or weakness, immoral and sinful, the latter sees it as the highest form of autonomy granted to the individual. These polarized ideas also prevailed in the nineteenth century, and were often interpreted with a view to gender. Consequently, (and paradoxically) the act of suicide has been tied both to notions of effeminacy as well as heroic masculinity.² This chapter studies Victorian attitudes towards suicide in relation to gender, in order to explain the prevalence of representations of female suicide by drowning. It will firstly establish how patriarchal ideology can be seen to have influenced these views, and secondly, investigate the way in which the construction and propagation of the narrative of the suicidal, fallen woman can be related to patriarchal anxieties.

Suicide, Sex and Susceptibility Studies

In the early nineteenth century Romantic movement, the act of self-destruction was seen as the ultimate act of freedom or autonomy.³ Premature death was glamourized by Romanticist writers, as it was associated with the idea of the immortalization of the genius: it was ‘best to burn brightly and die young’.⁴ They were not only inspired by Goethe’s fictional protagonist Werther, but also by figures such as the poet Thomas Chatterton, who had famously poisoned himself with arsenic in 1770. Such cases of suicide were appealing to the Romanticist imagination as they told the tragic stories of genial but tormented youths, who took matters of life and death into their own hands. Yet in the course of the nineteenth

¹ Margaret Pabst Battin, ‘Introduction’, in Margaret Pabst Battin, ed., *The Ethics of Suicide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

² Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide: Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), p. 18.

³ George Howe Colt, *November of the Soul: The Enigma of Suicide* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), p. 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

century, Romanticists ideas that glorified suicide started to fade, and suicide became more and more a social question that was bound up with ideas of the worrying ‘condition of England’.⁵ This awareness led to a high increase of inquiries into the relation between mental diseases and suicide, as ‘suicidality became a pathological symptom [...] something to be identified, classified, institutionalized and prevented’.⁶ Consequently, an epistemological shift took place from a ‘heroic vision of suicide to a more scientific yet demeaning acceptance of the act as [a result of] illness’.⁷ Higonnet has effectively argued that this shift entailed different conclusions on the suicidal tendencies of men and women, resulting in the nineteenth century feminization of suicide.⁸ Brown supports this by observing that in this period, ‘new ascriptions arose of suicidal behavior that were linked to tainted femininity’.⁹

This feminization of suicide surfaces in the nineteenth century belief that women were much more inclined to harm themselves than men were. Perceived as the weaker sex, women were believed to be more prone to mental diseases, such as hysteria, melancholia and madness. These disorders were typically regarded as female maladies.¹⁰ The alleged female vulnerability for these mental illnesses was quickly translated as a stronger susceptibility to suicidal sentiments. This reasoning could be summed up briefly as: ‘woman is a lesser man, a weaker being, both physically and mentally [...] resisting suicide takes willpower and courage; therefore women should fall victim to suicidal impulses far more readily than should men’.¹¹ This logic fits in perfectly with patriarchal ideas that were dominant at the time, which set the male as a definite superior to female. These ideas were supported by the conclusions drawn by (male) scientists, supposedly independently based on the results from their comparative studies of the two sexes, but which often were deeply grounded in the traditional ideas of gender roles and clearly intended to justify and uphold patriarchal domination. Gilmore calls this discourse the ‘nineteenth century scientific denunciation of women’,¹² which can be traced back to almost all branches of science.¹³ The

⁵ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, p. 153.

⁶ David Wright and John Weaver, ‘Introduction’, in John C. Weaver and David Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁷ Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences’, p. 70.

⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁹ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 7.

¹¹ Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 125.

¹² David D. Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 124.

early inquiries into suicide and the susceptibility of the two sexes could thus be placed within this tradition.

Yet during the first half of the nineteenth century, the study of self-destruction in Britain was obstructed by the lack of official statistics, and researchers could therefore not refer to decisive numbers that told of the distribution of gender among suicide victims. In this period, epidemiologists like William Farr cried out for the need of regulated statistics, and it was only around 1850, well into the Victorian era, that the government answered this call. This was quite late, as Anderson observes: ‘there was thus a neglect of English official suicide statistics, which was strange indeed at [the] time [...] Not until the later 1850s did suicide statistics begin to appear regularly [...] [It] got off to a slow start, and long remained comparatively undigested and difficult to use’.¹⁴ In the second half of the nineteenth century, researchers could finally incorporate statistics in their studies in the field of suicidology.

Besides inquiries into possible prevention of suicide, questions of gender seemed to be of most interest to the Victorian researchers. Though the belief had prevailed that women were more prone to suicidal sentiments because of their alleged frail constitutions, the official statistics told otherwise. Indeed, women were over-represented in Victorian psychiatric institutions, yet the number of females committing suicide proved to be systematically far less than the amount of men taking their own lives. Statistics clearly indicated that male suicide was three to four times more frequent than female self-destruction, with exception of the period of puberty and menopause, when female suicide increased but often still did not equal the number of male self-inflicted deaths, which rose until old age.¹⁵ This pattern was not just specific to the British isles, but appeared to be applicable to countries all over the world, as the Italian physician Henry Morselli argued.¹⁶ This led sociologist Emile Durkheim, often seen as the authoritative voice on self-destruction, to conclude at the end of the century that ‘suicide is [...] essentially a male phenomenon’.¹⁷

These figures were problematic to incorporate into ideas of male superiority and the feminization of suicide. Some progressive commentators used these statistics to point out women’s strength and perseverance, and thus attempted to change the nineteenth century view of women as frail and weak creatures. George Henry Lewes, the well-known literary

¹³ For a deeper inquiry into this denunciation in different nineteenth century scientific fields, such as sociology see Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Henry Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1882), p. 189.

¹⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), p. 72.

critic, wrote for example in such a manner about the female constitution. Lewes attributed the lower female suicide rate to ‘women’s greater timidity [and to] their greater power of passive endurance, both of bodily and mental pain’.¹⁸ An anonymous contributor to *Blackwood’s Magazine* wrote in 1880 on female suicide in a similar vein, declaring that it was ‘natural that women should kill themselves less than their husbands and brothers, for they are habitually better behaved and quieter, they have more religion, more obedience [and] more resignation’.¹⁹ Not all physicians and commentators were ready to make such bold assumptions. In fact, most writers that discussed the female constitution in relation to self-destruction tried to formulate an explanation of the statistics that did not entail a destabilization of male superiority.

Some questioned the representativeness of these official statistics, convinced that many cases of female suicide escaped registration. This was not a wholly unfounded belief, according to Anderson, who noted that it was ‘altogether likely that there was indeed more under-registration of female than of male suicide’.²⁰ This can be firstly led back to the idea that families had stronger incentives to conceal female cases of self-murder than male suicides. Male self-inflicted deaths were often seen to have been caused by extra-familial strains, such as financial ruin, whereas women’s suicides were regarded to be results of intra-familial strains, problems that arose from frictions within the family.²¹ Relatives of the female suicide victim, and especially her husband,²² therefore were often held responsible for her death, and this blame could severely damage the family’s reputation. Female suicide was, therefore, more likely to be covered up, and consequently escaped registration.

Another factor that was believed to have influenced the lower suicide rates of women in official statistics was linked to the suicide method. As we will see in Chapter 2, women generally chose methods that were less acutely fatal than men did, such as starvation, poisoning or drowning. In such cases, death is less immediate and help might still come in time. The female preference for self-drowning was another factor that was believed to have distorted official statistics. As Anderson explains, with drowning ‘there was often no clear evidence of how the body came to be in the water, and in law sudden death was presumed

¹⁸ George Henry Lewes, ‘Suicide in Life and Literature’, *Westminster Review*, 68 (1857), 52-78. p. 71.

¹⁹ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 126.

²⁰ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 44.

²¹ Jack Douglas, *The Social Meaning of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 215.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

accidental until proved otherwise, [therefore] a verdict of suicide was easily avoided in drowning cases'.²³ The Victorian coroner Westcott Wynn also discussed this problem:

It is a matter of the greatest difficulty to obtain recent statistics of the actual numbers of suicides [...] There are [factors] obscur[ing] our calculations; for example [...] the number of bodies found in our rivers, lakes and ponds [...] No evidence will be forthcoming which will be sufficient to prove by what means the deceased got into the water. It then becomes necessary either to provide valueless column of figures named 'Found Drowned', or else, some official has to allot the cases by sentiment to suicide, murder, or misadventure, at his discretion.²⁴

Though Wynn did not specifically link this to distortion of female suicides rates, his statement that 'the female sex is the especial patroness of death by drowning in every country',²⁵ can be read as a hint. Throughout the nineteenth century, the importance of circumstantial evidence in investigations of suicides grew,²⁶ allowing detectives to probe deeper into the motivations of self-murder, which somewhat corrected the rates. Still, it remained difficult to establish cases of drowning as acts of suicide, and this has been often cited as one of the reasons why the rates of female self-destruction could be seen as misleading.

Others did not question the figures that indicated lower female suicide rates, but interpreted them in a different way that worked within patriarchal ideology, such as the reverend J.W. Horsley, who was a reformer in the London Clerkenwell Prison. At Clerkenwell, Horsley had worked with female survivors of suicide attempts. According to his memory, women who had unsuccessfully tried to end their lives came into the prison every five days.²⁷ It was for this reason that Horsley maintained the belief that females were more prone to suicide, defining it as a 'specifically female crime',²⁸ despite contradicting figures. Horsley's argument was that women were simply less successful at its execution.²⁹ This explanation seems to foreshadow conclusions drawn by analysts today, who estimate that

²³ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 44.

²⁴ Westcott Wynn, *Suicide: Its History, Literature, Jurisprudence, Causation and Prevention* (London: H.K. Lewis, 1885), p. 58-59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁶ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 44.

²⁷ Rev. J.W. Horsley, *Jottings from Jail: Notes and Papers on Prison Matters* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 241.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

²⁹ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 126.

‘women are four times more likely to attempt suicide than men’,³⁰ whilst male death rates continue to be higher. This has been attributed to the fact that women generally opt for less lethal suicide methods. It is therefore not for this reason that Horsley’s ideas can be read in the light of patriarchal notions of his time, but for his un-nuanced explanation of this idea, which returns to the idea of male superiority. He for example states that ‘man often has more force, both physical and mental, and therefore his attempt is more frequently successful’.³¹ Horsley links the lower female suicide rate to women’s inferiority and incapability, which was well-suited to patriarchal ideology.

In the 1890s, the higher suicide rates for males were simply acknowledged, but physicians such as Samuel Strahan and Havelock Ellis advocated simultaneously a return to glorifying, Romanticist ideas of suicide. Whereas resisting suicide was before seen to be emblematic of masculine values of courage, perseverance and willpower, this was turned around in the new perception of self-destruction. In this view, suicide was no longer a surrender to mental illness, but an act of autonomy that could only be successfully completed by those who were brave and strong enough: men. The violence of the act also took on a new importance in this ‘masculinist’ interpretation. Strahan, for example, explained that ‘the low rate of suicide obtaining among women depends in part upon her lack of courage and her natural repugnance to personal violence and disfigurement’.³² Sexologist Ellis took these notions of violence and courage even further in his glorification of male suicide in his study *Man and Woman* (1894), almost taking pride in the capability of men to take their own lives.³³ Gates observes in Ellis’s writings an ‘absurd prejudice in favor of bloodier suicides as being braver and therefore more manly’.³⁴

Higonnet has argued that ‘to medicalize suicide is to feminize it’.³⁵ Indeed, in this section we have seen how the nineteenth century interpretation of suicide as the final outcome of mental illness entailed a feminization of self-destruction. Defining mental problems and suicide as ‘female’ can be read as an affirmation of male superiority. Yet the figures that indicated a lower female suicide rate were problematic to incorporate in this understanding of self-murder. The different explanations of the lower female suicide rate addressed in this section, from the skeptical attitudes towards official figures to the return to a glorifying,

³⁰ Benjamin J. Sadock and Virginia A. Sadock, *Kaplan & Sadock’s Concise Textbook of Clinical Psychiatry* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2008), p. 428.

³¹ Horsley, *Jottings from Jail*, p. 242.

³² S.A.K. Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co., 1893), p. 179.

³³ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 125.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁵ Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences’, p. 70.

masculinist idea of suicide, can be seen to have been constructed to uphold patriarchal ideas on gender roles and to stabilize male authority. It indicates to what extent the reasoning of Victorian experts could be twisted and turned in order to fit the nineteenth century ideology propagating male superiority.

Stories, Sales and Samaritans

Although the female suicide rate was thus far lower than that of men during the nineteenth century, the cases of women ending their own lives seemed to be far more ubiquitous. Cases of male suicides rarely inspired artists of the day,³⁶ and were thus less visible in Victorian culture. Stories of women and their self-chosen deaths, however, were widespread, both in high as in low culture. Far from being a taboo subject, Victorian magazines reported extensively on such cases, thereby playing upon the interests of their audiences, as for the average Victorian ‘a good suicide was almost as gripping as a good murder, and far more interesting than most fatal accidents’.³⁷ Cheap and popular magazines that reported on this phenomenon tended to focus in a sensationalist way on the blood and gore surrounding what was often referred to as ‘that rash act’, and did not refrain from giving detailed descriptions of dismembered body-parts or the scarred state of the corpse. These graphic accounts were read voraciously by the lower classes. Yet also family-oriented newspapers, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, reported frequently on suicide cases, albeit with an emphasis on the tragic aspects of self-murder.³⁸

In both types of publication, some cases of female suicide gained special notoriety and were prominently featured, such as the death of Margaret Moyes, who jumped off the Monument column in London in 1839. Her suicide attracted a lot of media attention, initiating a hype, as *The Spectator* commented: ‘numerous incorrect reports of the occurrence and its causes were circulated. An immense number of persons, principally females, crowded around the Monument [...] to view the scene of this shocking act of self-destruction’.³⁹ The interest Victorians took in Moyes’ death gave rise to popular broadsides imprinted with small images showing the fall of a female figure off the Monument column (see Figure 1 and 2) and verses narrating her last moments.⁴⁰ The way in which Moyes’ case (and that of others)⁴¹ was

³⁶ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 197.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁹ ‘News of the Week’, *The Spectator*, 14 September 1839, p. 862.

⁴⁰ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 39-40.

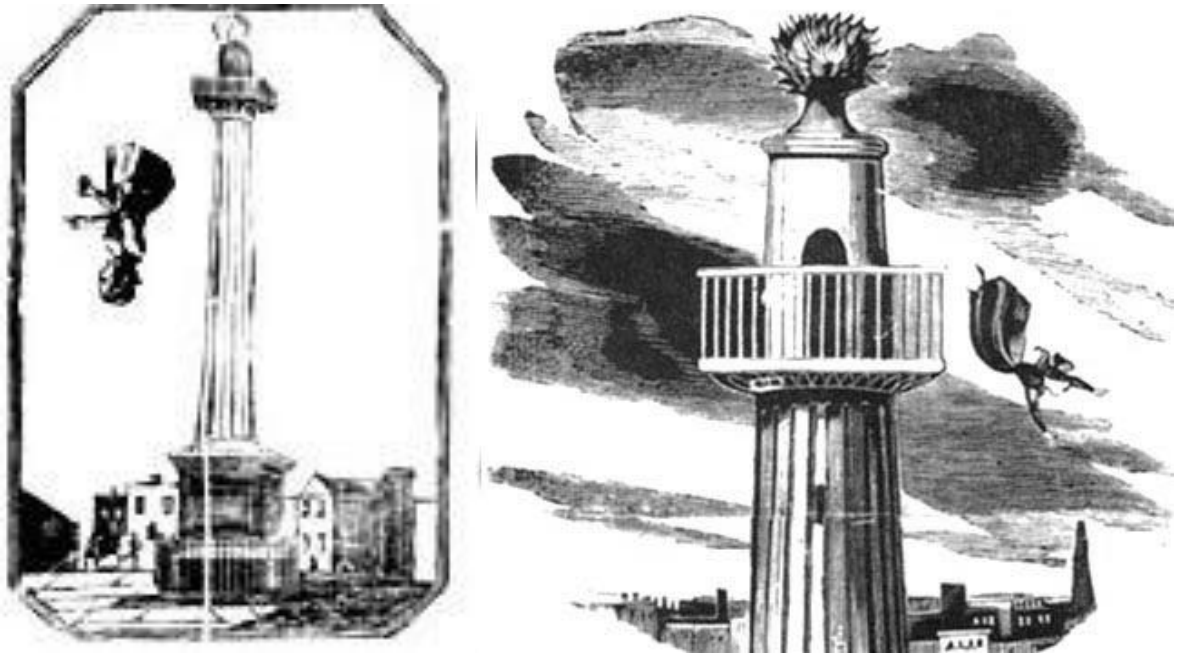


Figure 1 (left) and 2 (right): broadsides of Margaret Moyes' death

elaborated on in the press can be linked to patriarchal anxieties. According to Gates, this form of strategic media coverage of female suicide was quite effective as 'for the most part, fictions about women and suicide became more prevalent and seemed more credible than facts'.⁴² This focus on female suicide in the popular press veiled the statistics of male suicide, and aimed at defining self-murder as essentially a female problem, as 'the profusion of [these news-stories and images] helped perpetuate the inaccurate myth of frequency of female suicide'.⁴³ This type of reportage can therefore be interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal authority.

Though some physicians and epidemiologists spoke out against the prevalence of such suicide reports in the media, none seemed to question the way in which self-destruction was gendered in these representations. Early Samaritans such as the physician George Burrows and Registrar-General William Farr were mostly concerned with suicide prevention, and feared that these widespread stories inspired imitation. Burrows for example wrote in 1828 that the daily confrontation with suicide reports might drive those who were already troubled over the edge, and argued that if 'this offence [self-destruction] [would] be less noticed, it

⁴¹ Chapter 3 discusses another prominent case of female attempted suicide, namely that of Mary Furley

⁴² Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 125.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

would be less frequent'.⁴⁴ These sentiments led William Farr in 1843 to call for a 'plan for discontinuing, by common consent, the detailed dramatic tales of murder, suicide and bloodshed in the newspapers'.⁴⁵ The growing support for the Samaritan call for a limitation of the visibility of suicide would later in the century lead to a 'heavy censure [of] [...] graphic accounts of 'extraordinary suicides' like the extensive reporting of the Moyes case'.⁴⁶

This movement against the prevalence of suicide stories was initially turned against the popular press and the media. However, depictions of self-destruction also pervaded the Victorian high arts. Rather than presenting suicide in a sensationalist way, these works of art presented self-murder in a highly idealized and romanticized manner. Still, Victorian artists seemed to be mostly inspired by cases of female suicide,⁴⁷ and thus helped perpetuate the belief that suicide was essentially a female phenomenon. Critiques that were voiced of these representations were similar to those of the suicide reports in the media, most of them addressing the influence of imitation. Epidemiologist John Netten Radcliffe, for example, found the artistic, idealized depictions of suicide equally worrying as those found in the papers. Radcliffe saw the poets and novelists of his day as bearers of responsibility, and feared a new resurgence of 'Wertherism'.⁴⁸ the imitations of the suicide of Goethe's fictional hero that had spread over Europe after the publication of the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The Werther epidemic had proved the persistent influence of literature over the minds of readers, and continued on for decades.⁴⁹ Fearing the influence of romanticized works that presented 'suicide as a legitimate panacea against all ills',⁵⁰ Radcliffe called out to authors of his day to opt for realist ways to describe self-destruction.

Suicide stories responded to a certain peculiar fascination of the Victorian audiences, and were therefore widespread in both high and low culture. Especially cases of female suicide proved to be intriguing to the Victorian readerships, as they were extensively reported on in the media and inspired many artists of the day. This section has explored in what way the gender-focus in this discourse again placed problems of suicidality with the female, and can thus be related to the stabilization of male superiority and the nineteenth century

⁴⁴ George Man Burrows, *Commentaries on the Causes, Forms, Symptoms and Treatment, Moral or Medical, of Insanity* (London: Thomas and George Underwood, 1828), p. 448.

⁴⁵ 'Suicide in Great Britain', *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 28.3 (1843), 49-52. p. 51.

⁴⁶ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 197.

⁴⁸ J.N. Radcliffe, 'English Suicide-Fields, and the Restraint of Suicide', *The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, 8 (1862), 701-710. p. 704.

⁴⁹ Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1971), p. 207.

⁵⁰ J.N. Radcliffe, 'Baits for Suicide: 'Lady Audley's Secret' and 'Aurora Floyd'' *The Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, 3 (1863), 585-604. p. 592.

feminization of suicide. Though the proliferation of these stories did meet some resistance, this did not entail criticism on the representation of gender in these depictions. Most of the opponents of the prevalence of such reports and stories, as we have seen, voiced their concerns over suicide-contagion. The lack of attention for the gender-bias in this discourse is curious, for as Nicoletti has also observed, ‘male suicides were conspicuously absent’.⁵¹ The fact that the propagation of suicide as a female problem in the media and arts remained largely unquestioned, despite its contradiction by contemporary statistics, can be connected in a similar way to issues of patriarchal anxieties and the stabilization of male authority.

Stereotypes, Seduction and Sanity

One of the most recurring images of female suicide in this discourse was that of the fallen woman drowning herself. Incidents of female drowning permeated the news, and these cases proved to have a strong appeal to the Victorian artistic imagination, resulting in an iconography revolving around this theme from the 1840s onwards. In poems, paintings and novels of the period, a narrative was constructed that gave background to the lives of these drowned women. This story stereotypically followed the same course, starting out with the seduction of a naïve young girl. After losing her innocence, the seducer typically loses interest in his conquest and abandons her. In this stage of the narrative, the Victorian double standard strongly surfaces: a man could shamelessly enjoy his debauchery of young women, yet the girl had to bear the consequences the rest of her life. She would bring disgrace to her family, and was often cast out, forced to resort to needlework or even prostitution to support herself, and possibly, her bastard child. Unfit for such a wretched existence, the inevitable fate of this fallen woman was to commit suicide by drowning herself.

The abandonment or rejection by the male seducer can be seen as the catalyst for the eventual suicide of the fallen woman in the stereotypical narrative. The exclamation of the heroine of the popular Victorian melodrama *London By Night* (1845) after being rescued from the waters of the Thames can be read as typical of its time: ‘He deceived me – left me – what had I then to do but die?’⁵² Indeed, unrequited love was seen in the Victorian era as one of the major motives of female suicide, especially in cases of self-drowning.⁵³ This correlation

⁵¹ L.J. Nicoletti, ‘Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London’s “Bridge of Sighs”’, *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 2.1 (2004), <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2004/nicoletti.html>> [accessed 21 January 2016]

⁵² Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 198.

⁵³ Brown, *Art of Suicide*, p. 2001.

became evident in police investigations at the time. When the motivations of the female suicide victim were unclear, questions about love-interests soon arose, for example in the case of Margaret Moyes. Struggling to explain Moyes' rash act, investigators soon turned to her love-life.⁵⁴ The ring that she was wearing at the time of death was initially considered to be a token of love from a seducer, but proved to be a gift from her sisters. Her sisters were also asked to search for love-letters, yet none could be retrieved. Finally, the coroner was asked to examine whether Moyes was pregnant, but found out that this was not the case. Unable to label Moyes as lovesick, 'fallen' or pregnant, the official causes of her death were vaguely described as 'dullness of mind' and 'depression of spirits'.⁵⁵ The efforts made in trying to explain Moyes' death as a case of love melancholy exemplify how strongly female suicide was associated with ideas of unrequited love.

These associations mostly stemmed from the belief that disappointed love caused female hysteria and madness, leading to suicide. Different physicians throughout the nineteenth century had noted the negative effects of unrequited love on the frail female constitution. Physician Alexander Morison had already listed 'disappointed love' among one of the possible causes for insanity in 1825: 'Love, [...], produces febrile symptoms, and increased sensibility [...] when hopeless –[...] insanity'.⁵⁶ Especially women, he wrote later on in 1848, were more exposed to these sentiments than men when disappointed in their affections.⁵⁷ This caused him to conclude that 'the passion of love makes girls mad'.⁵⁸ A strong correlation thus existed in the Victorian consciousness which tied women's suicides to love melancholy and madness. Female self-murder was thus generally regarded to be 'motivated by love, [...] [a] surrender to an illness, [namely] *le mal d'amour*'.⁵⁹

This nineteenth century interpretation of female suicide can be connected to patriarchal ideology in two different ways. Firstly, it seems to support ideas of male superiority as it underlined women's (mental) dependency on men. Moreover, it presents female suicide not as an act of rational self-assertion, but as a demise to hysterics and madness. In this way, the stereotypical death of the fallen woman ties into the nineteenth century feminization of suicide. This is an important insight, and clarifies to some extent the way in which her suicide should be read. For, as Bronfen explains, feminist interpretations of

⁵⁴ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ Alexander Morison, *Outlines of Lectures on Mental Diseases* (Edinburgh: D. Lizars, 1825), p. 62.

