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The Social and Literary Phenomenon of Infanticide in 18th and 19th Century Britain

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È fosco l'aere, il cielo è muto,
ed io sul tacito veron seduto,
in solitaria malinconia
ti guardo e lagrimo,
Venezia mia!

A. Fusinato, *Addio a Venezia*, (1849)

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, Britain registered one of the highest birth rates ever, but it was not because large families were desired. On the contrary, most of these children were deeply unwanted, resulting in an outbreak of infanticides. In the majority of cases the accused were women, but surprisingly enough, the trials often resulted in the acquittal of the defendants. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the phenomenon of infanticide from both a social and literary point of view. From a social perspective, this dissertation wants to investigate what led women to commit such a dramatic act; why, in the majority of cases, they were absolved from their crimes, and how the pressures that society put on the so-called *Angel of the House* led to both the abnegation of the latter and the constitution of the *Fallen Woman*. In literature, infanticide was a very popular topic explored by some of the most admired authors of the period. The works examined in depth for the purpose of this thesis are *The Thorn* by William Wordsworth and *Adam Bede* by George Eliot. Through the individual analysis of the two infanticidal women protagonists of the poem and the novel – Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel – it is examined how each of them shapes a different version of the figure of the mother/murderess.

Keywords: *Infanticide* - *Motherhood* - *Fallen Woman* - *Angel of the House* - *Romanticism* - *Victorian Period*

INTRODUCTION

That authors take inspiration from the reality surrounding them is a universal truth. Literature becomes the mirror of society: intellectuals from all over the world use their intense sensitivity to depict contemporary events and create stories around them. In the authors' hands, literature becomes an instrument that at the same time reflects the world, and in which the world can identify itself. People have the opportunity to recognise themselves in the story they read and enhance their awareness about the social condition in which they live. In the last decade of the 18th century and during the majority of the 19th the crime of infanticide was spreading like an epidemic, therefore it is no surprise to acknowledge that many renowned authors of the period dedicated one of their works to the theme. For the purpose of this thesis, I analyse the works of two of the greatest authors of the British literature, William Wordsworth and George Eliot, and respectively *The Thorn* (1798) and *Adam Bede* (1859). I chose these works not only because they are two pillars of the entire British literature, but also – and especially – because they give voice to two very different female characters that, in some way, are strictly interwoven with each other, Martha and Hetty. Two women, two mothers and two criminals. Each of them, with their own individual and peculiar stories, conveys a different, but at the same time very similar, image of a Britain ravaged by the horrors of infanticide. Even though *Adam Bede* (1859) was published sixty-one years after the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), both works were published within a society that is struggling with the problem of mass-infanticide.

Starting from Hetty, her story is the only one in which there is no doubt that the crime was committed. Hetty is the accurate representation of the 19th-century woman victim of a society that leaves no freedom of choice to women. It was unbearable for the society of the late 18th and 19th centuries to think of a woman just as an individual and not as a mother; let alone to take into consideration the possibility that a woman could desire not to have children, or that she could have sexual impulses outside the act of procreation. Birth control and abortion were not an option because they were not felt as a necessity: a woman had a natural motherly instinct, and she practiced sexual activity only with her husband and only to give birth to a child. But reality was not always so obedient, as Hetty shows. Hetty does not want to have children, she severely dislikes

children (“Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs (…) for the lambs were got rid of sooner or later,”)[1] and she engages with Arthur Donnithorne in an ‘illicit’ sexual affair, which consequently leads to an unwanted pregnancy. Pregnancy was a private experience for any woman, even the married ones, because they all felt ashamed of the sexual layer of meaning that was intrinsic in their bodily condition. For women carrying an illegitimate baby, things were even worse. They chose not to confide their condition to anybody because they feared their reaction, especially that of their family, since they knew that a pregnancy outside of the marriage would have brought disgrace over their family name. This is why Hetty remains silent. She chooses not to confide her crime to Dinah because she fears her reaction, but most of all she fears the reaction of her relatives, the Poysers:

> I didn’t know what to do. I daredn't go back home again—I couldn't bear it. I couldn't have bore to look at anybody, for they'd have scorned me. I thought o' you sometimes, and thought I'd come to you, for I didn't think you'd be cross with me, and cry shame on me. I thought I could tell you. But then the other folks 'ud come to know it at last, and I couldn't bear that.[2]

In addition, it should be also noted that, since concealment of birth was one of the worst crimes in the eyes of society, at least until the Lord Ellenborough Act of 1803, the tiny communities of villagers obsessively searched for signs of pregnancy on women and in case they found some, they spied on them because they did not want to pass as accomplices. Taking this into consideration, it should be no surprise that Hetty runs away. She finds herself lonely and without any money, so her crime, like many others of the late 18th and 19th centuries, comes out of desperation. But also, she did not have any other choice.

