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Victorian Echoes in Modern Erotica: The Sexual Politics of Nancy Audrey Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*

Abstract. Nancy Audrey Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* (2012) reworks Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by eliminating its original focus on homosexuality and aestheticism. Instead, the novel centralises the sexual exploitation of female characters, reflecting the tropes of erotic romance. Women in Spector's narrative are depicted as passive objects or agents of male sexual desire, perpetuating the Victorian sexual ideology of the 'angel in the house' versus the 'fallen woman'. The portrayal of Sybil Vane exemplifies this regressive stance, reducing her to a disposable figure of entertainment in stark contrast to Wilde's morally consequential depiction. Rather than subverting Victorian gender politics or offering a meaningful reinterpretation of Wilde's themes, Spector's work reinforces patriarchal norms and punishes female sexual agency. Ultimately, the novel emerges as a derivative piece lacking substantive engagement with its literary inspirations.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Nancy Audrey Spector, neo-Victorian literature, gender politics

1. Introduction

Erotic romance fiction gained significant attention following the publication of E.L. James's *Fifty Shades* series (2011), which notably challenged conventional descriptions of sexual encounters. The series engages with explicit BDSM (bondage/discipline–dominance/submission–sadism/masochism) content, particularly focusing on power imbalances, the negotiation of consent, and the portrayal of physical restraint and punishment (Reenen 223). Controversy ensued, with critics arguing that these depictions transgressed established sexual boundaries, particularly in how they represent consent and coercion. Some scholars assert that “sexual practices with a male top and female bottom are always a direct or inescapable translation of socially sanctioned male oppression of women in patriarchy” (Downing 96). Additionally, concerns have been raised that the explicit portrayal of BDSM-related sexual activities, particularly those involving control and submission, might influence real-life sexual behaviour, potentially normalising

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violence or reinforcing gendered power imbalances. A study by Amanda B. Diekman, Mary McDonald, and Wendi L. Gardner investigated the influence of erotic romance novels on readers' sexual behaviour. They found that the idealisation of sexual encounters in these novels affects readers' real-life tendencies. For example, the study analysed the depiction of condom use and argued that the frequent omission of condom use in erotic romance novels makes readers less likely to use protection in their own sexual encounters (Diekman, McDonald, and Gardner 186). Similarly, some feminist scholars have expressed concerns that the depiction of violent and BDSM-related sexual activities—particularly those lacking clear consent or romanticising male dominance—might shape people's sexual expectations and behaviour in ways that reinforce patriarchal structures. However, feminist perspectives on BDSM are not monolithic; while some argue that such representations perpetuate harmful dynamics, others highlight BDSM's potential for subverting traditional gender roles by emphasising mutual negotiation and consent. Further scholarly debate continues to explore whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms.

Despite criticisms regarding gender stereotypes and patriarchal representations, the romance genre—particularly its erotic subgenre—remains one of the most financially successful literary markets. According to Linda Lee, “romance fiction had \$1.37 billion in sales in 2006 and held a 26.4 percent share of the consumer book market” (53). Interestingly, the majority of readers of romance and erotic fiction are women, who often “do not tend to reflect critically on gender stereotypes and patriarchal representations of women, or they simply do not mind such representations because of their own understanding of gender roles and their identification with these concepts” (Kraxenberger, Knoop, and Menninghaus 10). Consequently, much of romance fiction perpetuates gender role stereotypes that define womanhood from a patriarchal perspective. The reception of erotic fiction is polarised among critics. Some feminists, embracing sex positivity, celebrate this subgenre as a space where women can flaunt their sexuality—an aspect that has been silenced and repressed for centuries and is now a cornerstone of modern female empowerment (Hemmings 8). Other critics, however, argue that female sexuality in erotic fiction is redefined and portrayed through a patriarchal lens that reinforces the objectification of the female body. They regard erotic fiction as “texts which romanticize behaviors that legitimize male domination of women and the attendant problems of domestic violence and rape culture” (Srdarov and Coudray 349). These critics argue that the sexual encounters in heterosexual narratives often cater to male sexual fantasies, portraying women as sexually available to fulfill these fantasies. One of the most prominent examples of erotic fiction, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, was published by Erika Mitchell under the pseudonym E. L. James. She felt compelled to use a pseudonym due to her apprehension about writing sexually explicit material as a mother and wife (Laak 19), highlighting the ongoing challenges women face when expressing their own sexuality in the 21st century.