⁵⁷ Alexander Morison, *Outlines of Lectures on the Nature, Causes and Treatment of Insanity* (London: Longman et al, 1848), p. 289.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁵⁹ Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences', p. 71.

female suicides are shaped by a paradox: ‘the paradox inherent in [understanding] suicide is that it can either [be seen to] disintegrate identity or reaffirm a woman’s autonomy after defilement or abandonment’.⁶⁰ Higonnet rightfully states that nineteenth century images of female suicide are inherently associated with disintegration of the female self because such representations implied a ‘denial of woman’s ability to choose freely [over her death]’,⁶¹ by linking female suicide to madness. This can thus also be seen to apply to the inevitable suicide of the fallen woman.

Rhodes notes how the story of the fallen woman was mythologically invented by the Victorians in order to remind all women of the eventual demise and death of those who could be categorized as sexually transgressive, and threatened to destabilize male order.⁶² The focus on the hardships of the fallen woman in Victorian culture can be explained as a strategy to keep women to adhere to the traditional gender roles instituted by patriarchy. The stereotypical narrative thus warned of the consequences of female transgression, but also presented death as the only escape to those who already classified as fallen, as ‘rising’ was deemed impossible.⁶³ Women who identified themselves as fallen thus might have been more inclined to commit suicide as it was imprinted on their minds as their only option, and self-destruction allowed them to join in some sort of sisterhood with their fictional counterparts. This influence of the iconography has also been observed by other critics.⁶⁴ Though the narrative perpetuated in part what could be defined as the ‘myth of frequency of female suicide’,⁶⁵ it conversely thus also contributed to its own accuracy, as it could be seen to have increased the female suicide rates.

This chapter has exposed the ways in which patriarchal ideology influenced the changing attitudes towards self-murder throughout the nineteenth century. In this new interpretation, suicide was stripped of its heroic connotations and was more and more seen as the result of mental disease (in case of the fallen woman, love melancholy). This entailed a feminization of suicide, which placed problems of suicidality with the weaker sex. Though contradicting statistics, this idea was not only propagated in scientific discourse but also in the media and arts. The way in which this discourse propagated the myth that suicide was a female problem is shown as inherently related to patriarchal anxieties about stabilizing male

⁶⁰ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 153.

⁶¹ Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences’, p. 77.

⁶² Kimberley Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Ashgate, 2008), p. 12.

⁶³ Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes, and Remedy* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1843), p. 57.

⁶⁴ See Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 143.

superiority. The construction of the narrative of the fallen woman, which necessarily ended with her suicide by drowning, can be similarly read as a strategy to both ‘feminize’ suicide and reinforce male order. Before turning to the feminist analysis of some iconographic representations of the fallen woman’s suicide, the following chapter shall firstly investigate the Victorian fascination with female drowning, and relate this to patriarchal ideology.

Ophelia, water and femininity

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.¹

Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary decided to poison herself with arsenic, Shakespeare's Juliet stabbed herself in the heart with her lover's dagger, and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina flung herself on the tracks before a passing train. These fictional examples of female suicide illustrate how women in general have resorted to different methods to kill themselves. In 1851, R. Thompson Jopling already noted that it would be 'interesting to know the manner in which suicides [...] among the different sexes, have been committed'.² In his completed survey 'Statistics of Suicides' (1852), which discusses the suicides that occurred in London between 1846 and 1850, it becomes clear that the top three of preferred suicide methods of females included respectively poisoning, hanging and drowning.³ According to Jopling's research, based on suicide figures from the General Register Office, poisoning was the number one method of choice for females in London during the second half of the 1840s.⁴

As cases of women's suicides by poisoning and hanging were thus prevalent in the 1840s, one might wonder why the iconography evolving in this period focused specifically on female suicide by drowning. The combination of themes of water, women and death proved to be so aesthetically powerful that it could be seen to have caused the imagination of Victorian artists to overflow. This chapter seeks to explain the Victorian fascination with female drowning in particular. It will relate this back to the Shakespearean character Ophelia, who famously drowned herself, and who could be seen to function as a model for the Victorian

¹ Dorothy Parker, 'Résumé', in David Lehman, ed., *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 392.

² R. Thompson Jopling, 'Statistics of Suicide', *Assurance Magazine*, 1 (1851), 308-316. p. 310.

³ R. Thompson Jopling, 'Statistics of Suicide (Continued)', *Assurance Magazine*, 2 (1852), 32-54. p. 47.

⁴ Of course, when interpreting these figures one must keep in mind the claims that some suicides by drowning escaped registration, as we have seen in Chapter 1. Jopling himself added a similar disclaimer to his survey.

fallen (mad)woman. Secondly, this chapter will consider Victorian associations between femininity and water that might help to explain the aesthetic appeal of the image of the drowning woman. Lastly, it will show the ways in which drowning was specifically gendered as a feminine death throughout the nineteenth century, as it was tied to notions of passivity. This linkage will be read in the light of patriarchal ideology, which infamously denounced female agency.

Testing the waters

Few narrations of female death have appealed so strongly to the artistic imagination as William Shakespeare's description of the drowning of Ophelia in his masterpiece *Hamlet*:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do "dead men's fingers" call them.
There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like a while they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.⁵

Shakespeare's description of Ophelia's final moments of floatation presented such a divine sight that it has never failed to inspire artists over the past ages, especially during the 1800s. Ophelia's death-scene was recreated by numerous artists to the point of obsession in the nineteenth century.⁶ Rhodes has already indicated in what way Ophelia can be linked to the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning, arguing that the figure of the

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in G.R. Hibbard, ed., *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), IV.7.138-155.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism', in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Patricia Parker, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 86.

Shakespearean heroine is evoked in ‘depictions of fallen women lurking about the bridges and riverbanks of London planning their deaths by drowning [as well as] images of respectable women lost in thought standing beside bodies of water’.⁷ Indeed, as we will see, Shakespeare’s Ophelia can be regarded as a model figure for the Victorian stereotype of the fallen (mad)woman, whose inevitable fate was to drown herself.

First we must consider how Ophelia’s drowning can be regarded as an act of suicide, as there is some ambiguity in the play about the nature of her death. Her drowning is not enacted on stage, and it is through the narration of Queen Gertrude that the reader or spectator learns of the tragedy. Gertrude describes Ophelia’s death as an accident, implying how she slipped or fell from one of the branches near the brook. Yet there are hints throughout the play that are explicit enough to assume that she committed suicide. In scene V.I, two clowns prepare Ophelia’s grave, and whilst digging, discuss the nature of her death and whether she should receive a Christian burial.⁸ This discussion can be taken as a direct hint that Ophelia’s death was self-chosen, as one of the clowns concludes: ‘she drowned herself wittingly’.⁹ The eponymous hero of the play also implies that her death must have been an act of self-murder. When Hamlet sees her coffin, and does not yet know it holds his Ophelia, he concludes that ‘the corpse [...] did with desp’rate hand / Fordo its own life’.¹⁰ Although Hamlet asks himself the famous ontological question, ‘To be, or not to be’,¹¹ it can be argued that it is his sweetheart Ophelia who eventually decides to take her own life.

When interpreting her death as an act of suicide, one might wonder what eventually causes Ophelia to kill herself. Her motives can be seen to resemble those of the Victorian fallen woman, discussed in Chapter 1. Throughout the play, it becomes clear that Ophelia is oppressed by three patriarchal figures, namely her father Polonius, brother Laertes and love-interest Hamlet. She can be defined as ‘a blank page on which patriarchy can inscribe and project its desires’,¹² as she is continuously manipulated and exploited by these three men in her life. Though in love with Prince Hamlet, she is forced to repel his advances out of loyalty to her father and brother, who continuously remind her of the importance of remaining

⁷ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 74.

⁸ In the early modern period, suicide victims were denied a Christian burial because self-murder was considered to be a felony and a sin. Religious penalties for self-destruction were abolished in 1823. In Victorian times, suicide victims were buried in the ‘backside’ of cemeteries, without service. See Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

⁹ *Hamlet*, V.1.12-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, V.1.214-215.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III.1.65.

¹² Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 2.

chaste. Ophelia's loyalty to her father enrages Hamlet, and leads to his cruel rejection of her. This rejection can be seen as the catalyst for Ophelia's descend into madness, which finally results in her suicide. She becomes a 'document in madness',¹³ a classic case of female lunacy. The mad, lovelorn figure of Ophelia can be seen as a precursor of the fallen woman resorting to drowning in Victorian culture, as her downfall is similarly brought about by patriarchal oppression and love melancholy. As Rhodes notes, 'the woman abandoned by her lover [...] is thematically related to Ophelia'.¹⁴ Hamlet's rejection causes Ophelia to call herself 'of [all] ladies most deject and wretched',¹⁵ a proclamation which already suggests that her case is the primary example of love melancholy.

Nineteenth century readings of Ophelia also tended to set her as a model for the Victorian madwoman, suffering from unrequited love. When studying Ophelia's madness, the psychiatrist J.C. Bucknill diagnosed her with love melancholy, noting that 'the loss of her lover [...] is uppermost in her thoughts [...] [N]ever was sentimental mania more truly and more exquisitely depicted than in [her character]'.¹⁶ Some years later, the physician John Conolly also reflected on the figure of Ophelia, and compared the insane, lovelorn female patients under his care to the Shakespearean heroine. He wrote that:

[T]o die of a broken heart [is sometimes considered to be] a mere phrase [...] Physicians, however, still recognize these casualties and in every rank [...] our asylums for ruined minds now and then present remarkable illustrations of this fatal malady, so that even casual visitors recognise in the wards an Ophelia; the same young years, the same faded beauty, the same fantastic dress and interrupted song.¹⁷

Conolly's comparison indicates the way in which Shakespeare's Ophelia functioned as an inspirational figure in the Victorian psychiatric wards, a trend that Showalter has also observed: 'Medical textbooks sometimes illustrated their discussions of female patients with sketches of Ophelia-like maidens [...] When young women in lunatic asylums did not willingly throw themselves into Ophelia-like poses, asylum superintendents with cameras imposed the conventional Ophelia costume, gesture and props, and expression upon them'.¹⁸ Readings given by Bucknill and Conolly exemplify the way in which Ophelia was seen as the ultimate victim of love melancholy in the Victorian era.

¹³ *Hamlet*, V.1.188.

¹⁴ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 78.

¹⁵ *Hamlet*, III.1.158.

¹⁶ John Charles Bucknill, *The Psychology of Shakespeare* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859), p. 124.

¹⁷ John Conolly, *A Study of Hamlet* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1863), p. 177.

¹⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pp. 91-92.

Yet Ophelia might not only be defined as lovelorn, but also as fallen. Throughout the play, there are some indications that Ophelia has lost her innocence. Such interpretations were also given in the Victorian period, as Bucknill for example hinted: '[Ophelia's] father and brother fear for her chastity; and these fears may have been well founded, for she [Ophelia] appears [the type] [...] who, in the very spirit of unselfish devotion, could refuse her lover nothing'.¹⁹ One of the symptoms of Ophelia's madness is that she speaks in riddles, and sings different ballads. These ballads can be read as hints of a love-affair between her and Hamlet. In Act VI., Ophelia enters, singing songs that address the double standard and tell the story of the seduction of a young maiden:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber-door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

Young men will do't, if they come to't;
By cock, they are to blame.
Quoth she, before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.
So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.²⁰

One might wonder whether Ophelia sings about herself, and whether these ballads reflect her own position. It can be read as a hint that Hamlet and Ophelia have been lovers. The fact that she gives away flowers whilst singing these dubious songs has been taken as another indication for this interpretation, as it has been read as a symbolical act of deflowering herself.²¹ Moreover, the language that Ophelia employs throughout the play has been read to portray her as 'sexually knowing',²² as she responds to Hamlet's sexual innuendo's. In Act III., it becomes clear that she understands Hamlet's remarks, as she tells him: 'You are naught, you are naught'.²³

¹⁹ Bucknill, *The Psychology of Shakespeare*, p. 120.

²⁰ *Hamlet*, IV.5.48-65.

²¹ Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia', p. 80.

²² Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 3.

²³ *Hamlet*, III.2.127-140.

In different ways, Ophelia thus can be seen as a precursor of the Victorian fallen (mad)woman. Ophelia's story of seduction, rejection, madness and suicide corresponds to the narrative of the female stereotype retold again and again in the Victorian arts, and which could be seen to teach women an important moral, namely to adhere to the feminine ideal instituted by patriarchal ideology. Analogies between the Shakespearean heroine and the figure of the fallen woman were already drawn by psychiatrists and physicians in the nineteenth century, as we have seen in the works of Bucknill and Conolly. One could thus argue that Victorian artists chose to let their fictional, fallen heroines commit suicide by drowning to evoke the figure and fate of Ophelia, who could be seen as the archetypical fallen (mad)woman.

Panta rhei

In his study *Water and Dreams* (1942), Gaston Bachelard emphasizes how influential Shakespeare's description of Ophelia's death has been in the artistic imagination: 'For centuries, she [Ophelia] will appear to dreamers and to poets floating on her brook with her flowers and tresses spread out on the water. She will provide the pretext for one of the clearest of poetic synecdoches'.²⁴ The evocation of the Shakespearean figure of Ophelia might thus be seen as an explanation for the prevalence of representation of female suicide by drowning in the Victorian period. Yet the question still arises why the Victorians were so drawn to the idea of female drowning in particular. This theme can be seen to have appealed so strongly to the Victorian imagination because it builds on age-old associations between femininity, nature and water that were still prevalent during the nineteenth century. This section will elaborate on these associations and establish how these might explain the Victorian artistic fascination with the theme of female drowning.

Because of her procreative function, woman has been traditionally considered closer to nature than males, an idea that was also prevalent in Victorian thought.²⁵ Her death in the element of water can be read as a metaphorical return to nature, as she is subsumed into it. This has also been seen as one of the aspects that has made Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia's drowning so compelling to the nineteenth century audiences, especially to

²⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1942), p. 83.

²⁵ Wendy Stainton Rogers and Rex Stainton Rogers, *The Psychology of Gender and Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Open University Press, 2001), p. 100.

Romanticist and Pre-Raphaelite sensibilities.²⁶ Water, moreover, can be seen as ‘the true matter of a very feminine death’,²⁷ as Bachelard notes. In different ways, water has been traditionally seen as the feminine element, also in the Victorian perception. The death of a woman in water, the element to which she, as Shakespeare’s Ophelia, was ‘native and indued’,²⁸ can therefore be interpreted as a particularly powerful poetic image.

Water has been first of all seen as a symbol for femininity because of its life-giving quality. Long before Darwinian theory, which stated that life originated in water, philosophers such as the Pre-Socratic thinker Thales already declared water to be the primary substance and the source of all life.²⁹ Water, with its creative force, allowing seeds to grow and flourish, has been traditionally seen to symbolize women’s ability to conceive, carry and give life. This symbolism has strengthened the ties between the concepts of water and femininity, as well as maternity. The sea is often considered to be the strongest maternal image, as the French³⁰ psychoanalyst Bonaparte has noted: ‘[Nature is] an immensely enlarged, eternal mother, projected into infinity [...] The sea is for all men one of the greatest and most constant maternal symbols’.³¹ Myths about female menstruation have underlined the associations between water, the sea and femininity, as its cycle has been thought to be regulated by the phases of the moon, which also control the flow of tides of the ocean. Such ideas were also dominant throughout the nineteenth century, as the sexologist Ellis concluded in 1894.³² The prevalent associations between water and the feminine or the maternal in the Victorian period were also played upon in the works of different prominent artists of the century.³³

Water has been moreover defined as feminine because of its fluid character. In different ways, fluidity has been traditionally associated with femininity. Firstly, it can be

²⁶ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 3.

²⁷ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 81.

²⁸ *Hamlet*, IV.7.151.

²⁹ Giannis Stamatellos, *Introduction to Presocratics: A Thematic Approach to Early Greek Philosophy* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), p. 53.

³⁰ In the French language, moreover, this association surfaces in the fact that the words for mother (*la mère*) and sea (*la mer*) are homophonous.

³¹ Marie Bonaparte, *The life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: a psychoanalytic interpretation*, trans. John Rodker (London: Imago, 1949), p. 286.

³² Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary and Tertiary Sexual Characters* (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1894), p. 245.

³³ The revered poet Algernon Charles Swinburne for example was known to play upon these associations in his use of water imagery. This surfaces best in his poem ‘The Triumph of Time’ (1866), in which the poetic speaker contemplates taking his life by swimming out to sea, thereby going back to ‘the great sweet mother / Mother and lover of men, the sea’. The submersion in water in this poem is compared to the mother’s embrace of her infant. See Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘The Triumph of Time’, in Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle, eds., *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory* (London: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000)

seen to result from the ‘wetness’³⁴ of the female body, in comparison to the male body, or women’s capability to produce specific fluids through pregnancy (breast milk, amniotic fluids) and menstruation (blood). The most important fluid that women have been believed to (over)produce in comparison to men were tears, because of persistent ideas about women’s sensitive character and emotional vulnerability. Bachelard, for example, explicitly discusses this connection when declaring that: ‘Water is the profound organic symbol of woman who can only weep about her pain and whose eyes are easily “drowned in tears”’.³⁵ The belief in women’s hypersensitivity and frail constitution were perhaps strongest in the nineteenth century. This stood in stark contrast to ideals of masculinity of the time, which were largely based on aridity,³⁶ and entailed a suppression of the emotions.³⁷ Tears were often seen as a sign of feminine emotional weakness. Gates has used these ideas to explain the Victorian fascination with female death by water, arguing that drowning was necessarily seen as a ‘female-associated type of death [...] the way in which most visual artists and any writers [of the time] imagined female suicide. It was as though women drowned in their own tears’.³⁸

Secondly, fluidity has been linked to femininity because of stereotypical characterizations of womanhood, in particular the persistent idea that woman is fickle by nature. Nineteenth century gender stereotypes assigned aspects such as indeterminacy, inconstancy and unpredictability to femininity, and constancy and dependability to masculinity. The Victorian psychologist Edward Tilt, for example, argued that capriciousness was characteristic of women, supporting the age-old idea that ‘*la donna è mobile*’ (woman is fickle).³⁹ Believed to be in constant flux, femininity can be readily interpreted as a ‘fluid’ concept. Water, which essentially has a protean nature, and is famously used as a metaphor for transience in Heraclitean philosophy,⁴⁰ in this way functions again as a fitting symbol of femininity. Because of its alleged changeability, womanhood has been seen to be difficult to

³⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 81.

³⁵ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 82.

³⁶ Elaine Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia’, p. 80.

³⁷ In the early nineteenth century, however, men who shed tears were less seen as ‘unmanly’ as it fitted the Romantic ideal of sensibility. Throughout the century this changed, and a ‘toughness of heart’ became one of the key-elements of Victorian masculinity. See Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 106.

³⁸ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 135.

³⁹ Edward John Tilt, *A Handbook of Uterine Therapeutics and of Diseases of Women* (London: J. Churchill and Sons, 1863), p. 85.

⁴⁰ Heraclitus argued that all life was in constant flux and transformation. He used water (more specifically a stream of water, a river) as a metaphor in this idea that would later become famous as the phrase ‘*panta rhei*’, ‘everything flows’. This powerful image has underlined associations between water, transience and changeability. See S. Morris Engel, Angelika Soldan and Kevin Durand, *The Study of Philosophy* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 25.

define or understand, a concept as slippery and elusive as water itself. The endeavor to define femininity thus might as well be compared to an attempt to contain water in one's hands: one might think to have a grasp on the subject, yet realizes that it inevitably slips away through one's fingers. This lack of understanding has veiled womanhood with a sense of mystery, representing the unfathomable and the enigmatic. The famous psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud, for example, stated that, in his view, feminine (sexual) psychology remained 'a dark continent [... hid by] impenetrable obscurity'.⁴¹ Freud's idea reflected a popular nineteenth century view of womanhood, as Minsky has argued.⁴²

These associations can be tied again to the element of water, by relating the mysteries of femininity to the hidden and unknown depths that lie below the surface of the water, especially the 'unfathomed and unmapped depths of the ocean'.⁴³ Glasgow has noted in what way these associations have led 'the human imagination to run riot [...] turn[ing] the uncharted sea into the perfect dwelling-place for monsters and water-spirits, projections of a culture's fears, frustrations and desires'.⁴⁴ This can be seen to surface as well in Victorian art, in which the depths of water were often depicted as the realm of mythological creatures such as mermaids and sirens. These underwater temptresses symbolized female deviant or transgressive sexuality,⁴⁵ which failed to be controlled or defined, and consequently caused patriarchal anxieties in Victorian times. Cooper has shown how the pervasive images of mermaids and sirens in Victorian culture resonated with the iconography of the drowned, fallen woman.⁴⁶ The unfathomable depths of water can be seen to signify the mysteries of female sexuality, which can be read as an indication why the drowning of the Victorian stereotype of the fallen woman, the ultimate example of female sexual deviance, was seen as such a powerful image.

Femininity was strongly associated with water throughout the nineteenth century, which to some extent explains the aesthetic appeal of the drowning woman in Victorian art. However, there is also another association besides women's alleged affinity with water that needs to be considered when examining the iconography of female suicide by drowning. Drowning was, moreover, strongly associated with the idea of baptism in Victorian thought.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Samuel Slipp, *The Freudian Mystique: Freud, Women and Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 91.

⁴² Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 48.

⁴³ R.D.V. Glasgow, *The Concept of Water* (Zaragoza: R. Glasgow Books, 2009), p. 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ Suzanne Fagence Cooper, 'The Liquefaction of Desire: Music, Water and Femininity in Victorian Aestheticism', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20.2 (2009), 186-201. p.194.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁷ Rhodes, *Ophelia in Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 24.

The water in which the fallen woman typically drowned symbolically washed off her sins, and cleansed her.⁴⁸ Her total submersion in water signified purification, which offered salvation and redemption. This sealed the tragic fate of the fallen woman, as she could only be reinstated as the heroine of the story after her watery death. Though perceived as abject in life, the fallen woman's corpse transformed into an object that could be idealized (or when read in the light of patriarchal ideology, controlled). The element of baptism and the idealization of the fallen woman in death shall be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, in relation to Bronfen's theories.

Sink or swim

Another important factor that must be taken into account when trying to explain the fascination with female drowning is the ways in which suicide methods were gendered in the Victorian period. In Jopling's 'Statistics of Suicide' (1851), mentioned at the start of this chapter, a gender-based pattern in suicide methods can already be detected. It shows that violent methods such as stabbing, throat-cutting and shooting were much more frequent among male suicides. Women, on the other hand, seemed to prefer less aggressive methods, and therefore resorted to methods like hanging, poison, or drowning. Jopling notes 'the remarkable fact, that in the five years [of his survey] there was not one case of a female self-destruction by shooting'.⁴⁹ Jopling's figures indicate that men were more likely to opt for bloody and violent deaths, enabled by knives or guns. The development of such patterns must be considered with a view to the influence of stereotypes and ideology, pressuring suicidal men to end their lives in what are considered to be honorable, heroic or 'manly' ways, whilst vice versa affecting women to opt for 'feminine' methods. As Jaworski has observed: 'women use less violent [suicide] methods because they are socialized to be less violent. Likewise, if men are more violent in their methods, it is because masculinity is continually articulated as more violent and aggressive'.⁵⁰

Such ideologies also prevailed in Victorian times. The late nineteenth century sexologist Havelock Ellis was one of the few to write explicitly on this subject. He used an

⁴⁸ Remarkably, the waters in which fallen women drowned were often far from limpid, as it was stereotypically in the Thames that these women found their grave. In Victorian times, the London river was notorious for its filthiness. (See Christopher Hibbert et al, *The London Encyclopaedia* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1983), pp. 247-249). Despite this, representations of female suicide by drowning continued to play on themes of baptism and redemption. True to his realist style, Charles Dickens was one of the few to deviate from this tradition, as we will see in Chapter 4.