The second woman protagonist I examine is Martha Ray, in the poem *The Thorn* by William Wordsworth. In the context of infanticide, Martha's perspective offers a unique but equally important contribution. People of small communities felt the right to know if a woman was pregnant, just because they wanted to keep society under strict control and a pregnancy had to comply with the social order. Within this historical context there is Martha Ray. When she finds out that the man she loves has betrayed her, she withdraws from society. Vagrancy was extremely linked with concealment of birth, since a vagrant was thought to practice unrestrained sexual activity. The fact that the

[1] G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, London: Penguin, (1859), 2008, p. 169.
[2] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

people from her village could not be a hundred percent certain about her condition, together with all the hypotheses linked with the condition of vagrancy, drove them to the conclusion that she *must* have been pregnant. But, since months passed by and no baby was seen, she *must* have killed her own baby. Martha is the voice of all the women of the late 18th and 19th centuries victims of the people surrounding them, victims of the 'right to know.' It is of no fundamental importance to know whether Martha committed infanticide or not. What has to be highlighted is the physical and psychological violence that pregnant women had to endure during this period of time. People had no scruples in touching women's breast or abdomen to see if there were signs of swelling, and on a psychological level, they had no scruples in accusing a woman of a crime, even though they had no certainty of it.

Starting from Chapter 1, "Infanticide: The Stigma of an Era," first I outline the historical evolution of the crime of infanticide from the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century. From a legal point of view, I examine all the laws concerning infanticide issued during both the centuries, and how the processes took place. I describe the fundamental roles of coroners and forensic doctors during infanticidal cases, and I explain why, in the majority of these cases, criminal women were absolved rather than condemned. Also, I delineate the image of the infanticidal woman, what methods they used to kill their newborn-babies, and I try to explain the reasons why these women committed such a dreadful crime. Finally, I briefly describe the historical context in which the two works I examined, *The Thorn* and *Adam Bede*, were published, the first during the Romantic Age (1798) and the second during the Victorian period (1859). In the second chapter, "The Literary Perspective: William Wordsworth's *The Thorn*," I discuss William Wordsworth's poetics, and then I analyse *The Thorn*, one of the poems included in the collection of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In particular, I focus on the character of Martha Ray and her role as an infanticidal woman ostracized by a judgemental society. I also explore Wordsworth's constant revisions of *The Thorn* by comparing the first version of 1798 with the modified one of 1820. Lastly, I consider Parrish's interpretation of the poem, not as the story of Martha Ray, but as a dramatic monologue, a fruit of the narrator's imagination. Chapter 3, "George Eliot's *Adam Bede*," is devoted to George Eliot and her novel *Adam Bede*. Most of all, I examine the character of Hetty Sorrel and all the distinctive features that make her an "anti-woman:" her deceiving beauty, her lack of compassion, her anti-maternal feelings and finally, the

crime she commits. In the last chapter, "Proudly Fallen Women," I highlight all the characteristics that make Martha and Hetty, respectively an *ante-litteram* fallen woman and a fallen woman. I discuss how their condition of "fallen women," as opposed to the "Angel of the House," was actually a synonym for their freedom against all the constraints society imposed upon them. Women lived in a hostile place, which forced them to isolate themselves and ask nobody for help. It is evident how, even though they have different stories, both Martha and Hetty endure the same violence, the same sufferings, and the same loneliness. Martha and Hetty are just two examples of the multitude of women victims of a society that did not allow them a freedom of thought nor of action. The 18th and 19th-centuries societies obliged women to comply certain standards, and anyone who rebelled was silenced, accused, punished, and ostracize Martha's and Hetty's voices are a fundamental contribution to a chorus of women unheard for too much time. The aim of my thesis through the analysis of these women's stories, my goal is also to empower them and make their voices loud and clear again.