As in Nancy Kilpatrick's adaptation *Darker Passions: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one of the main appeals of Wilde's novel for some adapters is the opportunity to exploit its underlying

sexual content by explicitly divulging the sins of Dorian Gray (Poorghorban, “Subverting Gender Norms” 2). While Wilde’s original novel relied on subtlety and implication, later adaptations have increasingly foregrounded sexuality, reflecting broader cultural shifts in contemporary literature. The growing acceptance of sexually explicit content in fiction, particularly within genres like erotic romance, stems from evolving societal attitudes toward sexuality, gender roles, and artistic expression. The rise of erotic fiction, especially in the wake of works like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, has contributed to a literary environment where overt discussions of sex and desire are more commercially viable and widely consumed.

One example of this trend is *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* (2012), written by Nicole Audrey Spector. A work of mash-up literature, this novel merges Wilde’s narrative with E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* to create a hybrid story steeped in sexual themes. However, unlike other well-received mash-up fiction works—such as Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or Ben H. Winters’s *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, which have been recognized as significant contributions to the genre—Spector’s novel has largely received negative responses. Critics argue that it fails to offer a meaningful reinterpretation of either Wilde’s or James’s work, instead relying on surface-level intertextuality without deeper engagement with the themes of power, desire, or literary subversion. While mash-up fiction has carved out a distinct space within contemporary literature, *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* has not been canonized as a significant work in the said subgenre.

Mash-up literature has a long historical background, but its recognition as a distinct subgenre of popular fiction solidified with the publication of Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009). The novel quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller, sold over a million copies, and was adapted into a film in 2016. The financial success of this mash-up fiction significantly contributed to establishing the subgenre, inspiring many subsequent works that sought to blend different texts, genres, and historical contexts. Unlike literary adaptations, which rework a particular piece or transform it into a new medium, mash-up literature juxtaposes elements from multiple sources—such as supernatural creatures, horror motifs, or erotic themes—onto an existing narrative to create a novel interpretation. This method often involves inserting new plotlines, modifying character arcs, or altering the tone and genre of a classic work. Despite often being stigmatized as works that “steal, borrow, sample, copy, splice, and recontextualize” (Schneider 12), mash-up fiction has proven to be financially successful and popular among readers (Riter 16). However, questions regarding authorship and originality have become significant aspects of this subgenre in literary studies. As David Gunkel points out, “the mashup challenges the usual assumptions of authorship and moves away from the romantic notion of artistic genius” (81). *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, for instance, not only draws on Wilde’s and James’s novels, but also directly copies many of the same words and sentences from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By doing so, it exemplifies the complex interplay of originality and intertextuality that defines mash-up literature, blurring the line between homage, transformation, and replication.

Originally published in 2012, *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* is a neo-Victorian² novel that retells Wilde's narrative with one major difference: the mash-up is now a heterosexual narrative centred around the love triangle of Rosemary Hall, Helen Wotton, and Dorian Gray. In this sense, Spector has entirely eliminated the homoerotic undertones dominant in Wilde's original story. For a long period, the body of romance fiction was confined to exploring heterosexual relationships. Jayashree Kamblé's *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction* (2014) explores how dominant capitalist ideology sought to promote heteronormative narratives, particularly during an era when gay rights were gaining visibility in the social sphere of the sixties: "the challenge posed by homosexual desire is so irreconcilable with the heterosexual family that the genre has not acknowledged it until recently; that is, the contradiction has remained in the textual unconscious for much of the twentieth century" (Kamblé 89). Consequently, heterosexual love narratives remain significantly dominant in the romance genre. Moreover, romance fiction is generally considered popular fiction (Juhasz 66), and market demands for romance fiction dictate more heterosexual narratives, as the majority of readers are straight women (Radway 55). Hence, Spector's mash-up fiction aligns with heterosexual romance fiction, completely disregarding the homoerotic themes present in Wilde's original work. This indicates that while Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is now widely recognized in literary studies as a foundational queer text—particularly for its subtextual homoeroticism, its engagement with aestheticism as a coded space for queerness, and Wilde's own historical persecution for homosexuality—it has the potential to be reinterpreted within an entirely heteronormative framework.