⁴⁹ Jopling, 'Statistics of Suicides (Continued)', p. 48.

⁵⁰ Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, p. 27.

active/passive distinction in his explanation for the gender pattern in suicide methods. Ellis argued for example that women in general chose passive methods of suicide, such as drowning, because these methods required less preparation, less resolution (or courage) and were less violent.⁵¹ Especially this last element could be read in the light of nineteenth century ideas on gender roles, as Ellis attributed this lack of violence in female suicides to women's 'sense of propriety and their intense horror of making a mess',⁵² thereby placing them within the contemporary feminine ideal of the domestic housewife. Though written at the close of the nineteenth century, Ellis's ideas can be traced back to ideologies already prevailing in the mid-century, which prescribed that 'violent crime is unusual, even unnatural, in a woman'.⁵³ These sentiments showed perhaps most clearly in responses to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1863), which prominently featured a female murderer. Contemporary reviews dehumanized the character of Lady Audley for her lack of feminine qualities and her violent nature.⁵⁴ Women were believed to naturally feel abhorrent towards blood and violence, and consequently, to refrain from brutal methods of suicide. These sentiments could also be seen to explain the national outrage over women who in real life did resort to such violent methods when attacking themselves and others in this period.⁵⁵

Death by drowning could be considered as one of the least violent suicide methods, as it did not necessarily involve the infliction of wounds, and could therefore be stereotyped as feminine. Higonnet has noted how nineteenth century representations of female suicide tended to portray women's 'easeful deaths [...] [allegedly] painless and beautiful way[s] of dying'.⁵⁶ In the Victorian era, drowning was shown as such a 'preternaturally peaceful [death]'.⁵⁷ Images that belonged to the iconography of the day often implied that women simply waded into the water, never to return. They thereby presented drowning as an oversimplified surrendering to the waves. In Augustus Leopold Egg's 'Despair' (Figure 3),

⁵¹ Ellis, *Man and Woman*, p. 335.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 335.

⁵³ Virginia B. Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1990), p. 13.

⁵⁴ In 1863, a reviewer described the character as 'unnatural', because she possessed 'so little that is feminine, or even that is human'. His claim that it would be 'absurd [...] that any woman [...] would resort to [that] open and deadly violence' can be read to indicate the stereotyping of the time of women as less violent at the time. See 'Lady Audley on the Stage', *The London Review*, 7 March 1863, p. 245.

⁵⁵ The crime of Mary Ann Brough, for example, attracted a lot of attention because of its violent nature. In 1854, Brough slit the throats of six of her children and attempted suicide. She failed to injure herself fatally and was arrested. Though stories of infanticide and suicide were far from uncommon in Victorian times, Brough became notorious for her gruesome and bloody attacks. Because of their deviation from stereotypical feminine methods of murder/suicide, women such as Brough were often perceived to be even more unnatural or monstrous than women who harmed themselves and others in 'conventional' ways.

⁵⁶ Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences', pp. 78-79.

⁵⁷ Alexander, 'Hearts as Innocent as Hers', p. 83.



Figure 3: Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present* no.3.



Figure 4: George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*

belonging to his famous triptych *Past and Present* (1858), drowning was represented in such a way. The fallen woman looks out to the water, where a moonlit path seems to invite her to step in, and let herself be submerged in the waters. Images that depicted the washed-up drowned woman similarly presented drowning as a beautiful and easeful death, as the unscathed corpses central to these representations often radiated with beauty and serenity, as for example in George Frederic Watts' painting *Found Drowned* (1850) (Figure 4).

Drowning was moreover linked to notions of passivity, as it was repeatedly presented as an 'inherently feminine act of submission'.⁵⁸ Whereas masculine suicide methods like shooting oneself were seen to require agency (e.g. pulling the trigger), death by drowning could be seen to come forth out of a lack of activity or passivity, a quality which was defined as feminine at the time.⁵⁹ The Victorian linkage between femininity and passivity can be seen to have evolved from patriarchal anxieties to enact complete control over women's bodies. The woman floating towards oblivion, slowly letting herself be submerged in water, was an object rather than an agent, and therefore this particular portrayal of female suicide might have particularly pleased the nineteenth century audiences, as Dijkstra has suggested.⁶⁰ Victorian art was dominated by such images. Not only evocations of Ophelia's drowning might be seen to belong to this genre, but also the numerous visualizations showing the passive floating of other well-known nineteenth century heroines, such as the Lady of Shalott and Elaine,⁶¹ towards death.

There were, however, also images in the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning that could be seen to stress women's self-assertion in taking their own lives. These did not depict women passively in water, but in mid-air, jumping from bridges towards their death. In this way, the female figures central to these depictions could be seen to represent self-determination, energy and agency, and are thus radically different from the supine women of the former category. These images can be defined as 'portraits of action [showing] the actual taking of a life'.⁶² Gates has observed how the representations of such air-borne women 'bear a message different from the Victorian Ophelias [...] These women are not

⁵⁸ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 88.

⁶⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.39.

⁶¹ Both are characters described in the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, respectively in his poem 'The Lady of Shalott' (1833) and the work *The Idylls of the King* (1859). Examples of visualizations are Gustave Doré 'Elaine' (1867), John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Elaine* (1877), John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott* (1888)

⁶² Alexander, 'Hearts as Innocent as Hers', p. 77.



Figure 5 (left) and 6 (right): two Victorian representations of ‘air-borne’ women

deadened or will-less. Their soaring is – for a moment – an act of autonomy or self-assertion’.⁶³ Figure 5 and 6 are two examples of this genre. Nevertheless, such images were greatly outnumbered by those that depicted the passive demise of women in water, a fact that can be related to patriarchal anxieties about female agency at the time.

The question why female suicide by drowning appealed so strongly to the Victorian imagination can thus be explained in different ways. Not only did it evoke the death of the Shakespearean figure of Ophelia, who can be defined as ‘the symbol of feminine suicide’,⁶⁴ as well as the precursor for the Victorian fallen woman, the characterization of water as an essentially feminine or purifying element can be seen to have strengthened the aesthetic appeal of the figure of the drowning woman in the nineteenth century arts. The Victorian gendering of drowning as a specifically feminine death because of its passive character can be moreover linked to patriarchal ideology and anxieties about the control of women. Such anxieties have also been used to explain the predominance of images showing passively

⁶³ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 142.

⁶⁴ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 82.

submerging female suicide victims. The next chapter will extend this reading and look more closely at some examples of the iconography of the day in order to establish in what way they can be seen to be created to specifically suit a male viewer, using Bronfen's delineation of the survivor-complex.

3

*'Death becomes her'*¹

The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishment.²

Edgar Allan Poe has infamously declared a beautiful woman's death as the most poetical subject in the arts, as we have seen in the opening lines of this thesis. After this famous, yet highly controversial statement, however, Poe makes another observation that has received less attention by feminist scholars, but is nevertheless important to consider when looking at the way in which female death has been traditionally represented. Poe writes that it is 'equally [...] beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic [female death] are those of a bereaved lover'.³ He seems to imply with this statement that female death is described and portrayed best from a masculine perspective. Such ideas have pervaded nineteenth century art, as Bronfen has established: 'by implication, the corpse is feminine, the survivor [lamenting her death, narrating the event] masculine'.⁴

This division can be explained with a view to patriarchal ideology dominant at the time. Bronfen has provided a gender-based psychoanalytic reading elaborating on the question why the theme of female death in particular prevailed in nineteenth century art. She traces this back to universal human anxieties about death. All life comes at the price of death, and therefore to be born, is to be doomed to die. As the Greek tragedian Euripides famously wrote: 'Death is a debt we all must pay'.⁵ Though one of the basic facts of life, this awareness needs to be suppressed by human beings, according to Bronfen. The reality of death presents a danger to the health of the psyche,⁶ as ontological doubts and anxieties about the afterlife

¹ This title is derived from the 1992 film 'Death Becomes Her' directed by Robert Zemeckis.

² Sylvia Plath, 'Edge', in Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Routledge: the Critical Heritage, 2013), l. 1-3.

³ Poe, *The Raven and the Philosophy of Composition*, p. 27.

⁴ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 65.

⁵ Euripides, *Alcestis*, in Augustus Taber Murray, trans., ed., *Four Plays of Euripides: Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus & Iphigeneia Among the Taurians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 418-419.

⁶ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, x.

can potentially disturb our order. Despite this repression, humans nevertheless remain interested in the theme of death and its mysteries, Bronfen argues.⁷

This underlying fascination comes to the surface best in the way in which death has been perceived as an aesthetically pleasing theme in the arts.⁸ Representations of death in the arts are considered to be agreeable to the eye because the spectator experiences death by proxy: '[Death] occurs in a realm clearly delineated as not life, or not real [...] [It] delight[s] because we are confronted with death, yet it is the death of the other [...] Belief in our own immortality is confirmed. There is death, but it is not my own'.⁹ The viewer can therefore safely dream of death as he/she is positioned in a survivor-perspective, which defers the reality of one's own death. These sensations can be seen to explain why the theme of death has been used as such an ubiquitous trope by artists in general.

How can this reading be connected to the prevalence of nineteenth century representations of female death in particular? Bronfen applied a gendered analysis to these ideas, indicating that the survivor-perspective in nineteenth century culture was necessarily male.¹⁰ Death in the realm of art was 'safe' as it involved the destruction of the other, and not the self. Nineteenth century art placed death at the site of the gendered Other, the female, and thus away from the male self.¹¹ This rouses feelings of immortality and superiority in the masculine spectator as death is with the Other. In a similar way as death, femininity was interpreted in nineteenth century patriarchal thought as disruptive, or castrative, posing a threat to the order and stability of the male-dominated system. The eradication of the female Other could be seen to eliminate this threat to destabilization of the patriarchal system, and explain its popularity as a theme in the arts in an age in which patriarchy was so firmly instituted.

In death the female loses the quality of being Other,¹² and becomes an inanimate object that no longer threatens male order. Her body, once 'a site of superlative alterity',¹³ can now be controlled, composed, and dissected. In this state, the woman can be idealized. These ideas can be placed within the nineteenth century patriarchal cult of invalidism that Dijkstra has described. This cult glorified female suffering, illness and consequently, their deaths.¹⁴

⁷ Ibid., x.

⁸ Ibid., x.

⁹ Ibid., x.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹ Ibid., p. xi.

¹² Ibid., p. 98.

¹³ Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁴ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p.25.

Women who could be defined as either faint, frail or fading away, were set as icons of virtuous femininity.¹⁵ The ‘consumptive’ look consequently became an ideal of feminine beauty, which prescribed a pale, almost translucent skin, feverish eyes and an emaciated body.¹⁶ This sort of idealization went hand in hand with an eroticization of the dead female, the ultimate object of male fantasy. As Dijkstra has noted, her total passivity enlarged her ‘erotic potential’.¹⁷ An almost necrophilic interest was thus taken into the bodies of lifeless females in nineteenth century Western art, as both Cohen and Downing have also indicated,¹⁸ a morbid fascination that also surfaced in the Victorian iconography, and which, from a feminist perspective, can be seen to stem from the obsessive, patriarchal desire to control women.

This chapter applies Bronfen’s theory of the gendered survivor-complex to the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning. It studies three main themes, namely: the eroticization of the drowned woman, the male artist as positioned as the survivor, and issues of (male) spectatorship. For each theme, iconographic case-studies are selected. The first section will look at the popular poem ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ (1844) by Thomas Hood, a poem that is often said to have initiated the Victorian trend of eroticizing the figure of the drowned woman. The second section takes John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851) as a case-study and investigates in what way nineteenth century artists could be seen to evoke female death to assert their own immortality or superiority, as Bronfen has argued. It seeks to add to feminist criticism that has argued that the famous Pre-Raphaelite painting inherently implies ‘a triumph of men over women’.¹⁹ Lastly, this chapter will investigate the figure of the male spectator, which was stereotypically included in Victorian artworks representing female suicide by drowning. This section will look at more popular depictions, most prominently, Lord Fitzgerald’s 1858 illustration to ‘The Bridge of Sighs’, to establish in what way the drowned woman was presented as a spectacle, on display to please particularly a male audience.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 23-24.

¹⁶ Katherine Byrne, *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 93.

¹⁷ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 58.

¹⁸ See Daniel A. Cohen, ‘The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850’, *Journal of Social History* 31.1 (1997), 277-306. and Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003)

¹⁹ Mary Bradbury, *Representations of Death: A Social Psychological Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 122.

Thomas Hood's poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' is often seen to have sparked the Victorian trend of representing the drowned and fallen woman. First published in 1844, the poem soon became immensely popular with Victorian audiences. Hood's poem follows the stereotypical narrative by describing the downfall of a woman who eventually drowns herself. The poet connects his victim to the archetypal fallen woman Ophelia by adding the epigraph 'Drown'd! drown'd!',²¹ Queen Gertrude's famous words of lamentation over the death of Ophelia taken from *Hamlet*. Even though Hood's suicide victim remains anonymous and is only referred to as 'one more unfortunate',²² Hood was inspired not only by Shakespeare's Ophelia, but also by a real woman who had tried to drown herself, namely Mary Furley. Like Margaret Moyes', Furley's case was heavily publicized in the Victorian media, and readers of the time soon recognized Furley as Hood's tragic heroine. In a fit of despair, Furley had committed infanticide, and had tried to drown herself in 1844. Her attempt was unsuccessful, as she was pulled out of the waters of the Regent's Canal and was afterwards sentenced to death by hanging.

The verdict led to outrage as particulars of her crime slowly became public, which told the heart-rending story of an ill-fated woman, whose misfortunes in life had driven her over the edge. More and more people sympathized with Furley, which led *Lloyd's Weekly* to even call for a petition that would stop court from carrying out her sentence.²³ In 'The Bridge of Sighs', Hood seems to adopt a similar position, as the poem has become famous for its tender tone towards the suicide victim. Hood's intention to evoke sympathy becomes clear by urging the reader not to think of her sins: 'Think of her mournfully / Gently and humanly, / Not of the stains of her [...] Make no deep scrutiny, / Into her mutiny'.²⁴ Moreover, Hood portrays her as a pitiful creature whom nobody was looking out for, playing on the reader's sense of responsibility. For these reasons, 'The Bridge of Sighs' can be seen to call for a more lenient approach to fallen women and female suicide victims. These sentiments caught on, as Furley was eventually sentenced to seven year's transportation, and she was thus saved from the gallows.

²⁰ Thomas Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs,' in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Hood* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1857), 1.71-72.

²¹ *Hamlet*, IV.7.160.

²² Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs,' l.1.

²³ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 51.

²⁴ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', ll. 15-22.

Hood's poem thus seems to have a socially activist undertone, striving to change the Victorian condemnation of the fallen woman. In this way, 'The Bridge of Sighs' might be seen to take a progressive stance towards women, trying to mediate in between the extreme, patriarchal views that defined women as either virtuous or fallen. However, a deeper analysis of the poem shows that it can still be linked to patriarchal ideology, especially considering in the way in which Hood chooses to idealize his drowned 'Unfortunate'. The poem has received the dubious honour to be cited as the first Victorian representation which instituted 'the paradigmatic female corpse as poetic subject'.²⁵ This may be listed as one of the reasons why Poe, who would later similarly declare the death of a beautiful woman to be the most poetic subject, greatly appreciated Hood's work.²⁶

The beautification of the corpse is a central issue to address in a feminist reading of 'The Bridge of Sighs'. Hood seems to imply that for the fallen woman, redemption is only possible through death. In the closing lines of the fourth stanza, Hood for example writes: 'All that remains of her / Now is pure womanly'.²⁷ His use of the word 'now' seems to indicate that only in death the woman's sins can be forgiven and she once again becomes purified. These sentiments also return in his emphasis that 'Death has left on her / Only the beautiful'.²⁸ The water that has drowned the fallen creature has also symbolically washed away her sins, and has left her corpse as pure and virtuous as before her fall. The reverend Horsley condemned this idealized portrayal of suicide and specifically referred to Hood's poem: 'the sentimental glamour thrown over suicide [...] has had an evil result [...] I distinctly assert, for example, my belief that the poem of T. Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', written with the sole object of evoking charity for the despised, has yet, [...] tinged suicide with a halo of romance'.²⁹ Horsley implies that Hood's idealization of self-destruction has led to higher suicide rates, 'an evil result', as the poem seems to suggest that death is the only respectable way out for fallen women. Its tender tone towards the victim does not disguise that underlying message.

Not only does 'The Bridge of Sighs' idealize female suicide, it also eroticizes the corpse of the drowned woman. The poem comments on the victim's fairness and her slender

²⁵ Anne Jamison, *Poetics en Passant: Redefining the Relationship between Victorian and Modern Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 129.

²⁶ Poe called Hood in 1850 'one of the noblest, and, speaking of fancy, one of the most singularly fanciful of modern poets'. He also quoted 'The Bridge of Sighs' in full-length in this essay, complementing its 'vigor', 'pathos' and 'versification'. See: Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Poetic Principle' in Charles F. Richardson, ed., *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009), p. 185.

²⁷ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', ll. 19-20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 25-26.

²⁹ Horsley, *Jottings from Jail*, p. 251.

body, which the reader is urged to look upon, touch and take up. Many later representations of female drowning took over the erotic element by explicitly noting or showing the drowned woman's curves. Stereotypically, the bodies of drowned women in Victorian representations were wrapped in gowns that due to saturation revealed their contours. As Rhodes notes, they usually wore 'white dress[es] not unlike wedding gown[s]'.³⁰ The resemblance to a bridal gown again plays upon the theme of unrequited love. The artist thus did not have represent the drowned woman naked to be able to show off her features. In this way, the erotic element was veiled, and the representation was less likely to be considered perverse. The image of the female suicide victim is further sexualized in 'The Bridge of Sighs' when the poem notes the victim's 'poor lips [...] oozing so clammily'³¹ and the tangled hair that is floating around her head. Long, loose and disheveled hair was often interpreted in Victorian thought as an indication of 'sexual looseness [...] an equation of wild hair with wild sexuality'.³² Her haircolour, which Hood describes as a 'fair auburn',³³ completes the stereotypical image of the fallen woman, as this feature was seen to be characteristic of Victorian prostitutes or women having 'fleshly desires [...] and [a] flaming sexuality'.³⁴ The thick tresses of Hood's victim significantly have 'escaped the comb',³⁵ a clear metaphor for her fall into temptation.

Sexual desire slowly heightens in the poem, and culminates in the thirteenth stanza: 'Over the brink of it, / Picture it, - think of it, / Dissolute Man! / Lave in it, drink of it, / Then, if you can!'.³⁶ Hood uses water as a metaphor here to illustrate the excited state of the poetic speaker, who seems to be brimming or overflowing with desire. The direct address and imperative mood in these lines aims at arousing similar sentiments in the reader. Jamison has effectively argued that the intended reader (as well as the poetic voice) of this poem is male.³⁷ The survivor-complex in this poem is therefore clearly gendered. This can be assumed not only because of the poem's eroticization of the corpse, but also in the way in which it expresses the anxious desire to control the female body. This surfaces best towards the end, when the poetic speaker tells the reader to re-arrange the woman's limbs before they reach the state of rigor mortis:

³⁰ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 74.

³¹ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', ll. 29-30.

³² Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 14.

³³ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', l. 32.

³⁴ Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', in Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina, eds., *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 111.

³⁵ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', l. 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 75-79.

³⁷ Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, p. 129.

Ere her limbs frigidly
Stiffen too rigidly,
Decently, - kindly, -
Smooth and compose them:
And her eyes, close them,
Staring so blindly!³⁸

The speaker thus wishes to compose the body in a certain way that does not trouble or offend him as an spectator. Throughout the poem such anxieties intensify, surfacing for example in his repeated attempts to avoid the dead woman's gaze.³⁹

When connected to feminist theory, these anxieties can be seen to evolve from a patriarchal desire to control women. Despite the prevalent nineteenth century interpretations of female suicide as a disintegration of identity rather than a form of self-assertion, the dead body of the suicide victim is still disruptive to the speaker in this poem. She needs to be revised by male hand (i.e. composed and beautified, made into an artwork), a final act of control through which the poetic male speaker asserts his superiority. This kind of revision completely strips the woman's suicide of any remaining element of autonomy,⁴⁰ as her death no longer carries her own signature, but that of the male poet and artist. Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs' therefore has not only been influential for its eroticization of the drowned woman and instituting her corpse as the paradigmatic poetic subject, it can also be seen to indicate a male assertion of power over the dead woman's body, a theme more elaborately explored in the next section.

Portraits of perfection

Thomas Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs' sparked a great interest in the theme of female suicide by drowning. Due to its popularity, it was reprinted frequently,⁴¹ alongside illustrations made by eminent Victorian artists, such as John Everett Millais. Millais provided the accompanying image to the poem in the edition *Passages of the Poems of Thomas Hood* (1858), depicting a woman gazing at the quivering lights reflected in the waters of the

³⁸ Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', ll. 84-89.

³⁹ Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, p. 131.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴¹ Victor Shea and William Whitla, *Victorian Literature: An Anthology* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), p. 219.



Figure 7: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*

Thames, contemplating death. This was, however, not the first time that the Pre-Raphaelite artist addressed the theme of female suicide by drowning. Millais had already caused sensation years before with his iconic painting *Ophelia* (1851) (Figure 7) which could be seen as one of the most emblematic images in the iconography that Hood had initiated.⁴² Not only its subject matter was similar to the 'Bridge of Sighs', but also the way in which it imagined female suicide. When interpreted from a feminist perspective, Millais's *Ophelia* also plays upon themes of male spectator and survivorship. Though it has been noted that the painter himself saw 'the portrayal of women at her best' as one of the aims of his art, and intended to 'to do justice to woman',⁴³ his *Ophelia* can be seen to fit within patriarchal ideology of the time.

Millais broke with Victorian tradition in his depiction of Ophelia, as he chose to paint her in her final moments, after her fall or jump. Other artists of the period who painted the Shakespearean heroine, such as Arthur Hughes and Richard Redgrave, had predominantly depicted her just before her fatal plunge, idly throwing her flowers into the water that would

⁴² Shea and Whitla, *Victorian Literature*, p. 219.

⁴³ John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), p. 147.

finally consume herself.⁴⁴ Such conventional images thus favored foreshadowing Ophelia's tragic fate over actually showing her death by drowning. Millais's departure from this mode of representation can be seen to stem in morbid fascination with female death, and the patriarchal cult of invalidism. Dijkstra has noted how nineteenth century representations of the weightless or floating woman can be read to imply 'her willing – or helpless - submission'.⁴⁵ Millais's Ophelia, floating on her back, with her hand-palms facing upwards, becomes a classic emblem of feminine passivity.⁴⁶

Not only Millais's choice to represent Ophelia in the midst of drowning deviated from conventional images of the Shakespearean character at the time. Traditionally, such depictions focused on Ophelia's naivety and innocence.⁴⁷ Millais, however, transformed this virtuous Ophelia into a 'sensuous siren',⁴⁸ much after the French fashion.⁴⁹ The painter focused on a specific moment of Ophelia's death-scene, corresponding with the famous lines: 'Her clothes spread wide, / And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up'.⁵⁰ These lines were often cut from Gertrude's famous monologue in Victorian productions of *Hamlet*, because of their explicit sexual imagery.⁵¹ By envisioning this particular moment, Millais defied convention and turned to an eroticized representation of the dying Ophelia. He painted her with her lips half-open, which could be taken as a literal interpretation of Shakespeare's text, as Ophelia dies singing, or as a way of dramatizing her suspension between life and death, showing her final exhalation, the instant when the soul is said to leave its bodily form behind. In each case, it also 'invites an erotic reading',⁵² and therefore fits in Millais's conception of Ophelia as sensuous and transgressive. Millais's *Ophelia* is thus not dissimilar to Hood's poem in its eroticization of the dying (or dead) female body.

Millais's artwork thus stood out when displayed alongside other 'conventional' images of Ophelia at the 1852 exhibition at the Royal Academy. One of the debates it caused leads us to other issues that have tied the painting to patriarchal ideology. Most of the commentators at the time revered Millais's portrayal of nature, as it was deemed 'one of the most marvelously

⁴⁴ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 89

⁴⁵ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Albert Boime, *Art in the Age of Civil Struggle, 1848-1871* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 279.

⁴⁷ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 89.

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia', p. 81.