CHAPTER ONE

Infanticide: The Stigma of an Era

1.1 An Historical Overview

> Turn where we may, still are we met by the evidence of a widespread crime.
> In the quiet of the bedroom we raise the box-lid, and the skeletons are there.
> In the calm evening walk we see in the distance
> the suspicious looking bundle, and the mangled infant is within.
> By the canal-side, or in the water, we find the dead child.
> In the solitude of the wood we are horrified by the ghastly sight;
> and if we betake ourselves to the rapid rail in order to escape the pollution,
> we find at our journey's end that the mouldering remains
> of a murdered innocent have been our travelling companion.[3]

During the 19th century Britain registered one of the highest birth rates ever, corresponding to approximately five children per household. Nevertheless, reality was quite different from statistics. In fact, most of these children were deeply undesired, so much so as to become victims of infanticide.[4] Foreign newspapers started labelling Britain as the 'nation of infanticides,' as the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported in 1866. In 1858 the *Dublin Review* defined child-murder as 'the great social evil of the day,' and the *Saturday Review* considered it the consequence of the vices of civilization.[5] Infanticide quickly became a national shame. Media were becoming increasingly important for the Victorian society, especially as an authoritative source of information. That is why journals denouncing infanticide played a huge role in the growing panic over murderous women.[6]

For both married and unmarried women, pregnancy during the 18th and 19th centuries was a private experience, especially because their condition had a clear sexual component. Despite the intimacy of the circumstance, rumour played a huge part on the

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[3] A. Hunt, "Calculations and Concealments: Infanticide in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 34, n. 1 (2006), 71-94, p. 75.
[4] R. Sauer, "Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Population Studies*, vol. 32, n. 1 (1978), 81-93.
[5] G. K. Behlmer, "Deadly Motherhood: Infanticide and Medical Opinion in Mid-Victorian England", *Journal of the History of Medicine*, (1979), 403-427.
[6] A. Kilday, *A History of Infanticide in Britain c. 1600 to the Present*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, (2013), p. 56.

prosecution of unwed mothers-to-be. In fact, people surrounding these women – for example midwives and neighbours – were constantly looking for signs that would suggest a pregnancy. Especially in a time when medical care was not specialized yet, the symptoms used to accuse a woman of pregnancy were often unreliable. Apart from the traditional hints – like the cessation of menstrual menses, the extension of the abdomen and the presence of breast milk – these women also looked for very unusual signs. One of these would be the so called 'garlic test':

> a woman who thought she might be pregnant would slip a clove of garlic into her genital organ. In the morning, if she breathed out the characteristic odour, she was assuredly not pregnant. An embryo, if present, would certainly get in the way of this diffusion: sweet breath proved conception.[7]

Sometimes the search for signs turned into proper physical and psychological violence. Suspected women had to undergo interrogations and physical inspections, which generally consisted of touching the victim's breast to check for the presence of milk. In most cases, the accused justified their symptoms by alluding to other medical conditions.[8]

The place where infanticide occurred and the role of the infanticidal woman are inextricably linked. In fact, studies show that metropolises which had the biggest concentration of servants were also the ones with the biggest concentration of child-murder.[9] Women usually disposed of their babies near their workplace or their house. Research reveals that the crime rate was highest in Paddington, an urban area of London, while it was lowest in Clerkenwell, the poorest area of London. In Paddington there were more servants, who were more autonomous and so more able to get away from their crime. In Clerkenwell instead, the mistress of the house had a more direct authority over servants.[10] In the second part of the 19th century, the discovery of the babies' bodies constituted an unsettling contrast to the "*gentile façade*" of the Victorian villas. It was not odd to casually find a corpse while searching for something else. For example, as illustrated by Rose, in 1858 a nurse was sent to care for a 'sick' housekeeper (she actually had just given birth), and while searching for a clean linen, she found a dead baby in a box. Again, in 1863, a doctor who was called to visit a 'sick'

[7] Ibid., p. 56.
[8] Ibid.
[9] L. Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents. Infanticide in Great Britain 1800-1939*, London: Routledge, (1986).
[10] Behlmer, *op. cit*.

servant found a new-born baby with a noose around its neck. Due to the miserable life they conducted, it was generally believed that domestic employees were so eager to marry, as to be very easily seduced – and then abandoned – by their masters.[11] However, once the hope for marriage – and for a better life – was shattered, these women constituted the most fragile category of all, since if the pregnancy was discovered, they would have been immediately dismissed. In the majority of cases, that is why infanticide occurred.[12]

MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT AND BASTARDY IN LONDON, 1857

Occupation of Mother	*St. Marylebone*	*St. Pancras*	*St. George's, Southwark*	*Totals*
Domestic servants	81	82	31	194 (57.2%)
Not known	59	22		89 (26.3%)
Dressmakers	14	10	9	33 (9.7%)
Tradeworkers	—	5	11	16 (4.7%)
Since-married	2	2	—	4 (1.2%)
Gentlewomen	—	3	—	3 (0.9%)
TOTALS	156	124	59	339 (100.0%)

Figure 1

Women managed to conceal their condition because they wore long skirts, but it was undoubtedly difficult to mask the typical pregnancy symptoms (dizziness, nausea and so on). Since the majority of hospitals did not accept to treat unwed pregnant women, the delivery would happen secretly in their bedroom. Actually, just two hospitals in London accepted these patients, the Queen Charlotte's and the General Asylum. For what concerns the workhouses they completely refused the admission of unmarried mothers-to-be.[13] If the lives of servants were miserable, the ones of aristocratic women were not any better. Indeed, according to Dr Wiltshire many unmarried aristocratic ladies concealed their social status under the title of 'servant,' in order to escape the embarrassment that came with their high rank.[14]

The earliest infanticide statute dates back to 1623, under the reign of King James I. The law stated that any woman that concealed the birth of her illegitimate offspring and killed her new-born baby was punishable by death, unless a testimony could attest

[11] Rose, *op. cit.*
[12] Ibid.
[13] Behlmer, *op. cit.*
[14] Rose, *op. cit.*

that the infant was stillborn.[15] It was not until the 28th of March 1803 that the legislation was altered. Lord Ellenborough (Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench) presented a bill, the 1803 Act, which stated that:

> Women charged with the murder of any issue of their bodies, male or female, which being born alive would by law be bastard, shall proceed and be governed by such and the like rules of evidence and of presumption as are by law used and allowed to take place in respect to other trials for murder.[16]

It is clear that some things changed from the 17th century. First of all, infanticide would now be prosecuted in the same manner as other murders. Secondly, it was fundamental that the child was alive at the time of birth. Finally, the rule was addressed only to illicit children.[17] The remaining part of the act highlighted another important aspect.[18] If a woman's charge for murder failed, she could now be convicted of concealment of birth, a 'minor crime' for which the maximum penalty was of two years imprisonment. The 1803 Act gives me the chance to discuss more in depth about two crucial matters: illegitimate children and concealment of birth.

It was widely believed that illegitimates were the major victims of infanticide. One of the causes could be the fact that among the poorest social groups, where illegitimacy occurred the most, mothers were less aware of the sanitary methods used to take care of a child.[19] But actually, the main reason had to do with the shame a mother of an illegitimate child had to face. For an unmarried woman, raising an illicit child meant showing her sin, her moral disgrace. All she could do to avoid the public humiliation was to eradicate the evidence of her misconduct: "There are only two

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[15] "Many lewd women that have been delivered of bastard children, to avoid their shame, and to escape punishment, do secretly bury or conceal the death of their children, and after, if the child be found dead, the said women do allege [sic] that the said child was born dead; whereas it falleth out sometimes (although hardly it is to be proved) that the said child was murthered [sic] by the said women, their lewd mothers, or by their assent or procurement." M. B. Wasserlein Emmerichs, "Trials of Women for Homicide in Nineteenth-Century England", *Women & Criminal Justice*, vol. 5, n. 1 (2008), 99-109, p. 104.

[16] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

[17] Ibid.

[18] "Provided always, and be it enacted, That it shall and may be lawful for the jury by whole verdict any prisoner charged with such murder as aforesaid shall be acquitted, to find, in case it shall so appear in evidence that the prisoner was delivered of issue of her body, male or female, which, if born alive, would have been bastard, and that she did, by secret burying, or otherwise, endeavour to conceal the birth thereof, and thereupon it shall be lawful for the court before which such prisoner shall have been tried to adjudge that such prisoner shall be committed to the common gaol or house of correction for any time not exceeding two years." Ibid., p. 115.