Moreover, regarding Wildean aestheticism, two consistent approaches emerge in the prose adaptations of Wilde's novel. On one hand, some adaptations engage deeply with Wildean aestheticism, such as Reed's *A Face without a Heart* and Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*. These adaptations explore the question of aesthetic perception in late-capitalist societies, ultimately concluding that such societies have devoured the aesthetic space necessary for genuine artistic appreciation, reducing it to consumerist culture. On the other hand, neo-Victorian narratives that re-visualize the Victorian era and Wilde's narrative often tend to ignore Wilde's aesthetic philosophy or simply repeat the original narrative without offering new interpretations. Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* falls into this category. The character of Rosemary Hall, an adaptation of Basil Hallward, is initially presented as an artist whose life revolves around her artistic ambitions. However, unlike Basil—whose devotion to art is intimately tied to a spiritualised ideal of beauty and a deep aesthetic connection to Dorian—Rosemary's characterisation lacks the philosophical

2 Neo-Victorian literature refers to contemporary works that reimagine, reinterpret, or engage with the themes, aesthetics, and moral concerns of the Victorian era from a modern perspective. Many neo-Victorian novels, particularly within the erotic romance subgenre, explore repressed or hidden aspects of Victorian sexuality, often exposing the tensions between historical moral codes and contemporary attitudes toward desire and identity. By framing *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* as neo-Victorian, Spector's novel situates itself within a tradition of texts that both revive and revise Victorian literary legacies, engaging in a dialogue about how sexuality is reshaped across different historical moments.

depth that defines Wildean aestheticism. Her passion for art is depicted in a superficial manner, largely disconnected from broader aesthetic or ethical inquiries, reducing her role to a conventional love interest within a heterosexual romance framework. Similarly, the novel includes only passing references to art and beauty, primarily repeating and abridging Wilde's original concepts without critically engaging with them. In the following section, I intend to elaborate on how female subjectivity is portrayed in Spector's neo-Victorian mash-up novel.

2. Female Subjectivity: Reproducing the Angel in the House and The Fallen Woman

By establishing the ideology of separate spheres, which posited that women and men excel in different domains, the definition of gender roles, particularly in the Victorian era, became increasingly rigid and limited. This binary opposition projected that women “preferred the female, domestic, sentimental, collective private space (basically, the world of home) to the male, individualistic, public sphere of commerce and politics” (Davidson 444). As Amanda Vickery asserts, “Nineteenth-century advice books, women's magazines, evangelical sermons and social criticism provided chapter and verse on the bonds of womanhood at their most elaborate” (383), prescribing an ideal definition of womanhood in the Victorian era centred around the private sphere. This glorification of domesticity for women directly influenced their access to power in the social sphere, limiting their ability to systematically resist dominant patriarchal oppressions. For instance, it was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that British women achieved the same voting rights as men. Some scholars assert that the ideology of separate spheres provided women with opportunities to take control over the private spheres of life (Kerber 16). However, this control was largely symbolic and remained constrained within patriarchal expectations, as women were still expected to uphold traditional virtues such as domesticity, morality, and self-sacrifice. Their authority was often restricted to managing household affairs, child-rearing, and ensuring the moral integrity of the family, all of which reinforced rather than challenged the broader patriarchal structure.

In this sense, two widely known Victorian definitions of womanhood became prevalent: the ‘angel in the house’ and the ‘fallen woman’. Womanhood, which has always been socially determined, becomes a “construct as it is deployed in both popular culture and intellectual discourse to naturalize socially constructed and environmentally influenced difference, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of domination” (Lesser 118). This discourse becomes dominant through an essentialist outlook, reinforcing the idea that women are inherently more prone to failure in the social sphere. The concepts of the ‘angel in the house’ and the ‘fallen woman’ are deeply rooted in Victorian literature. As Gretchen Braun points out, “[f]or a female Victorian literary character, maidenly demise is preferable to sexual fall, and should physical chastity be compromised before marriage, an outcast state—from respectable society and perhaps even from God's grace—is inevitable” (342). The phrase ‘The Angel in the House’ originates from a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore (1854), in which he describes his deceased wife, Emily, as the incarnation