⁴⁹ Early nineteenth century French artists like Delacroix had interpreted the figure of Ophelia as a symbol of erotic awakening. See Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 282.

⁵⁰ *Hamlet*, IV.7.145-146.

⁵¹ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

and completely accurate and elaborate studies of Nature ever made by the hand of man'.⁵³ Millais spent many laborious hours painting the lush vegetation of the scene, and only when his background was finished did he put in his flower-bedecked, floating Ophelia.⁵⁴ Though his elaborate detail to the natural surroundings was praised by many, it has also troubled the reception of his artwork, as it has been seen to overshadow the actual theme of the painting, the tragic death of Ophelia.

One anonymous review in the *London Times* in 1852 already hints at this, seeming to question Millais's character when writing that 'there must be something strangely perverse in the imagination which sources Ophelia in a weedy ditch, and robs the drowning struggle of that love-lorn maiden of all pathos [...] while it studie[s] every petal of the darnel'.⁵⁵ Such critiques found strong opposition at the time. A reviewer of *Punch* magazine, writing in the same year, did not seem to be bothered by the idea that the viewer's attention was drawn more to the surroundings than the suffering of Ophelia: 'Talk as you like [...] about the needless elaboration of those water mosses and the over making-out of the rose-leaves [...] I am fain to turn from the face of the mad girl to the natural loveliness that makes her dying beautiful'.⁵⁶ Feminist criticism of Millais's *Ophelia*, however, has echoed sentiments that bear resemblance to those found in the 1852 review in the *London Times*. Showalter, for example, has famously voiced her opinion on the unsettling aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite artwork, arguing that:

T]he artist rather than the subject dominates the scene. The division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object; and the painting has such a hard surface, strangely flattened perspective, and brilliant light that it seems cruelly indifferent to the woman's death.⁵⁷

Rhodes has similarly noted the way in which Millais 'veil[ed] the emotional significance of Ophelia's death with a profuse veneer of detail, [thereby] privileg[ing] surface effect over content and divest[ing] the literary heroine of her traditional emotive impact'.⁵⁸

Such readings thus emphasize that essentially *Ophelia* can be seen as a display of the male artist's (and survivor's) artistry and mastery, which consequently neglects or even effaces the female suffering in the painting. Bronfen has also discussed the way in which such

⁵³ Millais, *The Life and Letters*, p. 145.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁵ 'Fine Arts – The Royal Academy', *The London Times*, 1 May 1852, p. 8.

⁵⁶ 'Our Critic' Among the Pictures', *Punch*, 22 May 1852, pp. 216-217.

⁵⁷ Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia', p. 81.

⁵⁸ Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture*, p. 90.

images can be seen as asserting male artistry, evoking feelings of superiority and even immortality. Though not writing specifically about Millais's *Ophelia*,⁵⁹ her words nevertheless resonate with feminist interpretations of the Pre-Raphaelite painting, when arguing that such images imply:

[A]n expropriation of the feminine body, a reduction of this body to an object externally coded [...] [a] site of his [the artist's] prowess, his imagination, his creativity. [...] [T]he pain, the courage of the dying woman is subordinated to notions of artistic ability and aesthetic effect. This is a form of violence which stages the absence of violence, a move that allows the painter and spectator to ignore the painful battle of a dying woman. It allows a blindness towards the real by privileging the beautiful play of forms, lines, colours.⁶⁰

Exactly the absence of violence in images such as *Ophelia* can be read as violent. The artistic preference to beautify female suffering and death reduces the female victim to a mere object, with no focalization of her own, for 'it is not her [Woman's] dying, her courage, her despair which are read as the signifieds of these representations [but rather] the artist's [...] response'.⁶¹

This indifference to female suffering and/or death can be illustrated by the famous anecdote that tells of the artist's disregard for his muse when painting *Ophelia*. The Pre-Raphaelite muse Elizabeth Siddal, one of the most sought-after models of the period for her consumptive look, 'with her alabaster skin, and red hair [...] her deathlike pallor and deep, aloof gaze',⁶² modeled for Millais whilst lying in a tub filled with water, heated by candles underneath. During one sitting, the candles went out, leaving Siddal in a bath of icy cold water. Completely absorbed in his creative process, Millais failed to observe this, and Siddal rather endured than disturb his moments of artistic genius. When Siddal was finally pulled out of the water, she had nearly contracted pneumonia.⁶³ According to Kemp, this belonged to one of the many instances of 'feminine self-sacrifice for the sake of male-centered sense of art'⁶⁴ in the Victorian period. Read in the light of feminist criticism of *Ophelia*, the artist's negligent attitude towards Siddal can be drawn parallel to his subordination of Ophelia's suffering to surface effect and his aesthetics.

⁵⁹ The chapter in which Bronfen elaborates on this subject studies Ferdinand Hodler's sketches of his dying mistress Valentine Godé-Darel (1915)

⁶⁰ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, pp. 50-51.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁶² Magda Romanska, 'Necr-Ophelia: Death, Femininity and the Making of Modern Aesthetics', *Performance Research*, 10.3 (2005), 35-53. p. 36.

⁶³ Theresa D. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), p. 123.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

Millais's *Ophelia* can thus be seen as one example of how the figure of the drowned woman invaded Victorian high art in the wake of Hood's poem, as it similarly eroticizes and beautifies the dying or dead female. Her body becomes the object of male desire, a spectacle, as the proscenium-like arch framing the picture implies.⁶⁶ The painting therefore displays female dying to the real life (male) viewer, who according to Bronfen can take delight in such a representation as it arouses feelings of superiority and immortality. Spectatorship is thus an important issue to address in explaining the popularity of the figure of the drowned woman in Victorian culture. Brown supports this by noting that images of female suicide by drowning generally placed suicidal women on display, as 'the object of a masculine gaze'.⁶⁷ In Millais's *Ophelia* this works on one level, as the object (the dying Ophelia) aims at catching the eye of the real, intended spectator. In many other Victorian depictions of female suicide by drowning, however, another dimension is added as the drowned woman is not only the object of the gaze of the real spectator but also of fictional spectators, or represented characters within the artwork.

Anderson has noted that this was another stereotypical element of the iconography, that besides the spectacle of the drowned woman, a 'supporting cast of policemen, watermen, or passers-by'⁶⁸ were often incorporated in representations of female suicide. This surfaces perhaps most clearly in Abraham Solomon's *Drowned! Drowned!* (1860) (Figure 8), where a whole procession stops to behold the woman who is pulled out of the water, including fruit-sellers, watermen, a constable, and a party returning home from a masquerade ball. In Solomon's work, the spectators of female suicide by drowning are both male and female, and of different professions and classes. This could be seen as an exception, as in most Victorian images of female suicide by drowning the represented spectators are solely male. The inclusion of predominantly male bystanders could serve as an indication that such representations built specifically on a male audience. When reading the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning from a feminist perspective, the incorporation of such fictional, male onlookers needs to be addressed.

⁶⁵ This title is derived from a 1862 article in *The Saturday Review*, see Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 62.

⁶⁶ The arch was one of the stereotypical features of images of female suicide by drowning.

⁶⁷ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, p. 153.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 201.



Figure 8: Abraham Solomon, *Drowned! Drowned!*

Male spectators could function as witnesses to women's acts of despair, but more often, they were represented as the finders of the drowned female corpse. Issues of male spectatorship in relation to the discovery of a drowned female suicide victim surface perhaps best in Lord Fitzgerald's etched illustration of 'The Bridge of Sighs' (Figure 9), printed alongside the work of Millais in *Passages from the Poems of Thomas Hood* (1858). Corresponding to the first two stanzas of the poem, Fitzgerald shows the discovery of the corpse of Hood's 'unfortunate' along the banks of the river Thames. The victim is surrounded by onlookers, who, despite being from different ages and different classes (which can be concluded from looking at their dress), are all male. The female corpse is again presented as a spectacle, as she is literally in the spotlight, which the constable provides with his bulls-eye lantern. She consequently falls victim to the scrutiny of her male observers, including the two young boys on the right, who intently gaze upon the dead woman without any sign of distress.

The fascination of the beholders surrounding her can be seen to originate in feelings of desire. Bronfen has discussed in what way male observation of the inanimate female body can



Figure 9: Lord Fitzgerald, 'The Bridge of Sighs'

be traced to issues of scopophilia, or pleasure in looking. Drawing on the Freudian idea that looking is ultimately derived from touching, and that desire can be aroused by the idea of contiguity, Bronfen notes that 'gazing at the body of the dead, feminine Other serves as a form of self-touch or autoeroticism'.⁶⁹ Though only one of the bystanders in Fitzgerald's illustration actually touches the woman's lifeless body, the gaze of the other onlookers can thus also be read as another form of touching. As the passive object attracting the male gaze, the female corpse in this etching fulfills women's 'traditional exhibitionist role'.⁷⁰ In her famous essay on cinema and spectatorship, feminist critic Laura Mulvey has expanded on this

⁶⁹ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 19.

role, explaining how the act of looking can be regarded as a traditional, male privilege. The surveyor is by definition male and the surveyed object female, as Mulvey writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditionalist exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.⁷¹

Female objectification becomes complete when her dead body attracts the male eye. As Bronfen has stated, the inanimate female cannot reciprocate this gaze, and is therefore vulnerable to ‘an indefinite array of incursions, be they of a bodily or hermeneutic kind’.⁷² She suggests that the way in which the dead female is involuntary subject to such readings amounts to a form of rape.⁷³

Most Victorian artists similarly chose to centralize the sense of spectacle in their representations of female suicide by drowning, focusing on the beautification of the female corpse and dramatizing the reaction of onlookers as Fitzgerald did. Early Samaritans had warned against such depictions as they seemed to glamorize suicide by promising young girls both a reinstatement of their respectability after death as well as attention they had often craved for in their difficult lives. Few artists seemed to answer this Samaritan call and chose to represent the reaction of onlookers in more realistic way, such as William Cray, who provided the illustrations for William Stephens Hayward’s *London by Night* (1865) (Figure 10). Hayward’s popular novel tells the story of the downfall of a young girl, whose entry in London society leads to promiscuity, alcoholic addiction and, inevitably, her suicide by drowning.⁷⁴ Cray visualized her downfall in twelve hand-coloured illustrations. The tailpiece ‘Found’ shows two policemen⁷⁵ finding the corpse of the drowned heroine.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷² Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 98.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁴ L.J. Nicoletti, ‘Morbid Topographies: Placing Suicide in Victorian London’, in Lawrence Alfred Philips, ed., *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi B.V., 2007), p. 30.

⁷⁵ The figure of the constable could be seen as one of the stock-characters in Victorian representations of female suicide by drowning, stereotypically illuminating the corpse with his bulls-eye lantern. The presence of the constable in such depictions might have been influenced by the growing concern and watchfulness of the police for potential suicides throughout the nineteenth century. Anderson has noted that even in the early nineteenth century police officers were employed in suicide prevention, as patrols around notorious suicide spots such as Blackfriars Bridge belonged to their duty. In the 1870s, some officers were even especially recruited to prevent suicides and were stationed strategically alongside the Thames. See Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 355-356.

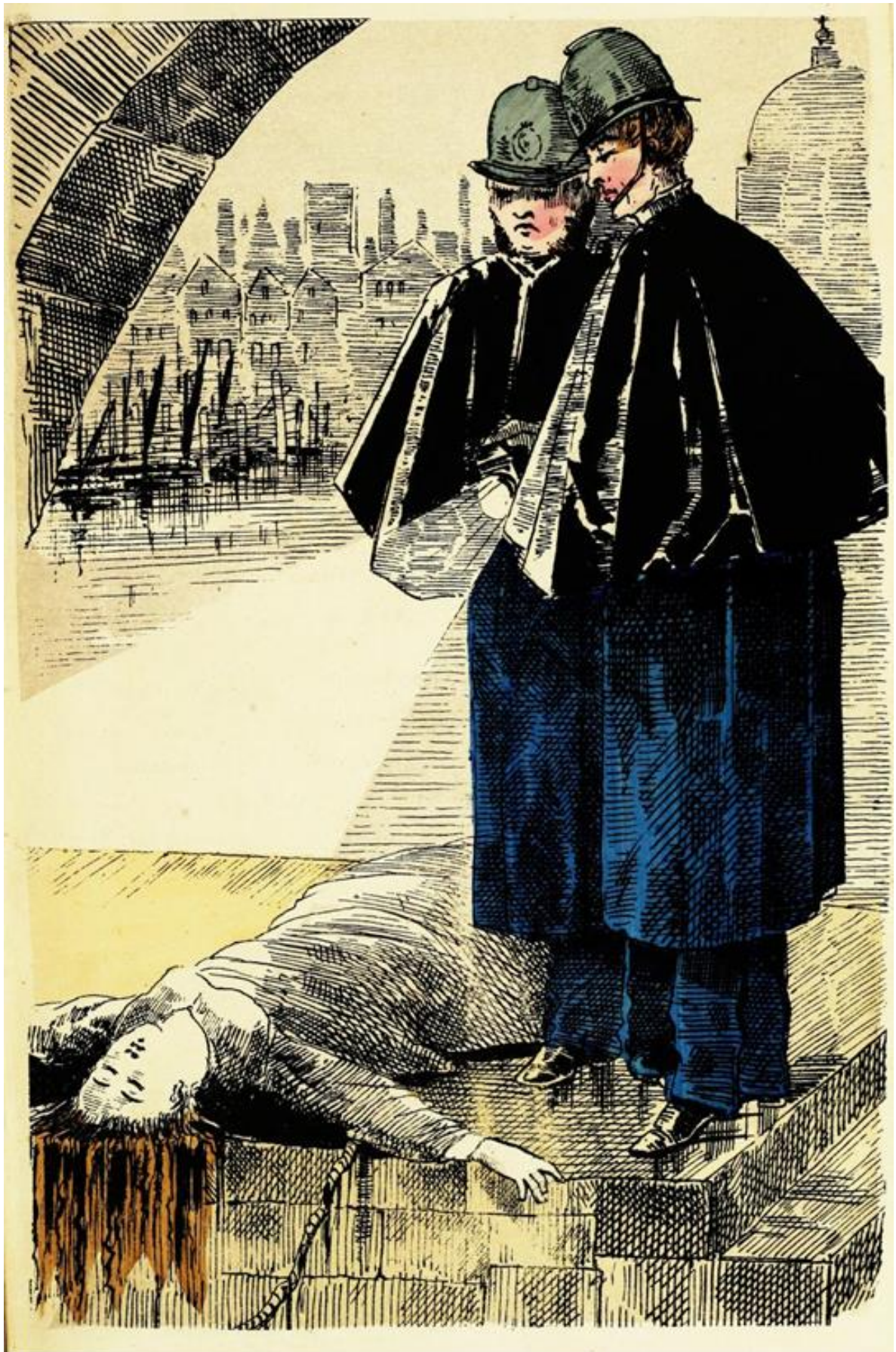


Figure 10: William Cray, 'Found'

Male spectators of female suicide were usually represented to be captivated by the body of the drowned woman, which inspired mixed feelings of awe and desire. In Cray's 'Found', on the contrary, the attitude of the constables towards the suicide victim seems almost indifferent. Their tall, erect posture contrasts heavily with the cut down, horizontally positioned dead woman. They do not kneel down to check her pulse, and seem to refrain from making any physical contact, standing passively alongside her dead body.⁷⁶ The indifference of the policemen strips the woman's suicide of its sentimental glamour. By deviating from the stereotypical reaction of onlookers, Cray removes the element of glorification and exposes female suicide as something to be condemned and denounced rather than idealized.

Moreover, it can be seen to convey a social realist message by focusing on the passive attitude of official authority, playing upon the viewer's sense of responsibility, as did Hayward's text: 'Why was there no one to clasp his strong arms around her neck [...] to draw her away from the fatal brink [...] Ah well! It was only – 'one more unfortunate'!'⁷⁷ The last part of this quotation shows a disturbing lack of interest or care, something that thus also surfaces in Cray's drawing of the scene. Other artists used similar strategies, such as the Russian realist painter Vasily Perov, who could be seen to respond to romanticized, British portrayals of female suicide by drowning with his *The Drowned Woman* (1867) (Figure 11). Gray has observed how Perov was familiar with the British iconography, in particular Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs'.⁷⁸ In his painting *The Drowned Woman*, a constable casually smokes his pipe next to a female body he has just dragged out of the river. The passive and detached attitude of the police officer points out public disengagement and creates an alienating effect that again plays upon the viewer's sense of responsibility.⁷⁹

The inclusion of the male spectator in Victorian representations of female suicide by drowning can be read as an indication that these images were especially targeting a male audience. According to Bronfen, the perception of the represented survivor(s) guides the viewer's interpretation of the artwork. Whereas the female corpse is the thematic subject, the survivor, who is by implication male, functions as the internal focaliser.⁸⁰ The woman is dead, and is therefore silenced and reduced to a mere object. Her Otherness no longer poses a threat

⁷⁶ According to Nicoletti, this passive attitude of onlookers was characteristic in representations of female suicide by drowning, noting that they very rarely showed attempts at resuscitation, even though this was standard procedure throughout the nineteenth century. See L.J. Nicoletti, 'Downward Mobility' <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2004/nicoletti.html>> [accessed 21 January 2016]

⁷⁷ William Stephens Hayward, *London by Night* (London: William Oliver, 1865), pp. 175-176.

⁷⁸ Rosalind P. Gray, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 174.

⁷⁹ David Clarke, *Water and Art: A Cross-cultural Study of Water as Subject and Medium in Modern and Contemporary Artistic Practice* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 52.

⁸⁰ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 5.



Figure 11: Vasily Perov, *The Drowned Woman*

to male order, as in this state, she can be fully controlled. The male assertion of power over the woman's dead body can be seen to rouse feelings of superiority and immortality (the survivor-complex), and leads to issues of scopophilia. In the romanticized and sexualized portrayals of female suicide discussed in this chapter, this visibly shows. But also the more realist representations by Cray and Perov can be linked to Bronfen's theories about the nineteenth century male survivor-complex, as they strictly place death with the female (the gendered Other) and thus away from the male self. By reading some emblematic works belonging to the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning from a feminist point of view, this chapter has considered the ways in which this iconography can be linked to patriarchal anxieties and the suppression of women. However, it has predominantly looked at visual examples, with the exception of Hood's poem. The iconography also strongly influenced the novel-genre, a relation which will be considered in the next two chapters.

4

Resuscitations

The downfall of the fallen woman was not only visualized in Victorian culture, her story of seduction, degradation, and eventually suicide was retold again and again in literature of the period. Mothersole has rightfully defined her figure as a nineteenth century stock-character, featuring in many great literary works of the time.¹ Despite some contemporary claims that a woman's fall into temptation was an 'unfit subject for fiction',² novelists nevertheless kept on using this theme in their works. The popular narrative, which focused on the fallen woman's hardships and her inevitable death by suicide, has been connected in feminist readings to patriarchal ideology, as it can be seen to warn women for the consequences of sexual transgression and keep them to adhere to the propagated feminine ideal.³ However, not all writers chose to follow the stereotypical story-line. Rogers has noted that some authors, though deploying the narrative, sought to challenge and/or transform it, thereby 'offering alternative models for imagining the fallen woman's trajectory in less fatalistic ways'.⁴ This chapter will look at two novels that seem to deviate in this way from the popular narrative, namely Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). Both authors allow their fallen heroine to live on after the moment of crisis, the contemplation of suicide. This chapter will consider these alternative endings from a feminist perspective, in order to establish to what extent these literary works break from the patriarchal tradition that prescribed a punitive ending (suicide by drowning) for the fallen woman, and in what way(s) they still adhere to it.

Charles Dickens

Although many Victorian novelists sent off their fictional characters to a watery grave,

¹ Brenda Mothersole, 'The Fallen Woman' in the Victorian Novel', in John Morris, ed., *Exploring Stereotyped Images in Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), p. 193.

² Ibid., p. 193.

³ Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 49.

⁴ Scott Rogers, 'Transforming the Fallen Woman in Adelaide Anne Procter's 'A Legend of Provence'', in Bianca Tredennick, eds., *Victorian Transformations: Genre, Nationalism and Desire in Nineteenth Century Literature* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), p. 152.

no one seemed to enjoy drowning his characters as much as Charles Dickens did. Every single one of his fourteen fully completed novels can be seen to play upon the theme of drowning,⁵ and it also featured in many of his short stories. Dickens thus seemed to share the Victorian fascination with death by water. However, Dickens strongly deviated from the iconographic tradition as drowning was not gendered as a feminine death in his works, but as a masculine one. Cregan-Reid has observed that of all the Dickensian characters that find death in water, none are female.⁶ Some of his female characters, however, do come very close to the brink, such as Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Meg in *The Chimes* (1844). Both these fictional women could be classified as fallen, and in these cases Dickens already seems to defy the conventional narrative constructed around the stereotype of the fallen woman by choosing alternative endings to their lives.

This section, however, will take his later novel *David Copperfield* (1850) as a case-study, which has been defined as the ‘wettest novel’⁷ in his oeuvre. Indeed, the novel is ‘drenched’ with mentions of occurrences of drowning (dead relatives of the Peggotty family), repeated use of water imagery (especially in the narrator’s figurative language⁸) and other metaphors (dying is for example described as ‘going out with the tide’⁹). On the very first page of the novel, moreover, such associations also surface when the reader learns that the eponymous protagonist was born with a caul. Superstitious beliefs held the caul as a talisman against drowning in Victorian times,¹⁰ and it was often sold to the highest bidder. In Dickens’ novel this is an old woman who indeed never drowned but, as the narrator comically adds, also never came near water in her life.¹¹ Though many of Dickens’ fallen female characters thus do come dangerously close to the water’s edge, they seem to enjoy a similar protection.

In *David Copperfield*, Dickens plays upon the stereotypical narrative of the fallen woman with the characters of Martha Endell and little Em’ly. Though the reader only meets Martha after her fall, Dickens introduces Em’ly early on in the novel. In the passages in which he describes the blossoming of a childhood romance between David and Em’ly, Dickens

⁵ Vybarr Cregan-Reid, ‘Drowning in Early Dickens’, *Textual Practice*, 19.1 (2005), 71-93. p. 71.

⁶ Vybarr Cregan-Reid, ‘Bodies, Boundaries and Queer Waters: Drowning and Prosopopoeia in Later Dickens’, *Critical Survey*, 17.2 (2005), 21-33. p. 21.

⁷ Cregan-Reid, ‘Bodies, Boundaries and Queer Waters’, p. 24.

⁸ David uses water several times as a metaphor; for example when describing the recollection of the events he writes of (‘Events of later date have floated from me to the shore where all forgotten things will reappear’ (115)) and when comparing the course of his life to ‘the silent gliding on [...] [of] flowing water’ (229). See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992)

⁹ Ibid., p. 379.

¹⁰ Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 142.

¹¹ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp. 6-7.

already seems to hint at her fate. In these first descriptions of Em'ly, he focuses on her beauty and naivety, two aspects that would cement her status as an angel if not dangerously combined with her aspirations to become a lady. Though these wishes stem from a desire to aid her uncle rather than from selfish ambition, it can still be marked as a tragic flaw. Dickens early on exposes the vulnerability of Em'ly, which was likely to be picked up by Victorian readers well aware of what fate would await young, beautiful women who were susceptible to the charm of seducers. Not only does Dickens foreshadow her fall, he similarly seems to play upon the reader's expectations by implying that Em'ly, just like many other fictional heroines at the time, is doomed to drown.

In their first stroll on the beach, Em'ly tells David of her fear of the ocean, remembering how it pulled her father and many other fishermen to its depths.¹² Yet her fears seem to be subordinate to an underlying fascination, as her repeated returns to this subject in her conversation with David indicate. Her uncle confirms this later by noting that as a child, 'she used to talk to [him] a deal about the sea'.¹³ David also observes that Em'ly's fear of the ocean is outweighed by a fascination that leads her to provoke its waters, as becomes clear in her reckless behaviour on the beach:

I [David] added: 'You don't seem to be [afraid of sea] [...] though you say you are'; for she [Em'ly] was walking much too near the brink [...] and I was afraid of her falling over. [...] She started from my side, and ran along a jagged timber which protruded from the place we stood upon, and overhung the deep water at some height, without the least defence. The incident is so impressed in on my remembrance, that if I were a draughtsman I could draw its form here, I dare say, accurately as it was that day, and little Em'ly springing forward to her destruction (as it appeared to me), with a look that I have never forgotten, directed far out to sea.¹⁴

David emphasizes the pictorial quality of the scene, which was captured by Dickens' original illustrator H.K. Browne or Phiz. Though Phiz's drawing (Figure 12) differs from Dickens' text in several ways, as he chose to represent Em'ly sitting alone on the sands, he does make her look longingly at the sea, following David's description. This frontispiece can be placed within the iconographic tradition that stereotypically situated women on shorelines or embankments, gazing intently on the waters in contemplation of suicide.¹⁵ Em'ly's

¹² Ibid., p. 34.

¹³ Ibid., p. 496.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵ Some examples hereof are John Everett Millais's *The Bridge of Sighs* (1858), Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present* (1858), and Thomas Graham's *Alone in London* (1894).



Figure 12: Hablot K. Browne 'Phiz', 'Vignette Title-Page'

fascination with water, both showing in David's description and Phiz's drawing, can be read as an indication that she will eventually drown herself.

Dickens however employs another strategy to presage such an ending for Em'ly. The retrospective narration of David allows Dickens to build tension by foreshadowing that tragedy would inevitably befall the young girl. This surfaces best in David's contemplation of Em'ly's fate after her reckless stunts at the beach. He asks himself whether it would have been better if 'the waters [would have] close[d] above her head that morning'.¹⁶ His affirmative answer to this question heightens the suspense in the story. By using this strategy and presenting Em'ly as a beautiful young girl, with a vulnerability to (sexual) advances and a fascination with water, the author seems to raise his reader's expectations by appearing to retell the stereotypical narrative of the fallen woman. Dickens does so to some extent, as Em'ly is seduced by James Steerforth, and elopes with him. Yet despite her fall, Em'ly lives

¹⁶ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 36.

and is towards the end of the novel restored. One of her letters shows she has thought about suicide ('If I was fit, I would be so glad to die!'¹⁷), yet there is no indication in the novel that she made such attempts.

Though many other characters in the novel comically refer to suicide,¹⁸ Em'ly's counterpart Martha, however, is the only one who makes a serious attempt. In the search to restore Em'ly, Mr. Peggotty and David turn to the help of her childhood friend Martha, who long before Em'ly fell into temptation. They encounter Martha at the critical moment, as she is just about to wade into the Thames and drown herself. Phiz chose this moment for his illustration 'The River' (Figure 13), which again in many ways adheres to the iconographic tradition of portraying female suicide by drowning. Martha's attraction to the water (surfacing in her fixed gaze as well as in the way her body seems to be falling or pulled towards it), the bridge that overarches the scene, and the male onlookers (David and Mr. Peggotty) can all be seen as elements that respond to that tradition. The image can also be drawn parallel to the novel's frontispiece, as it can be read to portray a later moment in the life of the young girl sitting on the beach.

Phiz dramatizes the moment by placing David and Mr. Peggotty at a considerable distance, thereby creating more suspense whether or not Martha will be saved. Alexander notes that the distance as well as the passive stance of the men (one seeking support of the rail and the other hesitating, only starting to take action) implies that Martha's fate is sealed, and their help will come too late.¹⁹ This is a departure from the text, in which Martha does not seem to be in acute danger as the men are in reaching distance of her. Phiz's dramatization of the scene moreover, turns Martha's suicide attempt into a spectacle, something that David also hints at: 'The way in which she [Martha] stood, almost within the cavernous shadow of the iron bridge, looking at the lights crookedly reflected in the strong tide, inspired a dread within me'.²⁰ Though the illustration freezes this moment and seems to imply that David and Mr. Peggotty will be no different from the stereotypical, awe-struck spectator discussed in Chapter 3, the text goes on to tell the reader how they pull Martha safely away from the brink. There is thus an important discrepancy between these two representations. Phiz's drawing

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 500.

¹⁸ Different characters in the novel refer in a melodramatic and comical way to suicide, most notably Mr Micawber, who repeatedly claims to kill himself because of his financial troubles (See *David Copperfield*, pp. 139, 227-229, 605) but also David himself, who refers to it most often in a romantic context (Ibid., pp. 36, 416, 692). Samaritans such as Radcliffe (chapter 1) would probably have denounced the novel for its views on self-murder.

¹⁹ Alexander, 'Hearts as Innocent as Hers', p. 73.

²⁰ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 580.



Figure 13: Hablot K. Browne 'Phiz', 'The River'

seems to communicate to the viewer that Martha is lost, and will fulfill the fallen woman's fate by drowning herself. It thereby corresponds to the iconographic tradition. Dickens' text, however, does not, as it describes how Martha is eventually saved.

Contrary to what the reader might expect, both Em'ly and Martha survive. This is an important deviation from the conventional storyline of the fallen woman. Towards the end of the novel they are restored and leave the country to find happiness overseas. These alternative endings could be read to communicate that not all fallen women seeking redemption should resort to suicide, presenting the possibility of rehabilitation. Dickens did not only aim at spreading this message through his fiction; he was also actively involved in supporting this cause. Dickens had already attempted to engage the public into sympathizing with the fallen woman in 1844, when he entered the debate about Mary Furley, Hood's inspiration for 'The Bridge of Sighs', and joined the protest against her death sentence.²¹ He opposed the idea that her case was an example of how the poor resorted to attempted suicide in order to get media

²¹ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p. 51.

attention and charitable aid, sentiments that were promoted by London politician Sir Peter Laurie.²² Laurie had argued that those who attempted self-murder should face severe punishment. Dickens satirized the politician in his short story *The Chimes*, in the character of Alderman Cute, who tells fallen woman Meg: ‘[I]f you attempt, [...] to drown yourself, [...] I’ll have no pity for you, for I have made up my mind to Put all suicide Down!’²³ Through his satire of Laurie and his focus on the plight of Meg, Dickens aimed at arousing sympathy for the figure of the fallen woman.

In 1846, he was approached by the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, who pitched the idea to establish an institute where troubled girls in need of guidance could turn to. This home, named Urania Cottage, would be realized in 1847, and Dickens played a major part in its creation. He hoped to redeem fallen women and save them from lifelong misery or premature death, caused either by poverty, illness, ‘or [their] own maddened hand’.²⁴ He promised girls ‘not the chance, but the certainty’²⁵ of rising out of their position if only they themselves were devoted to better their life. The Urania project thus advocated a progressive stance towards fallen women, which was revolutionary for its time. It challenged the prevalent ideas that a girl was lost once she had fallen, as contemporaries had observed: ‘Rising is a thing unknown. It cannot be. It is all descent’.²⁶ The first novel Dickens started on in his years at Urania Cottage was *David Copperfield*. Hartley has examined how strongly Dickens’ experiences there have influenced the writing of the novel.²⁷ Especially his conception of little Em’ly can be read in the light of his activist stance. When still in the writing process, he had written that he ‘hope[d], in the history of Little Em’ly (who *must* fall – there is no hope for her) to put it [the fallen woman narrative] before the thoughts of people, in a new and pathetic way, and perhaps to do some good’.²⁸

Slater has observed that Dickens implies that Em’ly’s fall is brought about by daughterly devotion,²⁹ as her aspirations to become a lady stem from a desire to help her adopted father. This is what makes her fall tragic rather than condemnable. Dickens also

²² Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 101.

²³ Charles Dickens, *The Chimes: A Goblin Story* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1844), p. 44.

²⁴ Charles Dickens, ‘An Appeal to Fallen Women’, in Jenny Hartley, ed., *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 187.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁶ Wardlaw, *Lectures on Female Prostitution*, p. 57.

²⁷ She for example argues that the character of Martha was modeled on one of the Urania inmates, see Jenny Hartley, *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2008), p. 80.

²⁸ *The Letters of Charles Dickens: 1847-1849*, eds., Graham Storey and K.J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 682.

²⁹ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1983), p. 346.

describes in great detail the taunts to which fallen women such as Martha and Em'ly were subject to. Martha's suicide attempt, for example, can be seen to be caused by this treatment, having eradicated any sense of self-worth, as her appeal to Mr. Peggotty demonstrates: 'Stamp upon me, kill me! [...] Throw me away, as all the world does. Kill me for being what I am'.³⁰ Standing aside the Thames, she draws an analogy between her own contamination (or fall into sin) and the river's polluted waters: 'I know it's like me! [...] I know I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am!'³¹ Martha feels she can only find her place in the river that absorbs and carries away all the city's refuse, to which she, as an outcast to society also belongs. Her repeated use of 'I know' in drawing this analogy can be read to indicate to what extent her degradation has been imprinted on her mind by society's contempt for the fallen. Dickens employs his realist style in this scene as well to divest Martha's near-drowning of any sentimental glamour.³²

Dickens exposes the cruelty which faced fallen women most memorably in the scene when Em'ly is confronted by Rosa Dartle. The latter's death-wishes indicate how many fallen women were driven to committing suicide:

Hide yourself, [...] if not at home – somewhere. Let it be somewhere beyond reach; in some obscure life – or, better still, in some obscure death. [...] [D]ie! There are doorways and dust-heaps for such deaths, and such despair – find one, and take your flight to Heaven!³³

This excerpt is indicative of the way in which death or suicide was seen as the only acceptable escape for the fallen woman. The fact that Em'ly is taunted so viciously by one of her own sex added for Dickens more shock value, as Slater has noted: 'It is a mark of real evil for Dickens when a woman shows no sympathy, or even downright hostility, towards 'fallen' members of her own sex'.³⁴ In 1861, Dickens would be stunned to meet a real life Rosa Dartle when he witnessed the discovery of a drowned woman in Regent's Park. It is worth quoting a large part of Dickens' recollection of this event as it also returns to issues of spectatorship addressed in the previous chapter:

³⁰ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 582.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

³² Many depictions of female suicide had represented drowning as a form of baptism, offering purification and redemption to the fallen woman. The waters at Martha's feet, however, are far from pure or limpid.

³³ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp. 612-613.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

The driver and park-keeper were looking over the bridge parapet. Looking over too, I saw, lying on the towing-path with her face turned up towards us, a woman, dead a day or two [...] The policeman who had just got her out, and the passing costermonger who had helped him, were standing near the body: the latter with that stare at it which I have likened to being at a waxwork exhibition without catalogue; the former, looking over his stock, with professional stiffness and coolness, in the direction in which the bearers he had sent for were expected [...] A barge came up, [...] and a woman steered it. The man with the horse that towed it, cared so little for the body, that the stumbling hoofs had been among the hair, and the tow-rope had caught and turned the head, before our cry of horror took him to the bridle. At which sound the steering woman looked up at us on the bridge, with contempt unutterable, and then looking down at the body with a similar expression [...] [She] steered a spurning streak of mud at it, and passed on.³⁵

This excerpt can be seen to have a similar purpose as the social realist depictions considered in the previous chapter, as Dickens emphasizes the indifferent attitudes of male onlookers, as well as the cruelty of the woman present at the scene. One could well imagine that Miss Dartle would respond in a similar way if Em'ly drowned herself. Her six-page long torture of Em'ly towards the end of the novel can be seen as the culmination of Dickens' efforts to evoke sympathy for the fallen woman. It seems as if he aimed at guiding the reader through a similar experience as Mr. Peggotty, whom in the beginning treats Martha with contempt but eventually tells her 'God forbid as I should judge you! [...] You doesn't know half the change that's come, in course of time, upon me!'³⁶

One last element that should be addressed is Dickens' representation of the figure of the seducer in *David Copperfield*. Dickens seems to use the character of James Steerforth to reflect on the Victorian double standard, the different standards of chastity for the two sexes: whereas men could freely enjoy their debauchery, women could suffer lifelong consequences. Steerforth, however, does receive his punishment at the end of the novel. His shipwreck amongst 'the ruins of the home he had wronged',³⁷ MacDonald has convincingly claimed, 'figures his death as punishment for his past sins'.³⁸ Dickens seems to reverse the ending of the stereotypical narrative, as the fallen women continue to live and the seducer dies, ironically enough, by drowning. However, the description of Steerforth's death differs greatly from iconographic representations of female suicide, which often emphasized the passivity,

³⁵ Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1898), pp. 226-227.

³⁶ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 582.

³⁷ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 675.

³⁸ Tara MacDonald, *The New Man, Masculinity and Marriage in the Victorian Novel* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 41.

and thus femininity of drowning. The storm that shipwrecks Steerforth has elements of the sublime to it which turn his drowning into a violent, and thus 'masculine' death: '[T]he high watery walls came rolling in, and at their highest, tumbled into surf, they looked as if the least would engulf the town'.³⁹ This stands in stark contrast with Dickens' representation of the near-drowning of Martha, who is about to wade into the waters of the Thames and let herself passively submerge.

There is, however, one link that can be drawn between Steerforth's death and the iconographic tradition of representing the drowned woman, as his dead body becomes similarly the site of erotic desire. Many critics have discussed David's infatuation with Steerforth, and have read this as an erotic fixation.⁴⁰ Especially in David's years at Salem House this surfaces:

I thought of him [Steerforth] very much after I went to bed, and raised myself, I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight, with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining easily on his arm. He was a person of great power in my eyes: that was ofcourse the reason my mind was running on him.⁴¹

This last sentence indicates that David does not fully understand his fascination himself and is in need of an explanation, finding comfort in the idea that it originates in mere admiration. However, there are different hints throughout the novel that support a homoerotic reading.⁴² When David goes out to see Steerforth's body that is pulled out of the water, it is remarkably positioned in the same way as he used to sleep at school. Schlicke has noted that the 'erotic element [is] still latent in David's gaze'⁴³ when seeing the corpse.

David's infatuation with Steerforth also clouds his judgment, as he still 'think[s] of [him] at [his] best',⁴⁴ after his death, despite the misery he caused in the Peggotty family. This response indicates Steerforth's power over the mind of David and others, which in the novel is early observed by schoolteacher Mr. Mell.⁴⁵ It seems that his death by drowning offers Steerforth some sort of redemption in David's view. This is problematic to the reader, who does not remain under Steerforth's spell after having seen his true colours.

³⁹ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 670.

⁴⁰ See for example, Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007)

⁴¹ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 79.

⁴² David's fast-beating heart, for example, when seeing Steerforth (Ibid., p. 247). For more in-depth analysis of David's affection for Steerforth see Oulton, *Romantic Friendship*

⁴³ Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens: Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 534.

⁴⁴ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 676.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

Whereas the reader might classify Steerforth along with Uriah Heep as the novel's greatest villain, he nevertheless remains a hero to David, whom is blinded by his former love for him. However, the fact that Dickens tries to evoke sympathy for Em'ly rather than for Steerforth, and allows the reader to transcend David's views of the latter, indicates how the author aims at positioning the reader to side with the fallen woman instead of the seducer.

David Copperfield plays in different ways upon the conventional narrative of the fallen woman. Especially in the storyline of Em'ly, Dickens seems to imply that her suicide by drowning is inevitable. Nevertheless, Dickens reverses the stereotypical fates of the seducer and his victim: Steerforth is drowned, and Em'ly restored. Dickens probably realized that his sympathetic portrayal of Em'ly and her restoration would be received as radical, writing that he felt 'a great hope [to be] remembered by little Em'ly, a good many years to come'.⁴⁶ Dickens deviated from the iconographic tradition which placed survivorship with the male (seducer) and death by drowning with the fallen woman. *David Copperfield* thus conveys a progressive message by communicating that fallen women were worthy of redemption, and that this was not to be found in death but through penitence. For both Em'ly and Martha, repentance leads them to a respectful, simple life overseas: Martha even marries and Em'ly devotes herself to philanthropy and the care of her uncle.

When looking from a feminist perspective to Dickens' resolution of the plot, one has to nuance this view. Hartley has observed that the novel offers emigration as a mass-solution.⁴⁷ Indeed, the scandal of Em'ly and Martha is implied to be too great to ever make them return as full members of British society. Even on the other side of the world, Martha continues to live, despite being married, 'morally segregated from the general population in an outback quarantine zone'.⁴⁸ Her happy ending thus nevertheless seems to overshadowed by her fall. Dickens also emphasized the importance of a fresh start overseas at Urania Cottage, as all young girls residing there had to prepare themselves for a new life abroad. His idea of emigration as a sole solution to their hardships was objected to by his partner Miss Coutts⁴⁹ as well as fallen women themselves, who according to Dickens 'ma[de] a fatal and decisive confusion between emigration and transportation'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *The Letters of Charles Dickens: 1850-1852*, eds., Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Jenny Hartley, *Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women*, p. 189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁵⁰ *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens: 1850-1852*, ed., Madeline House et al (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 83.

Besides promoting emigration at Urania Cottage, Dickens also put a high incentive on the prospect of marriage, another aspect that Coutts demurred.⁵¹ In his 'Appeal', he had already emphasized this, stating that the Urania women 'may become the faithful wives of honest men'.⁵² Slater has observed how 'in Dickens' view, the only really satisfactory destiny for woman, is a domestic one'.⁵³ In describing the fates of Em'ly and Martha, Dickens stays within the limits of what was acceptable for women in Victorian patriarchal society: either fulfilling the role of a wife or of a daughter. Though taking on a progressive stance with his novel, Dickens thus still adhered to patriarchal values inflicted at the time. Barickman et al have considered this split position and have noted that Dickens, as a natural beneficiary of the patriarchal system, to some extent shared its values, yet also recognized its oppressive character and was intent on changing this through both activist involvement and his fictional works.⁵⁴ Though thus far from a feminist icon, Dickens aimed at spreading a progressive message with *David Copperfield*, which was radical for its time by claiming that fallen women, such as his fictional heroines Martha and Em'ly, were worthy of redemption and being cleansed from their pasts, not by driving them to death but by giving them a second chance in life.

Elizabeth Gaskell

Charles Dickens was not alone in his efforts to redeem fallen women. In 1850, he received a letter written by fellow-novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, who inquired after his involvement at Urania Cottage, as she believed to have found a model inmate for its rehabilitation program. On a visit to a Manchester prison, Gaskell had been intrigued by the story of a sixteen-year-old seamstress called Pasley, a girl whose seduction by her doctor finally led to her commitment to a penitentiary. In her letter, Gaskell entreated Dickens to consider Pasley as a prospective candidate for Urania Cottage, emphasizing the way in which the girl 'pines to redeem herself'.⁵⁵ Dickens seemed to answer Gaskell's call, as in less than a month she wrote back to him to express her gratitude for all '[he] had done about [her] poor

⁵¹ Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 342.

⁵² 'Dickens's Letter to Fallen Women', p. 188.

⁵³ Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 335.

⁵⁴ Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.viii.

⁵⁵ *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, eds., J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 99

girl'.⁵⁶ Just like Dickens' fictional characters Em'ly and Martha, Pasley was offered a new life overseas.⁵⁷ Gaskell's role as a benefactor to Pasley has often been related to her works of fiction.⁵⁸ In the year of their acquaintance, Gaskell wrote the short story 'Lizzie Leigh' (1850), which prominently features the plight of the fallen woman. It can be linked, moreover, to her later novel *Ruth* (1853). The novel describes the attempts of a fallen woman to redeem herself, and openly questions whether she might ever be fully integrated in society again. Gaskell can be seen to both adhere to as well as deviate from the conventional fallen woman narrative in her resolution of the plot in *Ruth*, and this section sets out to establish in what ways one can read this from a feminist perspective.

The titular heroine of *Ruth* indeed shows some similarities to Pasley, the most important one being that they both work as a seamstress before their fall. In Victorian times, this was one of the most deplorable occupations for women. Needlewomen worked sixteen- to twenty-hours a day in the most dreadful circumstances, typically in dim-lit, overcrowded and unventilated rooms, and were severely underpaid.⁵⁹ The needle industry was notorious for its exploitation of female labour, which found strong opposition. Artists of the day responded to the issue, such as Thomas Hood, who wrote the poem 'The Song of the Shirt' (1843), in which he elaborated on the sufferings of seamstresses. The poem can be tied to his later work 'The Bridge of Sighs', which was also inspired by a former needlewoman, Mary Furley. This connection allows one to read 'The Song of the Shirt' as a prequel, especially when considering Anderson's observation that Victorian audiences were particularly sensitive to the plight of the seamstress, and 'to show [her] as driven to suicide was a favourite strategy for arousing and responding to public feeling'.⁶⁰

Gaskell's novel *Ruth* initially follows a similar course, as it starts by describing the dull monotony of life for its heroine, who slaves away at Mrs. Mason's with other girls until they reach '“[a] sullen indifference, which had become their feeling with regard to most events – a deadened sense of life’'.⁶¹ A distraction however appears when Mrs. Mason

⁵⁶ *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p. 100.

⁵⁷ Gaskell wrote to a friend that with the help of Miss Coutts and Dickens, she had found a couple who would sail to the Cape and were willing to look after Pasley. It remains unclear, however, if Pasley actually accompanied them on their journey.

⁵⁸ See for example, Robert E. Lougy, *Inaugural Wounds: The Shaping of Desire in Five Nineteenth Century English Narratives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 174., and Fariha Shaikh, 'Temporally out of Sync: Migration as Fiction and Philanthropy in Gaskell's Life and Works', in Lesa Scholl et al., eds., *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), p. 84.

⁵⁹ Deborah Anna Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, Or Do Worse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 33.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, p. 202.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 10.

promises that the most diligent girls are allowed to attend a ball. Though not having been industrious, Mrs. Mason makes an exception for Ruth Hilton because of her appearance, which she believes to be ‘such a credit to the house’.⁶² Ruth’s beauty is what makes her stand out, or allows her ‘to have any story at all’,⁶³ and which she, once fallen, will grow to dislike. Like Cinderella, Ruth is noticed at the ball and becomes the object of Mr Bellingham’s desires, a wealthy man who can be seen to initially play the part of Prince Charming. When Ruth watches Bellingham save a young boy from drowning, the apotheosis is complete and she submits to his advances, despite her early misgivings that their involvement is not quite appropriate.

It is remarkable that besides their first meeting at the ball, Ruth and Bellingham’s most important scenes together are set near the waterside: from little Tom’s near-drowning, to their stay in the Welsh countryside, and finally, their confrontation on the Abermouth beach. Gaskell uses water imagery throughout the novel, which already surfaces in her chosen epigraph, a quotation from the sixteenth-century poet Phineas Fletcher. The poem Gaskell cites refers to the repentance of Mary Magdalene, as Fletcher describes her at Christ’s feet, weeping for her past sins. The poem plays upon themes of water, drowning and redemption, as Fletcher writes: ‘Drop, drop, slow tears! [...] Cease not, wet eyes, / For mercy to entreat [...] In your deep floods / Drown all my faults and fears;’⁶⁴ The epigraph sets the tone for the novel, which also focuses on a Magdalen figure and her struggle to redeem herself. Fletcher uses tears metaphorically not only as signs of penitence but also of purification. In this way, the poem ties in well with the novel, which also uses water figuratively.

In the first volume of *Ruth*, water is used to presage the heroine’s fall as well as her suicide attempt. Gaskell employs a similar strategy as Dickens by seeming to adhere to the conventional plot. From the start of the novel, Ruth’s love for nature is emphasized, which leads her to roam around alone in the Welsh countryside during her elopement with Bellingham. In one particular scene, she arrives at a stream which leads to a waterfall. Though the waters run high and rapidly, she is intent on crossing it and springs from stone to stone. Here Ruth reminds one of little Em’ly and her reckless behaviour on the Yarmouth beach. The scene serves a similar purpose as the earlier discussed moment in *David Copperfield*, as it aims at indicating the impending danger of falling. Halfway across, when she hesitates to take

⁶² Ibid., p. 11.

⁶³ Hilary Schorr, ‘The Plot of the Beautiful Ignoramus: *Ruth* and the Tradition of the Fallen Women’, in Regina Barreca, ed., *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 166.

⁶⁴ Phineas Fletcher, ‘A Hymn’, in J.R. Turin, ed., *The Spenser of his Age: Selected Poetry from the Works of Phineas Fletcher* (Sacramento: Arden Library, 1979), p. 46.

a big leap, Ruth is addressed by a stranger, the hunchback Thurstan Benson. He offers her his help in crossing and warns her of the dangers of falling in the deep stream. He points out Ruth's precarious position on the slippery stones, which can be read as a warning for her relationship with Bellingham, that is not yet consummated. The flow of the current, which leads straight downstream, in this light, becomes a metaphor for Ruth's potential fall. The scene also foreshadows later developments in the plot, as Benson's help to get her across presages how he will save her from drowning once she has fallen, and offer guidance through the rest of her life.