of the ideal Victorian woman. This ideal was so influential that “the ideal Victorian wife was expected to perfectly emulate Emily by being endowed with her beauty, her docile manner, and her commitment to create a comfortable and orderly home for her husband” (Crouse-Dick 442). Chastity is a significant attribute in this definition, directly separating the angel in the house from the fallen woman. In the social context of the Victorian era, as Nina Auerbach asserts, the fallen woman is portrayed as a “beaten down prostitute, practicing one of the few trades available to Victorian females. She is defined economically rather than morally, emitting no special aura of destruction and doom but joining the poor seamstress and the shabby-genteel governess among the ranks of capitalist victim” (31). The fallen woman is often from a deprived class of society and succumbs to the lust of upper-class men. This dichotomy was widely criticised by feminists, who historically elaborated on prostitution and its relevance to destitution in the Victorian social context. While “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Freiwald 539), Spector’s mash-up novel largely reflects this dichotomy.

In *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, Rosemary Hall, the painter, “had just turned twenty years old and, having successfully shunned any prospects of marrying, had gotten her father to quiet on the matter. At least he was pleased with her achievements as a painter” (Spector 3). Rosemary appears as a woman who crosses the boundaries of the separate spheres by exhibiting her paintings and participating in public and social gatherings. Furthermore, Helen Wotton, Lord Henry’s wife, and Rosemary’s friend, appears as the seductive Victorian woman who crosses all social boundaries and emerges as a femme fatale in Dorian’s life. Even while repeating the same epigrams as Lord Henry in Wilde’s novel, Helen takes a different role in the social context of the Victorian period. She asserts, “you seem to forget that I am married, and the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (Spector 6). Helen’s behaviour, though radical for a Victorian woman, lacks the depth or nuance that might make it truly subversive. Yet, neither Rosemary nor Helen are portrayed as fallen women in Spector’s novel. In fact, a significant part of the novel is dedicated to detailed descriptions of Dorian’s sexual encounters with both Helen and Rosemary. Helen not only appears as a seductive woman in Dorian’s life, but also as a sexual guide who teaches Dorian how to perform: “We both know that you have Rosemary, that precious lamb, so willfully naïve to her sexual nature, bordering on hysteria. So captivated is she by the confusing lust. I, too, feel the gravity of your sexual pull” (Spector 21). Her role as a seductress and educator aligns her more with patriarchal fantasies of female sexuality as both alluring and dangerous, reducing her agency to a form of dominance that is ultimately tied to the male gaze. While Helen’s sexual liberty in Spector’s novel appears radical, it remains constrained by the narrative’s framing of her as an object of desire for the male characters, thus limiting her subversion of Victorian gender norms.

In *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century* (2012), Marie-Luise Kohlke observes, “even overtly feminist neo-Victorian novels are likely to end with desolation for their Gothic victim-heroines – or, more accurately, heroine-victims” (222). In the case of Spector’s *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, female characters are constantly subjected

to their sexual adventures, ultimately leading to consequences beyond their control. The portrayal of Helen and Rosemary as neither fully empowered nor entirely fallen women aligns with Kohlke's observation, suggesting a complex interplay between sexual liberation and inevitable downfall. This dynamic reflects the broader themes of neo-Victorian Gothic literature, where female characters often find themselves navigating a treacherous terrain between empowerment and victimisation. One instance of this occurs when Helen encounters Alan Campbell at a club with Dorian. In Spector's adaptation, Campbell is presented quite differently from Wilde's character, whose involvement in Dorian's life symbolizes moral conflict and the suppression of desires. Spector's Campbell, however, seems to serve a more peripheral role and lacks the moral complexity that Wilde imbued him with. This difference is significant, as it highlights how Spector shifts the focus from Wilde's moral and psychological exploration of repressed desires to a more straightforward narrative of sexual exploration and its destructive consequences. The alteration of Campbell's character could be seen as a move away from Wilde's nuanced critique of Victorian repression, opting instead for a more simplified depiction of the dangers of sexual liberation. In this sense, Spector's Campbell—and his disengagement from the moral and sexual complexities that Wilde's character represented—further underscores the sense of inevitable victimisation that permeates the novel, aligning with the broader themes of neo-Victorian Gothic, where characters, especially women, cannot escape the destructive forces surrounding them.