Ruth's fall, however, is inevitable. The following chapter contains a key scene of the novel, as the heroine's fate becomes sealed. Significantly, this scene is set again near water, this time a pond, which waters were of 'a blue which looked as if a black void lay behind'.⁶⁵ This is another example of how Gaskell uses water imagery to foreshadow Ruth's fall. In this passage, moreover, the author evokes the figure of the archetypal fallen woman, Shakespeare's Ophelia, in her description of Ruth. This is a different way in which Gaskell adheres to the iconographic tradition of representing the fallen woman. The Ophelia-analogy builds throughout the novel, surfacing for example in Ruth's affinity with flowers, but culminates in this particular scene. Near the pond the lovers visit grow water-lilies, which Bellingham gathers and starts to place in his companion's hair. Though Ruth 'did not think twice of this occupation',⁶⁶ the pleasure he derives from it can be read as originating in patriarchal desires to control the female body. Bellingham is the artist, and Ruth becomes his creation. Andres has noted how his act of 'painting' transforms Ruth into a spectacle,⁶⁷ and also indicates a scopophilic interest, which surfaces in the text: 'Her beauty was all [he] cared for'.⁶⁸ Bellingham urges Ruth to behold herself in the reflection of the water. Like a female Narcissus, Ruth is pleased with what she sees in the mirrored image, but feels dissociated from it. The reflection shows Bellingham's creation rather than herself, and this explains her sentiments of dissociation. Crowned with a garland of water-lilies, dressed in a white dress and wearing her hair slightly dishevelled, Ruth becomes Ophelia. Her transformation is complete, and leads up to her fall. The narrator leaves the two lovers at the pond, 'quite in

⁶⁵ Gaskell, *Ruth*, p. 61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶⁷ Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 60.

⁶⁸ Gaskell, *Ruth*, p. 61.

harmony',⁶⁹ only to resume the story when they return home. The sensuality of the scene and use of ellipsis both imply that this is the fatal moment when the heroine loses her virtue.

Like Ophelia, Ruth intends to drown herself once she learns that Bellingham has abandoned her. The temptation of the 'siren waters'⁷⁰ proves too strong and Gaskell describes Ruth's dramatic rush to the waterfall to commit suicide. She is, however, chased by Benson who eventually saves her from that fate and takes her into his house. Though the conventional narrative of the fallen woman would end with her suicide by drowning, Ruth's attempt can actually be seen as the start of the story, as only then her struggle to redeem herself, which is the novel's main focus, commences. Schorr has observed that Gaskell's deviation from the conventional plot here can be read as 'an attempt to redeem not just the woman, but the narrative itself'.⁷¹ In *David Copperfield*, the women survive their fall, yet the reader learns very little about their process of rehabilitation overseas. Gaskell chooses to centralize this plight, and more controversially, shows her heroine's struggle to redeem herself on English soil, something that the author herself even thought to be extremely difficult in her time, considering the fact that she offered Pasley a new life overseas.⁷²

In *Ruth*, Gaskell would emphasize these difficulties by emphasizing the ways in which her heroine is put to the test. She adopts a new identity, changes her appearance, nurses her illegitimate child, and starts a life of penitence, learning and religious devotion. She even becomes a governess in the family of Mr Bradshaw, who despite his 'undisguised contempt for [...] every moral error'⁷³ fails to recognize her as a fallen woman. Her secret past, however, continues to haunt her. The ultimate test comes in the form of a marriage proposal by Bellingham, offering to restore Ruth and their son's honour. Ruth refuses this chance of breaking free from her stigma, preferring her and her son's moral welfare over the restoration of their social respectability and the economic security Bellingham offers. This shows a self-respect and strength in a female character that could be perceived as radical for its time, and also troubled some contemporary critics.⁷⁴ Even when Ruth's secret is brought to light, and

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 81-82.

⁷¹ Schorr, 'The Plot of the Beautiful Ignomarus', p. 167.

⁷² Barbara Z. Thaden, *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction: Rewriting the Patriarchal Family* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 35.

⁷³ Gaskell, *Ruth*, p. 172.

⁷⁴ A critic writing for the *North British Review* in 1853 had questioned Gaskell's decision to make Ruth refuse Bellingham's proposal, calling it 'the one point of her story on which we have felt some moral doubt' (J.M. Ludlow, 'Ruth', *North British Review*, 19 (1853), 151-174. p. 162.) Gaskell contacted the author, John M. Ludlow, and wrote him that she still stood by her decision (*Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed., John Chapple & Alan Shelston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 90.

the town turns against her, Gaskell emphasizes her heroine's resilience as she becomes a nurse in the town's typhus ward, a place omitted by others because of the high risk of infection, an act through which she regains her respectability. Gaskell could have chosen this as an ending for her story, as all plot-issues are resolved. This would have voiced a strong message to her readership that there was a possibility of redemption for fallen women, even on native soil.

However, Gaskell opted to continue the story and let Ruth face her seducer once more. Ruth learns that Bellingham has contracted typhus, and volunteers to nurse him. In a cruel twist of fate, he regains his strength, while Ruth is fading, having caught his infection that will eventually kill her. Gaskell has often been criticized for this conclusion, one that 'no reader can survive without equanimity'.⁷⁵ Indeed, different contemporary readers regretted this unexpected plot-twist. Charlotte Brontë, for example, who acted as a proof-reader, commented on Gaskell's early sketch of the novel:

The sketch you give me of your work [...] seems to me very noble [...] Such a book may restore hope and energy to many who thought they had forfeited their right to both; [...] Yet – hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo. And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration. If that commands the slaying of the victim, no bystander has a right to put out his hand to stay the sacrificial knife: but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters.⁷⁶

It is unknown whether Gaskell explained her motivations to Brontë. Though being pointed at the effect of the ending on the reader, Gaskell still followed her own vision. Brontë's comments captured sentiments that would surface also in other reader's responses, such as that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who wrote: 'I am grateful to you as a woman for having treated such a subject – Was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should *die*? I had that thought of regret in closing the book'.⁷⁷ Not only women writers voiced their objection to Ruth's death. Some progressive critics reminded the author that not every fallen woman had to die, as there were success-stories of women who had been 'succoured and saved',⁷⁸ and lived respectful lives. In 1859, W.R. Greg, also demurred: '[Gaskell] has first imagined a character as pure, pious and unselfish as poet ever fancied, and described a lapse from chastity

⁷⁵ Schorr, 'The Plot of the Beautiful Ignoramus', p.

⁷⁶ *Charlotte Brontë: Selected Letters*, ed., Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 202.

⁷⁷ *Letters addressed to Mrs. Gaskell by Celebrated Contemporaries*, ed., Ross D. Waller (Manchester: John Rylands University Library, 1935), p. 42.

⁷⁸ 'Books and their Authors', *Sharpe's London Magazine* II, 1853, 125-128. p. 126.

as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given in to the world's estimate in such matters'.⁷⁹

Indeed, Gaskell's choice for this ending seems to undercut the progressive message that the novel sets out to communicate. Her 'ruthless' killing of the heroine who had proved herself time again, and had overcome so many difficulties, has been largely interpreted as a capitulation to societal pressures.⁸⁰ Gaskell can be seen to conform to the conventional narrative of the fallen woman by ending Ruth's story in this way. Especially when looking more closely at the death-bed scenes in the novel, one can clearly see how strongly Gaskell adhered to iconographic tradition in this description. Though Ruth does not die by drowning, her final moments strongly resemble those of the archetypal fallen woman, Ophelia. Ruth dies singing old childish ditties, just like Shakespeare's Ophelia.⁸¹ This likeness has been observed by critics such as Andres.⁸² However, Gaskell's representation of the dying Ruth calls to mind another particular rendition of the Shakespearean heroine, namely Millais' painting *Ophelia*. Ruth's position and aloof gaze for example evoke Millais' depiction: 'She was stretched on the bed in utter helplessness, softly gazing at vacancy with her open, unconscious eyes, from which all the depths of their meaning had fled, and all they told was of a sweet, child-like insanity'.⁸³ When her strength has failed her, and she is no longer able to sing, Ruth lies with 'her sweet lips [...] parted',⁸⁴ an aspect that was so emblematic of Millais' Ophelia.

By evoking Millais' Ophelia and resolving the plot in this way, Gaskell seems to reduce her resilient heroine in the last part of the novel to the archetypal, self-sacrificial and passive model of Victorian femininity. Feminist criticism has denounced Gaskell for this, 'condemn[ing] the moral timidity of [the author] in the face of publishers' and readers' pressures'.⁸⁵ Such critiques have linked the author's adherence to the conventional narrative by killing off her heroine to her anxieties about causing controversy. The publication of her novel *Mary Barton* in 1848 had already been met with strong disapprobation, and Gaskell feared that her new novel might provoke a similar storm of protest. This caused Gaskell great

⁷⁹ W.R. Greg, 'False Morality of Lady Novelists,' in Rohan Maitzen, *The Victorian Art of Fiction: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the Novel* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 153.

⁸⁰ Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Woman's Writing*, p. 46

⁸¹ Shakespeare describes her 'chanting snatches of old tunes' (*Hamlet*, IV.7.149)

⁸² Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, p. 62.

⁸³ Gaskell, *Ruth*, p. 361.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁸⁵ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 170.

distress whilst writing *Ruth*.⁸⁶ Such anxieties have been used to explain the novel's ending as Mothersole notes: 'Gaskell appears to lose the artistic courage to sustain the moral point she so strongly felt. Succumbing to the fear of public opinion, she allows Ruth the death of a conventional 'fallen' heroine'.⁸⁷ Despite this bow to convention, the book, with its focus on difficult themes such as seduction and illegitimacy, would inevitably cause controversy. Gaskell reported in her letters that it was a prohibited book in many households, and had even inspired book-burnings.⁸⁸ As the author, Gaskell was treated with similar contempt. It made her experience first-hand a fraction of the scorn that women such as Ruth were subject to. She wrote that she could not 'get over the hard things people said of Ruth [...] I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people'.⁸⁹ Moreover, she emphasized how 'improper' [she felt]⁹⁰ under the disapproving eyes of those in chapel.

Denouncing the novel simply for its conventional ending is, however, too easy.⁹¹ Interpreting *Ruth* from a feminist point of view is far more problematic. The heroine's decision to go and nurse her former seducer has been condemned as a sign of her submission to him, but can also be read as a mark of her moral superiority. She takes pity on a dying man and comes to his aid, even though he has ruined her life. When explaining her decision to Mr. Davis, she also emphasizes this: '[Y]ou said he was ill – and alone – how can I help caring for him?'⁹² Ruth dies as a rescuer, which infuses her with a greater power, as the reader knows Bellingham would never have made such a sacrifice for her.⁹³ There is no change in his character, even after his recovery. When visiting Ruth's corpse, he tries to buy off his guilt and is annoyed by the other common people present. There are still scopophilic desires lingering when he views her dead body, surfacing in his awe and admiration for her beauty in death. Moreover, his egoism and urge to control becomes clear by his use of possessive pronouns when leaving her, thinking: 'I wish my last remembrance of my beautiful Ruth was not mixed up with all these people'.⁹⁴

The fact that Bellingham remains the same self-centred rake makes Ruth's death even more insufferable to the reader. It gives rise to feelings of indignation that have largely fuelled

⁸⁶ *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 225.

⁸⁷ Mothersole, 'The Fallen Woman' in the Victorian Novel', p. 197.

⁸⁸ *Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, p. 223.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁹¹ Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 170.

⁹² Gaskell, *Ruth*, p. 356.

⁹³ Ruth Y. Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 112.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

the outrage over the novel's ending. The injustice has been felt so strongly that one might even wonder whether Gaskell perhaps aimed at eliciting such a response, and arouse protest against the Victorian double standard by ending her novel in this way. Despite Gaskell's unchanged portrayal of Bellingham, Ruth's self-sacrifice, however, has not been in vain, as it finally enables the acceptance of her bastard son in society, symbolized in the final scene when Mr. Bradshaw consoles Leonard at his mother's grave, as well as endowing her own figure with a saintliness that would remove her social stigma. These changes, however, only seem possible through the fallen woman's death, which, whether it is interpreted as a final punishment of her sins, or as a moral victory over her seducer, remains the crux of the novel.

Gaskell can thus be seen to adhere to as well as break with the conventional fallen woman narrative in *Ruth*, which has made feminist criticism of the novel so problematic. The author deviates from this tradition by allowing her heroine to live on after she intends to drown herself (which functions as the start of her story rather than the end). In this way, Gaskell initially seems to resist the punitive ending of the fallen woman that was propagated in the Victorian iconography. The novel, nevertheless, still concludes with the heroine's demise. Though Ruth does not drown, her death can be placed within the iconographic tradition as it evokes Millais' *Ophelia*, an image that we have seen to resonate with patriarchal ideas of feminine submission, passivity and self-sacrifice. Gaskell's representation of Ruth's death therefore severely undercuts the progressive message that the novel sets out to communicate. Though the feminist reader might be let down by Gaskell's decision to kill off her heroine and resolve the plot in a conventional manner, he/she might find some solace in the fact that the novel still openly questions an important issue of gender inequality at the time. As Langridge has noted: 'Gaskell can easily be accused of failing to deliver [...] But a side effect of Ruth's death [...] is the full revelation of the double standards that apply to men and women [...] which] was a truly progressive statement for its time and claws back some of the novel's feminist credentials'.⁹⁵

This chapter has looked at two cases of 'resuscitation', two works of fiction that initially seem to resist the conventional narrative that could be traced back to patriarchal ideology and prescribed a punitive death (specifically by drowning) for the fallen woman. Both Dickens and Gaskell can be seen to deploy this narrative in order to change it, raising their readers' expectations by appearing to retell it, but eventually transforming it from the conventional story of endless downfall to one of redemption. Their attempts at spreading a

⁹⁵ Rosemary Langridge, 'The Tearful Gaze in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*: Crying, Watching and Nursing', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12.2 (2011), 47-60. p. 57.

more progressive message through their fiction can be connected to their active engagement in the fallen woman's cause, surfacing in Gaskell's role as a benefactor to Pasley and Dickens' involvement at Urania Cottage. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens reverses the popular plot, by drowning the male seducer and restoring the fallen heroine. In this way, the author radically deviates from the stereotypical narrative and its perpetuation of the male survivor-complex. *Ruth* initially seems to follow this lead, yet Gaskell nevertheless conformed to convention in resolving the plot, allowing one to place her novel within the iconographic, patriarchal tradition. Though this chapter has provided a feminist interpretation of two works of literature that initially seemed to give an alternative ending to the plot of the fallen woman, the next chapter will consider two novels of the period that did follow the conventional storyline by ending with the tragic drowning of the fallen heroine.

Post-mortems

According to Victorian patriarchal convention, the fallen woman narrative thus only seemed to achieve ‘satisfactory closure’¹ after her death. Auerbach has supported this by writing that ‘by convention, the fallen woman must writhe in tortured positions of remorse until she dies penitent’.² The necessity of killing off the fallen heroine in this tradition has been related to patriarchal anxieties about female (sexual) deviance, which has often been read to pose a threat to male order and the control of women. This chapter looks at two different novels, namely George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878), that, unlike the two case-studies previously considered, both seem to adhere to convention as they focus on the struggle of such transgressive women that finally results in their suicide by drowning. It will use a feminist perspective to interpret the representations of female suicide in these novels to establish in what way they can be seen to respond to the Victorian iconographic tradition of presenting the fallen woman’s suicide as an inevitable surrender to patriarchal oppression, or whether these deaths might be read in a different light.

George Eliot

Many of George Eliot’s fictional heroines turn to water in their moments of despair, such as Hetty Sorel in *Adam Bede* (1859), the title heroine of *Romola* (1862) and Mirah Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), who all attempt suicide. The recurrence of this theme throughout Eliot’s works has often been connected with the author’s fascination for the failed suicide attempt of Mary Wollstonecraft, who threw herself in the Thames in 1795.³ In one of Eliot’s letters in 1871, for example, she notes how Wollstonecraft wetted her garments before her jump, in the hope of sinking faster,⁴ which Eliot later reworked in Mirah’s suicide

¹ Jane Jordan, “Trophies of the Saviour: Josephine Butler’s Biographical Sketches of Prostitutes”, in Jenny Daggars and Diana Neal, eds., *Sex, Gender and Religion: Josephine Butler Revisited* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), p. 30.

² Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment*, p. 151.

³ Brian Cookson, *Crossing the River: The History of London’s Thames River Bridges from Richmond to the Tower* (London: Transworld Books, 2015), p. 102.

⁴ *The George Eliot Letters*, ed., Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 160-161.

attempt. Eliot's works, however, do not only feature cases of near-drowning, but also actual deaths by water. Her novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), for example, famously ends with the drowning of the female protagonist of the story. This ending has made the text a source of 'scandal and fascination to feminists',⁵ as Blake has noted. This section will look more closely at Maggie Tulliver's death to answer the question in what way it can be seen to fit within the patriarchal iconographic tradition of killing off the fallen, deviant woman or whether it strains such an interpretation.

Like both *David Copperfield* and *Ruth*, Eliot's novel is 'soaked' with water imagery. The narrator's declaration to be 'in love with moistness'⁶ in the first chapter therefore sets the tone for the rest of the novel. The river Floss is central to the plot, which largely revolves around the downfall of the Tulliver family. Their financial ruin is brought about by Mr. Tulliver's lawsuit against Mr. Wakem over redirecting the flow of the river. Maggie's father opposes the plans of building an irrigation system along the river, mostly out of a feeling of economic and legal injustice, but also out of respect for nature. In one of his rages against the 'meddling with the river',⁷ Mr. Tulliver implies that one should not force the flow of the Floss, as it is an interference with nature's course: 'water's very particular thing – you can't pick it up with a pitchfork [...] a river's a river'.⁸ In this reading, the fateful lawsuit becomes one of human intervention versus nature, as Wakem pleads for artificial redirection of the river and Mr. Tulliver for preservation of its natural flow. After his loss, Mr. Tulliver refers to an old, superstitious belief in his condemnation of Wakem's 'meddling', by observing that it might have made the river angry.⁹ He seems to be right, as the final flood can be interpreted as a way in which nature seems to avenge herself, demonstrating that it cannot be controlled by human interference. Henry, for example, appears to follow this reading when noting that the torrential waters of the flood 'obliterate the power of such laws [human laws determining its flow] by flooding and destroying human property and lives'.¹⁰

This theme of natural flow versus artificial redirection becomes more important by connecting it to the analysis of the novel's heroine, Maggie Tulliver. Like the river she is so fond of, Maggie is 'redirected' throughout the novel, as she is pressured to assume a role

⁵ Kathleen Blake, 'George Eliot: the critical heritage', in George Levine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 216.

⁶ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995), p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁰ Nancy Henry, 'George Eliot and politics', in George Levine, *Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 142.

deemed fit for women, but which clashes with her passionate nature. Eliot centralizes Maggie's struggle to adhere to the feminine ideal of the time, which already commences in her childhood. In the Victorian era, the education of young girls aimed at preparing them for their adult roles as housewives and mothers,¹¹ and hoped to shape them to perfect little ladies, such as Maggie's cousin Lucy Deane. Rebellious by nature, Maggie tests this oppressive system and its aim to nip female autonomy and deviance in the bud, causing the great despair of her family. Maggie, however, grows up in a world in which she, as Nardo has rightfully observed, can never win.¹² Life is unfair to Maggie, whose attempts to please her brother Tom only end up in ridicule or anger, and whose intelligence is noticed by her father, but is denied the opportunity to be developed.

Whilst her deviant behaviour is only met by scolding in her childhood, it has more serious consequences for Maggie in her adolescence. Once the family is ruined and Mr. Tulliver falls ill, Tom claims patriarchal authority and urges his sister to follow his command. Maggie submits to the role that Tom and society demand of her, and becomes the dutiful, obedient sister, even surprising her mother of how the 'once 'contrairy' child [grew up so good], becom[ing] so submissive, so backward to assert her own will'.¹³ She dreams of a liberation from her plight but is time again reminded of the lack of opportunities for women. Maggie rightly points out that Tom, as a man, '[has] power, and can do something in the world',¹⁴ whereas she can only answer to the commands of the men in her life. This oppression slowly suffocates Maggie, as she tells Philip Wakem: 'It is like death'.¹⁵ Her compliance with familial/societal pressures involves a loss of self that equates death. Maggie must give up her dreams of becoming a learned woman as it is not deemed appropriate for one of her sex. The novel shows different variations of patriarchal responses to her aspirations, which can all be read as typical of its time: from her father's opinion that 'a woman's no business wi' being so clever',¹⁶ and the patronizing attitude of schoolteacher Mr Stelling, declaring women to be 'quick and shallow',¹⁷ to Tom's hateful response, telling Maggie that as a clever woman she will be a 'nasty and conceited thing'.¹⁸

¹¹ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1982), p. 101.

¹² Anna K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 167.

¹³ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 263.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Only Philip tries to stimulate Maggie to return to her studies. Ominously prophesying her premature death, he notes that this self-denial will slowly take its toll: 'I foresee it will not end well: you can never carry on this self-torture [...] this long suicide'.¹⁹ The narrator sides with Philip, emphasizing 'the pity of it, that a mind like hers should be withering in its very youth [...] for want of [...] light and space!'.²⁰ Through these responses, the reader seems to get a glimpse of what Flint has identified as 'the only identifiable feminist issue'²¹ on Eliot's agenda, namely her stand on female education. Though the author did not openly support other feminist causes such as the question of suffrage²², - she infamously considered woman's vote 'a doubtful good'²³ - betterment of girls' education was a cause close to her heart, and 'one of the objects about which [she had] *no doubt*'.²⁴ In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot criticizes the limitations of female education and stirs sympathy for its improvement by describing a heroine who so clearly suffers from the lack of it.²⁵

Maggie, however, does not only have to suppress the yearnings of her mind, but also those of her heart. Besides her complex relation with Tom, Maggie grows to love two other men through the course of the book, namely Philip and Stephen Guest. Though her affection for Philip is completely different from her love for Stephen (as the former stems out of feelings of intellectual compatibility and the latter out of physical attraction), these love-affairs are the same in the sense that they both pose her for the dilemma of choosing between her loyalty to her family and her own desires: Philip is the son of the man who ruined her father, and Stephen is engaged to her cousin Lucy. Finding herself again in a split position between wanting to please others (her brother in particular) and staying true to her own self, she eventually favours duty over passion. Maggie retains a life of self-denial until the river floods, and she and her brother both drown.

The reader is prepared for such a tragic ending, as it is foreshadowed in several ways. In the very first chapter, Mrs. Tulliver already tells Maggie that she shall 'tumble in [the river] and be drowned some day'.²⁶ Eliot can furthermore be seen to draw on Ophelian imagery to

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 295-296.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 277.

²¹ Kate Flint, 'George Eliot and gender', in George Levine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 162.

²² Julliette Atkinson, 'Introduction', in Gordon Haight, ed., *The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1996), p. xii.

²³ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1998), p. 262.

²⁴ Nancy Henry, *The Cambridge Introduction to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 23.

²⁵ Elizabeth Gargano, 'Education', in Margaret Harris, ed., *George Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 116.

²⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 11.

presage both Maggie's impending sexual fall with Stephen as well as her death by drowning. One of Maggie's favourite sites is the Round Pool. Its surroundings are described almost in exact same words that Shakespeare uses in Ophelia's death-scene, noting the willows, reeds, and the 'glassy water'²⁷ in which Maggie dreamily stares. The dubious brother-sister relation essential to the plot can also be compared to that of Laertes and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, as Polhemus has observed.²⁸ Though the one explicit reference to Ophelia in the novel does not directly concern the heroine of the story,²⁹ Maggie is, however, compared to the figure of Crazy Kate, a nineteenth century stereotype of female madness and love melancholy that has been defined as an 'important auxiliary image [of Ophelia]'.³⁰

Yet there is another important form of stereotyping that recurs throughout the novel and ties in with foreshadowing Maggie's ending. Eliot's heroine is repeatedly connected to the figure of the witch. Her affiliation with the gypsies, her dark physique and the bewitching effect she produces on Stephen are all examples of this type of imagery.³¹ Maggie herself is also fascinated with this theme, devouring at a young age stories that tell of the drowning of presumed witches. Early on in the book she describes such a scene in detail:

It's a dreadful picture, isn't it? But I can't help looking at it. [The woman is] put in [water] to find out whether she's a witch or no, and if she swims she's a witch, and if she's drowned – and killed, you know – she's innocent [...] But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned?³²

This passage refers to the infamous ducking test that women accused of witchcraft had to pass to be exonerated, evolving from the idea that water, as the pure element of baptism, would repel those guilty of devilry. Little Maggie's fascination with these trials is uncanny as it bears such resemblance to her own ending. As the stereotype of the witch is often thought to have been invented to stigmatize female deviance, and witch-hunts are accordingly translated as societal (or patriarchal) attempts to eliminate or punish such divergence,³³ Maggie's eventual drowning has also been read as a punitive ending to her story.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁸ Robert M. Polhemus, *Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 172.

²⁹ The narrator at one point in the novel digresses to discuss the idea that 'character is destiny', illustrating this with plot of *Hamlet*, see Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 359.

³⁰ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 11.

³¹ For a more extensive analysis of Maggie as a witch-like figure, see Nina Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30.2 (1975), 150-171.

³² Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, pp. 14-15.

³³ Ed Ksenych, *Forbidden Desires: Deviance and Social Control* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2003), p. 22.

Feminist interpretation of *The Mill on the Floss* has predominantly condemned Eliot for adhering to the Victorian patriarchal convention that prescribed death for the female deviant.³⁴ Especially during the 1970s and 1980s, such readings resulted in articles with the telling titles such as Austen's 'Why Feminists Are Angry with George Eliot' (1976). These denunciations were fuelled by critiques of Eliot's seeming reluctance to commit herself to the feminist cause (specifically suffrage), sentiments that still prevail in feminist criticism of the author today.³⁵ In many readings of *The Mill on the Floss*, the final flood is criticized as a *deus ex machina*, a literary device Eliot is believed to turn to in order to solve Maggie's problematic story-line according to convention.³⁶ The flooding of the river, however, signifies more than an easy resolution of the plot. It is anticipated throughout the novel, as the water level of the river is a continuous concern to the people in the town of St. Ogg's.³⁷ The construction of a dam does not seem imperative at the start of the novel, when the river's waters are still low,³⁸ yet they seem to rise as the story proceeds, culminating in the all-engulfing flood that takes the life of both Maggie and Tom. Returning to the idea that the Floss' artificial redirection is echoed in Maggie's plight, the overflow of the river can be drawn parallel to the heroine's struggle, as its rising waters seem to reflect her increasing frustrations and desires.

This reading can be supported by looking at the extensive analogy that Eliot draws between Maggie and the Floss. McDonagh has noted that this surfaces in the very first description given of the Floss and its tributary the Ripple in the opening sentence of the book:³⁹ '[T]he broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace'.⁴⁰ Here water imagery is employed to evoke the complicated brother-sister relation key to the plot, as the description of the current reminds one of Maggie's impetuous love for Tom.⁴¹ This passage simultaneously echoes the novel's ending, as the siblings famously drown embracing each other. On the same page, the analogy becomes even clearer, as in the description of the

³⁴ Adela Pinch, 'The Mill on the Floss and 'The Lifted Veil': Prediction, Prevention, Protection', in Amanda Anderson, ed., *A Companion to George Eliot* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2013), p. 122.

³⁵ K.M. Newton, *Modernizing George Eliot: the Writer as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-Modernist and Cultural Critic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 6.

³⁶ Leila Silvana May, *Disorderly Sisters: Siblings Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p. 77.

³⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 12.

³⁸ Tom's friend Bob Jakin observes that 'he's none so full now, the Floss isn't' (Ibid., p. 43.)

³⁹ Josephine McDonagh, 'The early novels', in George Levine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 47.

⁴⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 5.

⁴¹ McDonagh, 'The early novels', p. 47.

Ripple, 'the little river, with its dark, changing wavelets',⁴² one can also recognize the dark-complexioned and whimsical character of Maggie. Later in the novel, the narrator asks the reader to think of Maggie's life as 'the course of an unmapped river',⁴³ and thus makes the comparison explicit.

Maggie's struggle, moreover, is repeatedly described as a battle against a current, against the natural flow of her feelings. Especially in fighting her affection for Stephen such imagery is used, for example when the narrator uses free indirect speech to give insight into her feelings: 'If it were *not* wrong – if she were once convinced of that, and need no longer beat and struggle against this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream!'⁴⁴ The flow of water (or the Floss) is used as a clear metaphor here for Maggie's desires, that will eventually led her into her fall, as she would soon be overcome 'by a wave too strong for her'.⁴⁵ The fatal boat-trip of Stephen and Maggie perhaps best exemplifies how the Floss channels Maggie subconscious desires. Once they embark the boat and push off, they are carried by the Floss' 'tides of desire'.⁴⁶ Soon the tone becomes more sensual and even erotic. Polhemus has noted that although the literal facts of the text retain propriety, its imagery hints at a sexual experience.⁴⁷

Maggie lets herself be led by both Stephen and the river, feeling '[a] stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will'.⁴⁸ Such female acts of total submission have been read by Stewart as one of the 'reigning tropes'⁴⁹ in British nineteenth century fiction to evoke eroticism. The description of their journey downstream plays in various ways upon the sexual, with the rhythmic motions of the boat caused by Stephen's rowing, and the emotional state of the lovers, 'overflowing with brim-full gladness'.⁵⁰ One particular passage of this scene can also be read in this light:

Some low, subdued, languid exclamations of love came from Stephen from time to time, [...] otherwise, they spoke no word, for what could words have been but an inlet to thought? And thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped.⁵¹

⁴² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 360.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 401.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 374.

⁴⁶ Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 261.

⁴⁷ Polhemus, *Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence*, p. 186.

⁴⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 415.

⁴⁹ Stewart explicitly refers to this scene in making his argument: see Stewart, *Death Sentences*, p. 261.

⁵⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 415.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 415.

It seems that reason, which has been holding Maggie back from her involvement with Stephen, finally loses out to passion. Only the realization that they have drifted off too far awakens them. Though Stephen somewhat admits to Maggie's accusations that he deliberately rowed out this far, he also blames it on the current: 'See how the tide is carrying us out – away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster around us'.⁵² This is also implied before in the text, as even though Stephen stopped rowing, 'the boat glided [on] without his help'.⁵³ Maggie's suppressed desires can be seen to form an undertow that leads her into the consummation of her relation with Stephen.

Though tempted to continue that 'easy floating',⁵⁴ she nevertheless feels bound to duty and returns home a fallen woman. The last part of the novel holds more hardships in store for Maggie, such as Tom's reaction, who declares to 'wash [his] hands off her forever'.⁵⁵ Maggie becomes more and more solitary, seeming to pass most time 'looking blankly at the flowing river'.⁵⁶ This image can be placed within the Victorian iconographic tradition representing suicidal, fallen women staring longingly at a body of water. Maggie's increasing emotional turmoil seems to be reflected in the change of weather, resulting in moaning winds and incessant rain that threatens to flood the Floss. This culminates when a letter from Stephen arrives, tempting Maggie again to return to him. Realizing that her struggle will never end, Maggie wishes for death, and gives way to sobbing. Like her eyes brimming with tears, the river is no longer able to contain its waters, and floods.

Through this imagery, it is implied that Maggie herself causes the flood. Indeed, as Auerbach has noted, Maggie 'seems to be on the side of the flood, since it seeps into the house as an efficacious [...] answer to her despairing prayer'.⁵⁷ Following this reading, her drowning can be interpreted as a form of suicide,⁵⁸ as it is the consequence of her own death-wish. Maggie longs to die as she can no longer bear to suppress her feelings, and in this light the flood symbolizes an outbreak of subconscious anger and frustration, a final destructive revolt against the system that has oppressed her. It seems a backlash against the community of St. Ogg's, as its intense fury 'crashes through houses, destroys livestock and drowns crops',⁵⁹ thereby seeming to take revenge. Remarkably, however, it appears to claim no other victims

⁵² Ibid., p. 416.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 415.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 429.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 434.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 456.

⁵⁷ Nina Auerbach, 'Power of Hunger', pp. 164-165.

⁵⁸ We might also read this in the light of Philip's remark, who already called her self-denial a 'long suicide' (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 296).

⁵⁹ Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger', p. 165.

that the Tulliver siblings. Drifting on the waves, Maggie seeks out Tom, who steps in her boat and is therefore sucked along with her into dangerous tides, and eventually, death.

Many contemporary male critics were baffled by Eliot's decision to kill off Tom. In his letter to Eliot's publisher Blackwood in 1860, Edward Bulwer-Lytton seemed to speak out for this group when arguing that 'we don't see why he should be drowned at all'.⁶⁰ The fact that Maggie's death remained largely unquestioned, whereas Tom's was listed as one of the novel's most important flaws,⁶¹ can be both read in the light of the Victorian convention of killing off the fallen woman as well as the patriarchal survivor-complex. Nevertheless, by drowning them both, Eliot seems to offer a different ending to her story. Once in the boat, Tom reaches a new understanding that 'came with so over-powering force – [which was] such a new revelation to his spirits, of the depths of life that had lain beyond his vision'.⁶² Humiliated, he seems to abandon his patriarchal stance, which has led to his estrangement from Maggie, by uttering the one loving, childish word that signifies their reconciliation: 'Magsie!'⁶³

Though tragic, Eliot's alternative ending is one in which sister and brother are equal. This reading has provided comfort to feminist readers who felt saddened at the heroine's death. Prominent twentieth century feminist Simone de Beauvoir, for example, recognized a great deal of her younger self in Maggie,⁶⁴ and though she still questioned the inevitability of her death, she found solace in the fact that by going down with Tom, 'both society and the individual are punished'.⁶⁵ It is of course true that the feminist interpretation of this resolution is dubious, as only in the face of imminent death is the deviant heroine 'restored', which greatly diminishes its effect. However, Maggie's drowning is far from the conventional, submissive demise of the fallen woman. In a way, the flood can be read as a feminist force, unleashed by the continuous oppression of Maggie. It signifies the all-destructive effects of patriarchal power suppressing women, not only sweeping away Tom, one of the foremost representatives of this system in the novel, but also eradicating the site of oppression itself, namely Maggie's body. In this light, the epilogue of the novel offers a glimmer of hope, as it

⁶⁰ *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed., David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 122.

⁶¹ Besides Tom's death, Maggie's fall for Stephen was generally considered as one of the greatest faults in the novel, see Nowell Marshall, *Romanticism, Gender and Violence: Blake to George Sadini* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013), p. 83.

⁶² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 466.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

⁶⁴ Laura Green, 'I Recognized Myself in Her': Identifying with the Reader in George Eliot's 'The Mill on the Floss' and Simone de Beauvoir's 'Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 24.1 (2005), 57-79. p. 63.

⁶⁵ Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 71.

notes that even years after, traces of the flood are still to be found, leaving the reader with the impression that the fatal consequences of patriarchal oppression are still felt.

This interpretation also calls for a revisitation of feminist readings of George Eliot, as the author has often been simply denounced for her views on suffrage and has been even defined by some as an anti-feminist.⁶⁶ This section has shown that although Eliot does not boldly deviate from the stereotypical narrative of the fallen woman, she does give a different spin to this story through her use of (water) imagery. By drawing an extensive analogy in the novel between the suppressed state of her heroine and the gradual rising of the waters in the Floss, Eliot can be seen to endow Maggie's death in the flood with a meaning different than those found in conventional nineteenth century representations of female suicide, exposing the destructiveness of the patriarchal system. Although one can hardly define *The Mill on the Floss* as the story that Maggie so longs to hear told, one in which 'the dark woman triumphs',⁶⁷ it does definitely move away from the traditional Victorian representations that depict the fallen woman's suicide by drowning as a final surrender.

Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy may have modeled the female protagonist of his novel *The Return of the Native* after Maggie Tulliver, as Eustacia Vye seems to be a reincarnation of Eliot's tragic heroine. In appearance, both women are quite alike, as their beauty could be defined as deviant: Eustacia, with her tall build, raven hair and dark eyes, 'full of nocturnal mysteries',⁶⁸ is a mirror image of Maggie. Moreover, Eustacia, like Maggie, is rebellious in spirit, but is similarly weighed down by societal and patriarchal pressures. Their goals in life are unattainable because of their sex, and this oppression results for both women in downfall, and eventually, a watery death. Though their stories thus are much alike, the representation of their suicides, as we will see, are wholly different. This section focuses on the way in which Hardy can be seen to adhere to the Victorian iconographic trend of depicting the fallen woman's suicide as a final demise in his representation of the struggle and eventual death of his heroine Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*.

Though Maggie and Eustacia might have some similarities, their aspirations in life are very different. Whereas Maggie dreamt of developing her intellect and becoming a learned

⁶⁶ Wendy S. Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), p. 67.

⁶⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 298.

⁶⁸ Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 77.

woman, Eustacia craves sensation. Having had a taste of excitement in life in her younger years in her native place Budmouth, ‘a fashionable sea-side resort’,⁶⁹ Eustacia cannot adjust to the monotony of life on the Egdon Heath, where she is forced to move. Nothing ever seems to happen on the heath, something that Hardy also stresses in the first description of the landscape, defining it as unchangeable: ‘everything around and underneath had been from pre-historic times as unaltered as the stars overhead [...] the great inviolate place had an ancient permanence’.⁷⁰ To Eustacia, this surrounding is stifling, and she feels herself prisoner of it. In order to escape to this reality, she fills her head with romantic fantasies: ‘To be loved to madness – such was her great desire’.⁷¹ These cause her downward spiral, as she eventually loses herself in romantic idealization. Upon hearing that a native from the heath will return from Paris, she falls in love with a vision, dreaming that this man, Clym Yeobright, will take her away to introduce her to the *beau monde*. Blinded by this fantasy, she mistakenly marries a man who intends to spend the rest of his life on the heath. Because of Eustacia’s fanciful ideas of love, critics have not compared her figure to Eliot’s ambitious Maggie Tulliver, but to a different nineteenth century literary heroine who famously got carried away by fantasies and also met an untimely end, namely Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary. This analogy was already drawn in contemporary reviews of *The Return of the Native*.⁷²

Like the heroine of *Madame Bovary*, the character of Eustacia Vye has suffered harsh criticism. After the publication of Hardy’s novel in 1878, reviewers have predominantly rejected its female protagonist. One critic writing for the *Saturday Review* in 1879, for example, noted that ‘she is a wayward and impulsive woman, essentially commonplace in her feelings and wishes’.⁷³ The same reviewer also implies that her suicide, functioning as the denouement of the plot, does not fulfill the requirements of the tragedy that Hardy intended to write,⁷⁴ because ‘our sympathies have never been strongly enlisted in [her]’.⁷⁵ Another critic writing for *The Eclectic Magazine* in 1879 simply defined her as a ‘thoroughly selfish, cruel, unprincipled and despicable woman’.⁷⁶ Such dismissive readings have prevailed in the

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷² In an unsigned review in the *Athenaeum* in 1878, for example, a critic noted that ‘it is clear that Eustacia Vye belongs essentially to the class of which Madame Bovary is the type’. See *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*, ed., R.G. Cox (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 47.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁴ Hardy tried to adhere to the pattern of classical tragedy in *The Return of the Native*, see Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Companion to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 168.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁶ Rosemarie Morgan, *A Student Companion to Thomas Hardy* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 70.

criticism of Eustacia Vye, as Stein has noted.⁷⁷ However, when looking more closely at her character from a feminist point of view, we will see that there is more to the ‘vain [...] and arrogant daydreamer’⁷⁸ than meets the eye.

For it is not only the monotony of life on the heath that can be seen to oppress Eustacia. She feels not only trapped within her natural surroundings but also within the inferiority of her sex. As Kearns has noted, she is one of the many nineteenth century literary heroines suffering from the effects of ‘masculine law’⁷⁹ or patriarchal authority. Egdon Heath can be seen to represent the narrow-minded, traditional patriarchal community, where an unruly figure as Eustacia cannot find her place. In one of Hardy’s descriptions of Eustacia Vye it is made painfully clear that she cannot live her full potential in this male-dominated world:

Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those, which make not quite a model woman. Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while [...] few would have noticed the change of government.⁸⁰

This excerpt implies that although Eustacia possesses all the qualities of a great leader, she is deprived of such power because it is not appropriate for ‘a model woman’. The emphasis placed on Eustacia’s potential in this passage is important. Bloom has effectively argued that by creating this image of a reigning Eustacia in other worlds, Hardy seems to deliberately draw attention to the fact that in the patriarchal society she actually lives in she remains powerless.⁸¹ The narrator makes this even clearer by noting that ‘the only way [for Eustacia] to look queenly without realms or hearts to queen it over is to look as [she] had lost them; and [she] did that to a triumph’.⁸² It is her frustration at this lack of power, that can be seen to eventually drive her towards her suicide.

Eustacia spends her life defying conventional female roles. The fire that she lights at the start of the novel can be read as symbolic of the ‘high Promethean fashion’⁸³ in which she

⁷⁷ Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 174.

⁷⁸ Ellen Lew Sprechman, *Seeing Women as Men: Role Reversal in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), p. 53.

⁷⁹ Katherine Kearns, *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 229.

⁸⁰ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 76.

⁸¹ Harold Bloom, *Thomas Hardy* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), p. 43.

⁸² Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

revolts. Stein has observed that one way in which she rebels is by attaining traits of masculinity, most specifically of the Byronic kind.⁸⁴ Indeed, Eustacia is narcissistic, solitary by preference (even gravitating towards the misanthropic),⁸⁵ nonconformist and melancholic, all character-traits which could be traced back to the Byronic hero. It is necessary to look more closely at Eustacia's appropriation of masculinity as this will shed more light on the later analysis of her suicide attempts and her choice of method. By assuming qualities of the nineteenth century model of masculinity,⁸⁶ she attempts to transcend the limitations of her sex, and succeeds to some extent. The reader is for example told how her schemes showed 'rather the comprehensive strategy of a general than the small arts called womanish',⁸⁷ thereby seeming to follow her great heroes, powerful men such William the Conqueror and Napoleon. Though Eustacia's appropriation of masculinity leads to her ostracism of the female community on Egdon Heath, it does allow her to command some of the male residents of the heath, such as Charley, her servant boy, and the young Johnny, 'the little slave [...] [who] seemed a mere automaton, galvanized into moving and speaking by the wayward Eustacia's will'.⁸⁸ Eustacia initially seems to be born under a full moon, to put it in the words of the character Christian Cantle, who recites the superstitious saying that one's sense of masculinity is dependent on the lunar phases at birth: 'No moon, no man'.⁸⁹

However, Eustacia's authority shows more and more cracks over the course of the novel, and the reader becomes aware of her lack of power and control. Eustacia seems too deeply affected by patriarchal pressures to be able to ever attain full domination. Thomas has supported this by noting that despite her 'smouldering [...] rebelliousness, Eustacia is perhaps the [...] most ideologically constrained of all Hardy's heroines'.⁹⁰ This surfaces in her relation to her younger subjects, most notably Charley, who forms her connection to Clym. When asked to arrange an introduction, Charley demands something in return, namely to hold his mistress's hand. Eustacia's authority is thus not complete, and she has to deploy her femininity (to almost sell her body in a way) to get what she wants from her servant. This also returns in the mumming scene in the novel. As a part of her scheme with Charley, Eustacia

⁸⁴ Stein, *The Byronic Hero*, p. 175.

⁸⁵ When Clym asks Eustacia to help him with the education of the natives of the heath, Eustacia tells him: 'I have not much love for my fellow-creatures. Sometimes I quite hate them' (Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 223).

⁸⁶ Stein, *The Byronic Hero*, p. 175.

⁸⁷ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 83.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁰ Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 126.

takes on the role of the Turkish Knight in the commoners' play, hoping to meet Clym. This gives Eustacia the opportunity of adopting a masculine persona, enabling her to 'assume the heroic masculine role to which she is always aspiring'.⁹¹

Cross-dressing should allow Eustacia to explore that 'transitional [and] liminal space [...] [where] the dictates of birth-sex and assigned gender may be, if only temporarily, evaded'.⁹² Yet convention still restrains her, as her reason for selecting this particular role shows: 'A direct fall from the upright to the horizontal, which was the end of the other fighting characters, was not an elegant or decorous part for a girl. But it was easy to die like a Turk, by a dogged decline'.⁹³ The mode of dying that Eustacia prefers in the play could be defined as feminine in contrast to the other abrupt and violent, masculine or 'heroic' deaths taking place on the stage. Boumelha for example has noted how this 'dogged decline' is reminiscent of the demise of the fallen woman.⁹⁴ Adhering to the traditional exhibitionist role that women have had to play in patriarchal society, Eustacia chooses the most 'elegant or decorous' part possible, feeling desperate to attract Clym's eye. Eustacia is thus deeply affected by the ideology that reduces women to objects on display, which surfaces more clearly in her jealousy of Thomasin, whom, dressed in feminine attire, seems to steal her spotlight at the play:

Eustacia was nettled by her own contrivances. What a sheer waste of herself to be dressed thus while another was shining to advantage! [...] The power of her face all lost, the charm of her emotions all disguised, the fascinations of her coquetry denied existence, nothing but a voice left to her: she had a sense of the doom of Echo.⁹⁵

Eustacia seems to realize that her only power lies in her beauty, with which she can captivate men. She has learned to exploit the power of her appearance, and in the disguise of the Turkish Knight Eustacia feels stripped hereof. Having relied on her attractiveness in cases when her authority failed (for example in her deal with Charley), Eustacia is unsettled by the fact that now only her voice remains – an instrument that she has never been able to use in a complete authoritative way in a world that silences women. The comparison made in this passage to the mythological figure of Echo, who cannot speak for herself and only repeats sounds she has heard, stresses this incapability.

⁹¹ Sprechman, *Seeing Women as Men*, p. 53.

⁹² Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire*, p. 121.

⁹³ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 162.

⁹⁴ Penny Boumelha, "'Wild Regions of Obscurity': Narrative in *The Return of the Native*" in Keith Wilson, ed., *A Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2009), p. 259.

⁹⁵ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 173.

Despite this realization, and the fact that she tells Venn the reddleman that he thinks too much of [her] influence over men-folk',⁹⁶ Eustacia fatally miscalculates and overestimates her own powers. She is forever anxious to control and prove her authority, which is made clear early on in the novel when she tries to draw out her lover Damon Wildeve with her bonfire. He responds to her call, which thrills Eustacia: 'I determined you should come; and you have come! I have shown my power'.⁹⁷ Wildeve, however, still pulls the strings in their relationship, as he rightfully points out that the idea of him drew her out in the first place. She makes a more catastrophic mistake in marrying Clym, believing that this would enable her escape to Paris. Despite the fact that he had expressed his aversion to the city, Eustacia felt assured that she had 'the power of inducing him to return'.⁹⁸ Clym, however, is not to be swayed, and Eustacia finally feels defeated. This brings about her fall, as her alienation from Clym drives her back into the arms of her old lover Wildeve. The question whether or not Eustacia commits adultery has been contested by critics up to this day.⁹⁹ However, the erotic context in the scenes of Wildeve and Eustacia does imply the affirmative: their secretive dance together on the heath, where Wildeve feels delirious at 'clasp[ing] as his [...] what was another man's',¹⁰⁰ can be read as an example hereof.

Once Clym suspects Eustacia's infidelity, the narrative seems to assume the conventional fallen woman-plot. This theme surfaces earlier in the novel in the plight of the Thomasin, whose postponed marriage to Wildeve puts her at risk of social disgrace. Though this delay is caused by license irregularities, Thomasin is believed to be left at the altar, and consequently becomes the object of ridicule. Her cousin Clym, for example, puts all blame on her when stating: '[she has] mortif[ied] us [the family] as to get jilted on the wedding-day. What has she done?'¹⁰¹ Wildeve's intentions or legal technicalities are thus left unquestioned. Through such responses, Hardy seems to expose the hypocrisy of the Victorian double standard, an attack that would be more forcefully made in his later novel *Tess of d'Urbervilles* (1891). Thomasin's 'fall' presages in a way Eustacia's, as their fates are intertwined through the same love-triangle. Moreover, these two characters function as doubles and/or antagonists

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 288.