'Mr. Campbell, is there something you wish to obtain from me?' asked Helen. Romeo Alan Campbell bit his lip, and waved to the small group of men around him. 'You know of Helen Wotton,' he cried to them. 'Ah, the rich old whore!' called one of the men, who, for some reason, was dressed as a clown, with a fat red honker affixed to his nose and a tassel of painted bells strung around his neck. He saluted Dorian empty-handed. 'She'll fuck ya' blind!' cried another man in thick spectacles. 'Does she need a dressing room?' cried another, rather nonsensically. He was too short to be seen over the shoulder of Romeo Alan Campbell. 'An undressing room is what she needs,' cried Romeo Alan Campbell, riling the crowd into an uproar. (Spector 60)

Clearly, unlike Lord Henry Wotton, who is continuously admitted to upper-echelon parties and entertains politicians and artists in Wilde's narrative, Helen fails to provide a safe social space for herself, ultimately leading Dorian to ask her to leave the club. If sexual liberty and defiance of sexual and gender norms for female neo-Victorian characters symbolise agency and authority, this authority is constantly compromised and undermined even in the most sexually liberated neo-Victorian novels. Similarly, Nancy Kilpatrick's *The Darker Passions: The Picture of Dorian Gray* reimagines a Victorian heroine who finds no boundaries in the realm of sexual adventures but is eventually imprisoned and subordinated by Lord Henry, who embodies patriarchal ideology. Unlike Kilpatrick's adaptation, which ultimately celebrates the union between the subordinated woman and the patriarchal man, Spector's mash-up novel draws on the tragic fate of its heroines, creating an ambiguous outlook on female sexual agency and authority.

Moreover, Rosemary Hall, who admires Dorian and paints a portrait of him as a symbol of love incarnate, finds herself troubled by her relationship and sexual encounter with him. In describing Dorian to Helen, she notes, “what oil painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinous to late-Greek sculpture—that is what Dorian is to me” (Spector 9). In her sexual encounter with Dorian, Rosemary resembles Anastasia Steele from *Fifty Shades of Grey*, feeling uncomfortable with the BDSM dynamic between herself and Dorian. This resemblance is portrayed vaguely, suggesting that Spector’s novel might have chosen its title in response to market demands rather than as a vibrant mash-up of the two novels. Eventually, Rosemary finds the courage to confront Dorian about her feelings, expressing, “I wanted to have you all to myself. That has been my only want since I laid eyes upon you. I am only happy when I am with you. When you are away from me, I live in unbearable desire” (Spector 44). Their first sexual encounter, which turns into a BDSM scene, leaves Rosemary deeply hurt: “he kept slapping her. She was too confused at first to register, and by the time she understood—he was beating her—she was crying hot tears into the pillow, and then she was wailing” (Spector 49). This brutal experience overwhelms her: “It was too much to take in, and she thought she might faint if she did not leave at once. The source of all her passions and love was revealed to be brutal” (Spector 50). Rosemary immediately leaves Dorian’s house and ignores his letters and requests for reconciliation: “He’d sent her letters defending himself and even went to her house, where he was greeted coldly by her butler and told that Rosemary was not at home” (Spector 52). Wilde’s portrayal of the love dynamic between Basil and Dorian symbolises a forbidden love that can never be Consummated in reality and must be appreciated in the realm of art rather than the real world. The death of the painter by the sitter in Wilde’s novel underscores the dangers of homosexual love outside the artistic sphere, as the portrait remains as splendid as when it was first painted, contrasting with the harsh reality faced by the Victorians, who viewed homosexual love as unnatural and impossible (Poorghorban, “The Love That Dare Not” 4). In Spector’s narrative, Rosemary’s relationship with Dorian becomes a manifestation of this impossible, unnatural, and forbidden love.