⁹⁹ In her recent study *The Madder Stain* (2015), Ramel for example enters this debate when arguing that Eustacia has been wrongfully listed as 'adulterous'. See Annie Ramel, *The Madder Stain: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Thomas Hardy* (Leiden: Rodolphi, 2015), p. 51.

¹⁰⁰ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 314.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 188.

of each other in the narrative, as Dutta has noted.¹⁰² Hardy himself also implied this when drawing the plot outline of the novel.¹⁰³ The antagonistic relation also surfaces in the fact that Thomasin's honour is eventually restored, whereas for Eustacia this is not the case.

Eustacia falls into a downward spiral which leads her towards madness and suicidality, classic sentiments of the fallen woman. Hardy adheres to convention not only in his description of her inner feelings but also of her outer appearance. In one of her moments of despair, the heroine retreats to a bank in the heath, where she is portrayed as the archetypal madwoman, her hair and garments all disheveled and wet. In this scene, Hardy moreover seems to subtly evoke Ophelian imagery by noting that whilst leaning on the bank, 'her head [was] pressing the dewy heather',¹⁰⁴ thereby creating an image of Eustacia crowned with garlands of flowers. This all seems to prepare the reader for her eventual death by drowning. It does indeed lead up to a suicide attempt, but not the one that will kill her. Eustacia finally returns home, where her eye is caught by her grandfather's pistols. Whilst the idea of suicide gathers force within her, Charley has observed Eustacia's contemplation and takes the guns away. Having reached a 'certain finality',¹⁰⁵ Eustacia is infuriated with her servant to find that she is denied even the autonomy to kill herself: 'Why should I not die if I wish? [...] You have hindered my escape'.¹⁰⁶ It is important to note here that in Eustacia's perception, suicide thus equals autonomy and her escape from a life of oppression.

The fact that she intends to use her grandfather's pistols can be drawn in connection to her aforementioned attainment of masculinity. As discussed in Chapter 2, shooting oneself was gendered as a typically masculine method of suicide in the nineteenth century. Eustacia's seemingly preference for such a death marks the performative character of self-destruction that Jaworski has discussed.¹⁰⁷ The choice for a 'manly' death can be seen as Eustacia's final attempt to attain a sense of masculinity. This fails, however, because of Charley's interference. Eustacia's grandfather Captain Vye nonetheless believes that she would never have been able to pull the trigger, when stating that he 'hardly suppose[d] she will ever have

¹⁰² Shannon Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy: A Study of His Attitude to Women* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), p. 36.

¹⁰³ When explaining the plot briefly in a letter to his illustrator Arthur Hopkins, Hardy emphasized the polarization of these two female characters when writing: 'Thomasin [...] is the good heroine [...] [who] lives happily [...] Eustacia is the wayward & erring heroine [...] [who] is unhappy & dies'. See *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy: 1840-1892*, eds., Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 398.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

¹⁰⁷ Katrina Jaworski, 'The Gender-ing of Suicide', *Australian Feminist Studies* 25.63 (2010): 47-61.

bravado enough to use one of them [the pistols]'.¹⁰⁸ This remark is indicative of the way suicide methods were gendered at the time. Yet as Captain Vye also noted, 'there are more ways of letting out life than through a bullet-hole'.¹⁰⁹ Eustacia eventually drowns one stormy night in one of the pools of the heath. Like Ophelia's, Eustacia's death takes places offstage, which has shrouded it in mystery. Critical opinion has been divided over the question whether she jumps in of her own accord, accidentally drowns, or might even be killed by the voodoo-practices of Susan Nunsich.¹¹⁰ However, her history of suicidality makes the former most plausible. One might argue that the fact that Eustacia finally chooses to drown herself marks her final defeat. Broken in spirit and no longer able to revolt against oppression, she chooses the conventional feminine death.

Her death by water is foreshadowed in different ways. The most obvious premonition comes from Eustacia's mother-in-law, Mrs. Yeobright, who warns her for standing 'on the edge of a precipice without knowing it'.¹¹¹ After this remark, Eustacia is described 'looking into the pool',¹¹² seeming to reflect upon her own destiny. The scene in which Clym offers Eustacia water has also been read as a 'proleptic image'.¹¹³ Many more instances can be found.¹¹⁴ Water imagery is furthermore used to describe Eustacia's frustrated sexual desires. The narrator for example notes that Eustacia's suppressed passion for Wildeve could only be detected by one who would 'penetrate below the surface and gauged the real depth of that still stream',¹¹⁵ thereby playing on the prevalent Victorians associations of water depths and mysteries of female sexuality, discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover, the deep represents a sphere of possibilities for Eustacia, a realm where she can live her romantic fantasies. When anticipating the arrival of Clym, in her eyes the deliverer of her plight, Eustacia has a curious dream:

It was as wonderful as a dream could be [...] She was dancing to wondrous music, and her partner was the man in silver armour [...] Suddenly these two wheeled out from the mass of dancers, dived into one of the pools of the heath, and came out beneath in

¹⁰⁸ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 434.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

¹¹⁰ Tom Ue, 'Death and Tragedy in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and Oscar Wilde's *Salome*', in Michael Y. Bennett, ed., *Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 90-91.

¹¹¹ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 294.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹¹³ Frank R. Giordano, *'I'd Have My Life Unbe': Thomas Hardy's Self-Destructive Characters* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), p. 75.

¹¹⁴ The sound of a stone dropping in water, moreover, is used by Eustacia and Wildeve as a sign during their secret rendez-vous.

¹¹⁵ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 336.

an iridescent hollow, arched with rainbows. 'It must be here', said the voice by her side, and blushing looking up she saw him removing his casque to kiss her.¹¹⁶

This place below the surface of water becomes Eustacia's own paradise. The knight she dreams of will however not turn out to be Clym, but Wildeve, as the reference to a passionate dance (their sexual fall) indicates. The fact that Wildeve joins her in death, drowned in his attempt to save her, corresponds to the dream as well. When interpreting Eustacia's suicide by drowning, the dream is important as it suggests that she goes out to seek her own (sexual) liberation. This problematizes both the idea that her resort to drowning indicates her defeat as well as the interpretation of this resolution as an adherence to the conventional fallen woman-narrative, and leaves the interpretation of her death by water open to ambiguity.

Though this part might be still problematic, Hardy's representation of Eustacia in death can be seen to clearly respond to traditional Victorian depictions of the fallen suicide victim. Once her body is retrieved from the weir, Eustacia is layed out. Her corpse then becomes a spectacle for the men who have in different ways functioned as her oppressors in life, as the final scene of the fifth book of the novel shows:

They [Venn, Clym and Charley] stood silently looking upon Eustacia, who, as she lay there still in death, eclipsed all her living phases. Pallor did not include all the quality of her complexion, which seemed more than whiteness, it was almost light. The expression of her finely carved mouth was pleasant, as if a sense of dignity had just compelled her to leave off speaking. Eternal rigidity had seized upon it in a momentary transition between fervour and resignation.¹¹⁷

The image drawn here is reminiscent of those belonging to the Victorian iconography studied in Chapter 3. It is remarkable to observe that the accompanying illustration drawn by Hardy's illustrator Arthur Hopkins takes a wholly different approach, by using stark realism in representing the drowned victim (Figure 14). Hopkins chooses to portray the moment that Eustacia's body is retrieved, and seems to render her 'as undesirable as possible', as Dalziel has noted, leaving out the eroticism of Hardy's description, which is emblematic of Victorian tradition.¹¹⁸ Surrounded by male onlookers, Eustacia's body becomes a site of scopophilic

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 452.

¹¹⁸ For a more extensive analysis of the discrepancies between Hopkins' illustration and Hardy's text, both in relation to Eustacia's representation in death as well as to other scenes in the novel, see Pamela Dalziel, 'Anxieties of Representation: The Serial Illustrations to Hardy's *The Return of the Native*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51.1 (1996), 84-110. p.93.

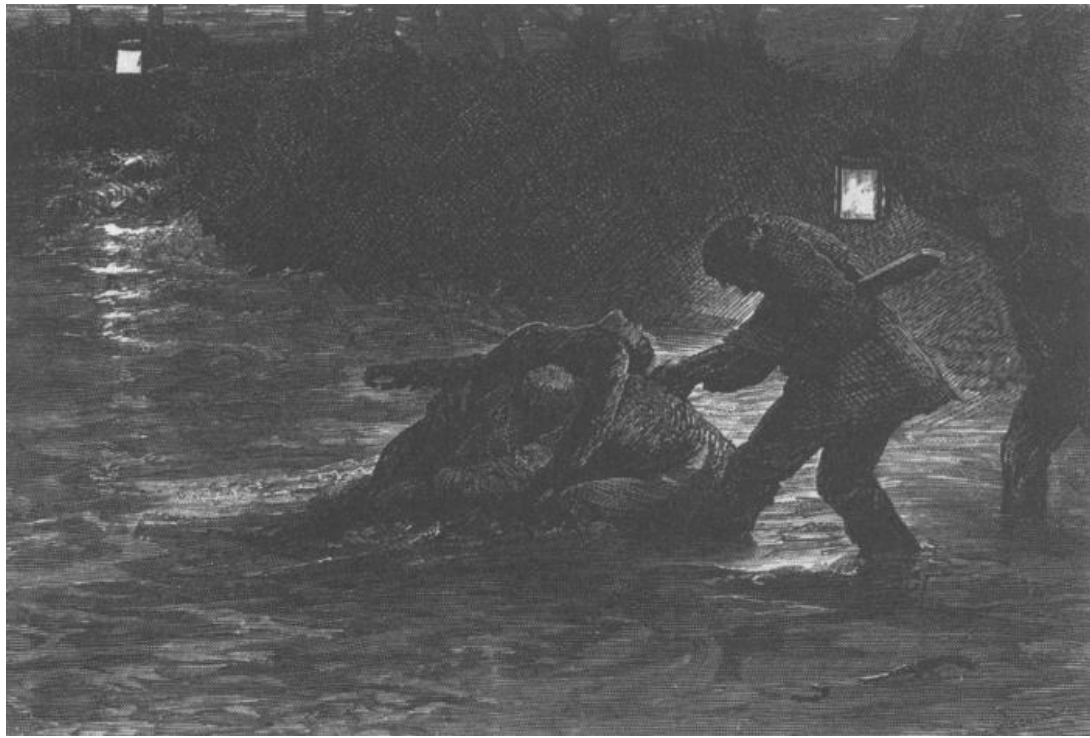


Figure 14: Arthur Hopkins, 'All that remained of the desperate and unfortunate Eustacia Vye'

desires, her beauty being more radiating in death than in life. Her dead body pleases the male eye, as Clym urges the other men to come and have a look: 'You would like to see her [...] would you not? She looks very beautiful now'.¹¹⁹ The dead Eustacia is no longer the threatening deviant, a potential disturbance to patriarchal order. Death reduces her to a safe and silenced object, for, as the narrator notes, she has left off speaking. In this state, the male spectators have full control and can consequently take delight in viewing her corpse, as it positions them in the superior survivor-complex.

Hardy's play on themes of scopophilia and voyeurism has been observed by different feminist critics, as the instrumentality of the male gaze in his fiction has been used as an argument to prove the author's alignment with patriarchal values.¹²⁰ Such feminist readings have contested the prevalent 'myth' of Hardy as a humane lover of women'.¹²¹ This reputation was built mostly in twentieth century readings of the author, which applauded him for addressing controversial topics such as the double standard in his works, and argued that he was sympathetic to his female characters, despite the fact that predominantly women

¹¹⁹ Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, p. 452.

¹²⁰ Joanne Devereux, *Patriarchy and Its Discontents: Sexual Politics in Selected Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xii.

¹²¹ Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy*, p. 20.

suffered tragic endings in his novels.¹²² More recently, feminist criticism has however exposed traces of scopophilic and sadistic pleasure in Hardy's narrative technique, and has decried its tone as sexist, and even misogynist.¹²³ Many of these readings take his later works as case-studies, and most tend to focus specifically on the analysis of these issues in relation to his well-known novel *Tess of d'Urbervilles*, showing the 'violence implicit in that narrative [as well as its] focus on control and domination'.¹²⁴ Yet this technique also surfaces in *The Return of the Native*, as our analysis has shown, especially in Hardy's description of the dead Eustacia. This indicates the value of this text in feminist criticism of Hardy and the way it can be read to question the author's representation of women.

This section has shown in what ways Hardy adheres to Victorian convention in depicting the fall and suicide of Eustacia Vye. The idealized and eroticized description of the corpse of his drowned heroine strongly corresponds to tradition, and can be read as an indication that this resolution should be read as the conventional ending, marking the triumph of patriarchy over the dead female. Though Eustacia's suicide can be both read as a final defeat (succumbing to the conventional fate of the fallen woman), as well as a final act of defiance (seeking her own sexual liberation), in each case this act eventually 'renders her entirely without autonomy',¹²⁵ as Malton has argued. Both her body and her story consequently become open to the inscription of her oppressors in life.¹²⁶ A passive corpse is eventually all that remains of Eustacia Vye, as through her death by drowning, the fire of her rebellion has been extinguished forever.

In this way, Eustacia's ending is radically different from Maggie Tulliver's. Whereas *The Mill on the Floss* can be seen to end on a somewhat hopeful note in a feminist reading, the gender relations at the conclusion of *The Return of the Native* are highly conventional, with its perpetuation of the patriarchal survivor-complex. These interpretations can be seen to have wider implications for feminist readings of both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. This chapter's reading of *The Mill on the Floss* indicates that Eliot, who has long been denounced for her opinions on suffrage and women's rights, might be read in a more positive light. For in her novel, the death of her heroine Maggie can be read as a violent backlash against the patriarchal community that has oppressed her all her life. In this way, Eliot deviates from the

¹²² See for example, H.C. Duffin, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels, the Poems, and the Dynasts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), p. 238.

¹²³ Kristin Brady, 'Thomas Hardy and matters of gender', in Dale Kramer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 101-102.

¹²⁴ Devereux, *Patriarchy and Its Discontents*, p. xii.

¹²⁵ Sara A. Malton, "'The Woman Shall Bear Her Iniquity: Death as Social Discipline in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*", *Studies in the Novel*, 32.2 (2000), 147-164. p. 160.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Victorian tradition that prescribed a punitive death for the fallen woman. Hardy, on the other hand, adhered to tradition, by both implying Eustacia's suicide to be her final defeat through the gendering of her suicide method, and playing on themes of scopophilia and the male survivor-complex. This analysis has been related to feminist criticism of the author, which has accused him of writing from a sexist perspective, essentially objectifying women. This leads us to conclude that though Eliot and Hardy seem to set out to tell the same story, namely that of the fallen woman, they do so in very different ways.

Conclusion

Nineteenth century ideas of the ‘most poetical topic’¹ – female death – were strongly rooted in patriarchal ideology. The annihilation of the female in the realm of art placed the male spectator in the survivor-position, confirming ideas of male superiority and/or immortality, and thereby taking away anxieties about the destabilization of male order by female deviance.² In death, the woman was reduced to an object and was therefore no longer perceived as disruptive. Bronfen has effectively formulated this psycho-analytic theory in explaining the popularity of the theme of female death in nineteenth century art. These ideas have initially seemed difficult to apply to the ubiquity of representations of women’s suicides, as self-destruction traditionally has been associated with notions of autonomy. Such associations seem to oppose the elements of objectification that pleased the nineteenth century spectator in viewing representations of female death, according to Bronfen’s theory. This thesis has set out to explain the prevalence of depictions of women’s suicides by drowning in Victorian culture in the period 1840-1880. It has sought to establish in what way this iconography can be seen to be shaped by patriarchal ideology of the time and the way in which novelists could be seen to respond hereto in their works of fiction.

This thesis has shown that the new definitions of suicide that arose during the Victorian era were largely influenced by patriarchal ideology. The epistemological shift that took place medicalized suicide rather than glorified it, and consequently, feminized it.³ In this new interpretation, attempting suicide was seen as a sign of weakness, the final surrender to mental illness. In Victorian patriarchal thought, these ideas were generally translated into ‘the masculinity of staying alive, and the femininity of death and suicide’.⁴ Such ideas were propagated, despite contrasting statistics, in scientific discourse, the arts and the media. This propagation constructed a ‘mythic vision of suicide as feminine’,⁵ and could be seen to both stabilize and reinforce male order. The prevalence of depictions of women’s suicides in Victorian culture therefore has to be read in the context of the changing attitudes towards self-

¹ Poe, *The Raven and the Philosophy of Composition*, p. 27.

² Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. xi.

³ Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences’, p. 70.

⁴ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, p. 134.

⁵ Higonnet, ‘Speaking Silences’, p. 69.

destruction during the nineteenth century, and the way in which patriarchal thought can be seen to have connected these new interpretations to ideas of ‘tainted femininity’.⁶

The Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning can be regarded as an important discourse through which such ideas were propagated. The construction of the fallen woman narrative central to this discourse, stereotypically ending with her punitive death, has been related to patriarchal anxieties about female (sexual) transgression. Moreover, the way in which the fallen woman’s suicide was stereotypically portrayed as a result of female madness, or more particularly love melancholy, presented her self-murder not as an act of self-affirmation but rather as a demise to hysterics. Stripped from any connotations to heroic autonomy or self-assertion, the fallen woman’s suicide was not perceived as disruptive in patriarchal thought. The male spectator, reader or artist could still assume the survivor-position and assert his superiority or immortality, as the analysis of some iconographic representations in Chapter 3 has shown. In this way, Bronfen’s theory is still applicable to these images of female suicide, and can be used to explain the popularity of this genre. This analysis has shown that the iconography is necessarily bound up with patriarchal ideology and its anxieties about the control of women, especially when considering the idealization and eroticization of the female corpse in this discourse. As Nicoletti has also suggested, ‘behind these hegemonic images of drowned women was a struggle [...] to maintain [patriarchal] social order’.⁷

The Victorian fascination with women’s suicides by drowning in particular can be similarly linked to patriarchal ideology. Besides playing upon age-old ties of femininity and water, and calling to mind the death of the Shakespearean heroine and the archetypal fallen woman Ophelia, this thesis has argued that Victorian artists can be seen to use female suicide by drowning as a theme in their works because it suited the nineteenth century denunciation of female agency. Dijkstra has described in detail how the patriarchal cult of invalidism advocated a view of women as passive and lifeless, an ideal that in feminist readings can be seen to suppress women. Because of its links to passivity, drowning was considered to be typically a feminine suicide method. The female slowly submerging in water, who could be defined as an object rather than an agent, therefore seemed to appeal more to the (patriarchal) artistic tastes than a woman actively inflicting wounds onto her own body. This reading has

⁶ Brown, *The Art of Suicide*, p. 15.

⁷ Nicoletti, ‘Morbid Topographies’, p. 33.

again indicated the extent in which the iconography can be seen be shaped by patriarchal anxieties over the control of women.

As a part of the ideology oppressing women, the iconography of the day was ‘limited [to] what the drowned female body might say [...] it could not recreate female suicide as a rational escape from a hopeless situation [...] it could not demand political autonomy or emancipation’.⁸ Nicoletti has argued that this was generally applicable to Victorian visual culture addressing the theme of the fallen woman’s suicide by drowning, an idea that this thesis supports.⁹ The representation of this theme in works of literature was, however, less homogeneous.¹⁰ The second part of this thesis has investigated in what way prominent novelists of the period responded to the iconography in their works, and has extended these readings to reflect upon their feminist sensibilities. Though the four case-studies addressed in the last two chapters of this thesis all deploy the conventional fallen woman narrative, they resolve the plot in different manners.

In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens strongly deviated from tradition by reversing the stereotypical ending of this narrative, as he drowned the male seducer and allowed his fallen female characters to live on, even showing the prospect of their restoration. In this way, the author can be seen to radically break with the gendered survivor-complex. His resolution, however, uses emigration as a mass-solution and thereby displaces the problem of fallen woman’s reintegration in society. This resists labeling Dickens’ deviation of the conventional narrative in this novel as a feminist strategy. Yet his alternative ending in *David Copperfield* can nevertheless be read as progressive as it challenges the convention that prescribed death for the female deviant. Elizabeth Gaskell seems to make a similar attempt at spreading such a progressive message in her novel *Ruth*, telling the story of a fallen woman who survives her suicide attempt, and hopes to redeem herself. Gaskell’s novel, however, finally communicates that this redemption is only possible through death. This underlying message, which advocates a patriarchal view, can be used to place *Ruth* within the iconographic tradition.

In the two remaining case-studies considered in this thesis, the fallen heroine dies by committing suicide by drowning. Though a superficial reading might use this as an argument to prove the authors’ adherence to tradition, this thesis has examined the representations of female suicide in these literary works in more detail. It has argued that George Eliot’s use of water imagery in her novel *The Mill on the Floss* allows one to read her heroine’s drowning in

⁸ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁰ Rogers, ‘Transforming the Fallen Woman’, p. 152.

a different way. The author can be seen to move away from conventional Victorian depictions of female suicide by drowning, and exposes the destructiveness of patriarchal oppression of women. This reading can be seen to shed a new light on Eliot's sympathy with the feminist cause, and indicates a need to revisit the denunciation of the author in contemporary feminist criticism. The last case-study, Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, seems to adhere most closely to the iconographic tradition. Hardy can be seen to present drowning as a gendered suicide method in his novel, and more importantly, plays upon themes of scopophilia and the male survivor-complex in the description of his drowned heroine. These findings correspond to recent feminist criticism of the author, which has questioned Hardy's portrayal of women. The analysis of the four case-studies in this thesis has shown how differently prominent Victorian authors responded to the iconography of the day. They took up the theme of the fallen woman, and reworked her narrative; some to follow the patriarchal convention (as is the case in Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and to some extent, in Gaskell's *Ruth*) and others to give a different spin to her story, by presenting it in a more progressive way (as Dickens and Eliot did in their works). This thesis has moreover used these findings to reflect upon the feminist sensibility of the authors considered, which has rendered new insights, especially in the case of Eliot.

Images of women drowning themselves, however, have resonated in the arts long after the 1880s both in literary works, surfacing for example both in fin-de-siècle novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) as in recent publications such as Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2015), as well in the visual arts, for example in Roy Liechtenstein's painting *Drowning Girl* (1963). In many of these instances, female suicide by drowning is related to themes of unrequited love as well as sexual transgression or 'fallenness', and thus seems to have similar associations as in the Victorian era. Romanska has moreover observed that throughout the late twentieth century a revived interest was taken in the figure of Ophelia, that can be seen as reminiscent of the nineteenth century captivation with the Shakespearean heroine.¹¹ This all goes to show that the fascination with drowning women was not specific to the Victorians, and that it, though expressed less overtly, still lingers today. Though this thesis has focused specifically on the Victorian iconography revolving around the drowned woman, more research is needed that addresses her cultural afterlife. Such inquiries might be read in the light of this thesis in order to observe different

¹¹ Romanska, 'Necr-Ophelia: Death, Femininity and the Making of Modern Aesthetics', p. 47.

trends in the representation of female suicide by drowning in the arts and establish in what ways this might have changed ever since the 1880s.

The figure of the drowned woman thus seems to float to the surface of the artistic imagination time and time again. She is pulled from a ‘muddy death’ to a ‘melodious lay’¹² to use Shakespeare’s words, by artists that either revel in the beauty of her death, and assert their own immortality over her fictitious dead body, or attempt to ‘resuscitate’ her by seeking to empower her figure. This thesis has studied both kinds of representations that can be seen to belong to the Victorian iconography of female suicide by drowning and has uncovered the workings of patriarchal ideology in this discourse. In this way, this thesis has answered to one of the most important responsibilities of feminist criticism, by questioning the gendering of power relations in this discourse and exposing a bias herein. Thereby, it raises an awareness of how these iconographic images can be seen to express the desire to control and/or objectify women. In today’s world where females are still subject to (sexual) objectification in the media and arts, this kind of research is still relevant as it points out the long history and pervasiveness of this tradition. Bronfen has also advocated the importance of investigating such themes when writing that ‘representations of female death work on the principle of being so excessively obvious that they escape observation. Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to [their] ubiquity’.¹³ This thesis has exposed the Victorian fascination with the drowned woman as inherent to patriarchal ideology, a discovery that, like a ripple breaking the surface of still waters, might be seen to influence future feminist interpretations of this genre, and indicates that there is something darker lurking in the way in which these representations relegated women to the realm of the dead.

¹² *Hamlet*, IV.7.153-154.

¹³ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 3.

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