The novel then leads to a series of sexual encounters in which Rosemary is used merely as a sexual object to satisfy Dorian’s desires. When Rosemary is experiencing menstruation, Dorian makes a crude suggestion: “When a woman is in your vile condition, one that she...cannot help, for it is nature’s cruel course, then one must become creative” (Spector 84). Here, Dorian proposes oral sex, and when Rosemary agrees, he later admits, “It was fine. But there were a couple of moments when I felt your teeth, which you can imagine is excruciating, for the male organ is quite sensitive” (Spector 86). Unlike Anastasia Steele in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, who embodies sexual liberation and empowerment, Rosemary’s character symbolises a passive, inexperienced, and chaste woman whose sole sexual experience is with Dorian. This dynamic reflects her role as a mere object of Dorian’s sexual gratification rather than an empowered participant in her own sexual encounters. Moreover, as the novel progresses, Rosemary discovers a troubling truth about her past: the only person she had been physically intimate with was her half-brother. This revelation is uncovered through a letter that Helen sends to Dorian.

Dorian, if you marry Rosemary Hall you will become wretched. As you know, I do not champion marriage, and am certain that should you marry anyone you will become unselfish, and unselfish people are colorless. But Rosemary, in particular, is not a woman to call your wife, she is, in your case and yours alone, to be called your sister. (Spector 99)

In *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, the equivalent of homosexual love in Wilde's narrative becomes a half-sibling erotic encounter within Spector's heteronormative framework. In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, homosexual love is depicted as forbidden, unnatural, and ultimately impossible, symbolised by the destructive relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray. Spector's novel, however, reinterprets this theme by presenting a half-sibling relationship between Rosemary Hall and Dorian Gray as the new form of impossible love within a heterosexual context. Rosemary's relationship with Dorian parallels Wilde's portrayal of homosexual love as an unattainable and dangerous desire.

When Rosemary finally confronts Dorian about her feelings, she writes a poignant letter: "She said she would always love him and hoped to one day learn to love him as a brother, though she did not foresee such a day, and she prayed he would understand and that God would forgive them, she asked that he pray too" (Spector 107). This letter reflects Rosemary's internal conflict and the impossibility of reconciling her feelings for Dorian with societal expectations. Spector's narrative revisits the fatal encounter between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray, mirroring it with the murder of Rosemary. Dorian's violent act against Rosemary is described in visceral detail: "When she first felt the blade on her back, she thought it was his hand moving to unlace her. But the pressure kept going until it was a weeping pain, bolder than anything she'd felt before" (Spector 120). This scene symbolises the ultimate consequence of trespassing sexual boundaries within a heterosexual framework. Rosemary's demise signifies not just the punishment for half-sibling love but also the broader condemnation of transgressing Victorian sexual norms. In *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, Rosemary embodies the ideal of the 'angel in the house'—a chaste, sexually inexperienced woman who succumbs to her forbidden desires for Dorian. Her death serves as a narrative device to illustrate the consequences of defying these entrenched sexual norms, reinforcing the idea that such transgressions are met with severe retribution. Both Wilde's novel and Spector's adaptation explore the theme of impossible love, but Spector's adaptation shifts the focus from homosexual to heterosexual relationships, with Rosemary's tragic end underscoring the dangers of violating societal expectations regarding sexuality.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sybil Vane is portrayed as an innocent and virtuous young actress who becomes a tragic victim of Dorian Gray's manipulative charms. Her art, love, and ideals are all shattered when Dorian cruelly rejects her, highlighting the dangers of his seductive power. In contrast, in Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, Sybil Vane's character is reimagined in a far more disturbing light, reflecting the broader themes of women's disempowerment often found in neo-Victorian literature. Instead of a tragic figure, Sybil becomes a victim of sexual exploitation and degradation. In one harrowing scene, Helen Wotton aids Dorian in drugging Sybil

for a coerced sexual encounter: “The girl giggled through her tears. She was either drugged or totally mad” (Spector 63). This portrayal starkly departs from Wilde’s sympathetic depiction, where Sybil’s downfall stems from emotional and moral corruption. In Spector’s narrative, however, the manipulation is far more overt and violent. Dorian’s predatory behaviour is evident in his interaction with Sybil: “I can take you out of here and get you a nice meal. A hot meal. You would like that, wouldn’t you?” (Spector 63). Following this coercive manipulation, Sybil is subjected to a brutal and sadomasochistic encounter, culminating in her being left unconscious: “Within a minute, her sobs subsided. Her head began to droop. Helen ducked under the table and untied her. As soon as the girl was free, she caved forward, falling on her face” (Spector 66). This scene underscores the objectification and dehumanisation of women in Spector’s novel, contrasting sharply with Wilde’s tragic, yet dignified, treatment of Sybil. The broader implications of this scene reflect the prevailing neo-Victorian theme of women’s disempowerment, where female characters are often victimised, exploited, and rendered voiceless in a world dominated by male authority and predation.

Emma Liggins argues that fallen women in Victorian literature are often categorised as either innocent victims of male lust or as shameless, degraded figures unworthy of sympathy (Liggins 41). However, in *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, Helen does not fit neatly into these categories. Helen, while sexually liberated and manipulative, is not portrayed as a fallen woman but rather as an accomplice in Dorian’s exploitation. Her actions—drugging Sybil and facilitating Dorian’s desires—reflect a complicity in patriarchal structures rather than a direct condemnation of her character. In Wilde’s original narrative, Sybil’s downfall results from Dorian’s betrayal and reflects the broader theme of the corrupting influence of Dorian’s hedonism. In contrast, Spector’s novel reduces Sybil’s role to a mere plot device, devoid of the emotional and thematic depth present in Wilde’s depiction. This is starkly contrasted in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), where the protagonist, a prostitute named Sugar, is depicted not as an object but as a complex, empowered figure. Through her resilience and manipulation of her circumstances, Sugar challenges the dominant gender norms of the Victorian period, presenting a stark contrast to the passive and punished women in Spector’s narrative. The novel’s portrayal of sexual encounters serves to highlight the dangers and objectification inherent in these relationships rather than offering any form of feminist empowerment. Overall, Spector’s adaptation shifts the focus from Wilde’s exploration of art and virtue corrupted by male desire to a narrative where female characters are used and discarded. Helen’s role as a facilitator of Dorian’s desires and Sybil’s victimisation illustrate the ways in which Spector’s novel fails to address or subvert the dominant sexual norms of its time. Unlike Wilde’s nuanced representation of Sybil’s fall, Spector’s depiction of female characters and their sexual experiences underscores a more cynical view of sexual liberation, presenting it as fraught with risk and exploitation rather than empowerment.

3. Conclusion

Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray* (2012) is a notable reworking of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that completely omits the discussions of homosexuality and aestheticism central to Wilde's novel. Instead, Spector focuses on the sexual exploitation of female characters, a theme that resonates with the darker tendencies often found in neo-Victorian erotic romance, where women are frequently reduced to objects in the male sexual gaze. In Spector's narrative, women not only become victims of male desire but also actively participate in perpetuating this cycle of exploitation, as seen when Helen Wotton aids Dorian in drugging Sybil Vane for a coerced sexual encounter. This reversal, where women facilitate the sexual objectification of one another, illustrates the continued dominance of male-centred desire in the text. While some neo-Victorian works subvert Victorian gender politics by presenting women as powerful, independent figures who challenge the traditional social order, Spector's novel does not engage with these possibilities. Instead, it reinforces Victorian sexual ideologies, perpetuating the dichotomy between the 'angel in the house' and the 'fallen woman'. In Spector's *Fifty Shades of Dorian Gray*, every sexual encounter involving women ultimately results in punishment—whether through social stigma, personal degradation, or death. Helen is socially ostracised for her sexual autonomy, Rosemary's first sexual experience with her stepbrother is presented as taboo and sadomasochistic, and Sybil Vane is reduced to an object of sexual entertainment, her fate left tragically unresolved. These portrayals align with the neo-Victorian tendency to focus on the re-inscription of Victorian moralism, rather than offering the progressive perspectives found in other texts. The fate of Sybil Vane in Spector's adaptation, where her victimhood is left unacknowledged and unimportant, contrasts sharply with Wilde's portrayal, where Sybil's tragic death triggers moral reckoning and consequences for Dorian. In this way, Spector's novel reflects the ongoing struggle in neo-Victorian literature between maintaining traditional gender roles and attempting to challenge or subvert them, often ending up in the reinforcement of old ideologies rather than their dissolution.

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