[19] Sauer, *op. cit*.

courses before the unfortunate mother, either to kill her child or support it by sin."[20] In 1834 the high number of illegitimates started to alert the government, which wanted to find a solution. It was Malthus, a British philosopher and economist, to suggest it. He believed that by shifting the responsibility from the father to the mother, and by denying to the latter the support of the New Poor Law,[21] then illegitimacy would decrease.[22] With the old bastardy statute if a woman accused a man of being the father of her infant, he could either pay for the maintenance of the child, or any justice could arrest him.[23] In accordance with the new rule, women needed to obtain paternity proof in order for fathers to economically sustain their children, but this was very challenging to gain.[24] Malthus argued that it was licit freeing men from their duties, since it was a woman's responsibility to preserve her chastity. He was also convinced that in this way infanticide cases would diminish, since, according to them, when left to herself, the woman, possessing *natural maternal feelings*, would not attempt to kill her own offspring. The man, considered instead the one to suggest the crime in the first place, would have no interest in doing so anymore, being now free.[25] This theory was completely ineffective, and contrary to popular belief, child-murder rates actually increased. This was because in the majority of cases women could not afford raising a child on their own, and things got even worse with the Little Poor Law of 1844. According to this statute, women could now start legal actions against the fathers of their infants, but the process was very difficult and often not worth the effort. They had to pay the magistrate and the officer in an attempt to locate the man, which was not always guaranteed, and they also had to provide evidence of paternity. Eventually, what they earned was insufficient to support them and the children.[26]

In the 18th and 19th century women who wanted to hide their pregnancy had to protect themselves from the suspects and the accusations of their neighbours. This

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[20] A. R. Higginbotham, ""Sin of the Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London", *Victorian Studies*, vol. 32, n. 3 (1989), 319-337, p. 322.

[21] "Outdoor relief - the financial support formerly given to the able-bodied - was no longer to be available to them so as to compel them to work. Outside assistance was widely available to the sick and elderly. But in many areas assistance was only given within the confines of the workhouse where the regime was deliberately harsh and often cruel" (E. Chadwick, "Poor Law Reform". Available: https://www.parliament.uk/about/livingheritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/poorlaw/, Accessed 2023, May).

[22] Rose, *op. cit*.

[23] Behlmer, *op. cit*.

[24] Sauer, *op. cit*.

[25] Rose, *op. cit*.

[26] Behlmer, *op. cit*.

happened mainly for two reasons. The first regards individuals' 'right to know.' People believed that being the accused woman part of their community, they had the right to control her, since her pregnancy constituted a 'threat' to their established economic structure. Secondly, in order to avoid the charge for complicity, members of communities accused any woman suspected of carrying an illegitimate child.[27] All this hunt led women to give birth completely alone and in secret. They had a limited amount of time to deliver the infant before suspicions were raised, and despite the agony of labour, they had to remain silent all the time. The afterbirth was just as difficult. The woman had to clear all the evidence, cut the umbilical cord, and then go back to work as if nothing happened.[28] Legally, concealment of birth was considered a crime only if the dead body of the baby was found hidden in private places. On the contrary, if infants were left where anyone could see them, like in highways, it was technically not acknowledged as concealment.[29] Dr Frederick Lowndes in 1876 believed that this was the reason why babies were so often dumped in streets.[30] Also, if a woman cried during and after labour, but no one heard her, leaving her alone until the new-born died, she could not be accused of concealment of birth.[31] Finally, in Scotland, even if just one person knew of the woman's condition, she could be acquitted. Until 1861 the charge for concealment of birth was included in the infanticide statute. With The Offenses Against the Person Act (1861) things changed, concealment of birth became a distinct crime, and it could be applied to any person, not just the mother.[32]

1.2 Methods of Infanticide and Forensic Medicine

In 1866 the *Journal of Social Science* reported: "(…) the police (…) think no more of finding the dead body of a child in the streets than of picking up a dead cat or dog."[33] But how were all these murders committed? One of the forms of passive infanticide was neglect. Negating the care of a new-born was an 'easier' way to commit the crime, especially for married women, as it was undetectable. Other practices were overlaying

[27] Kilday, op. cit.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Rose, *op. cit*.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] C. Damme, "Infanticide: The Worth of an Infant under Law", *Medical History*, vol. 22, (1978), 1-24.
[33] P. Mathieson, "Bad or Mad? Infanticide: Insanity and Morality in Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Midlands Historical Review*, vol. 4, (2020), 1-44, p. 2.

and suffocation. The latter was difficult to identify as voluntary, that is why it was the most employed technique in all Britain, as showed by the graphic below.[34]

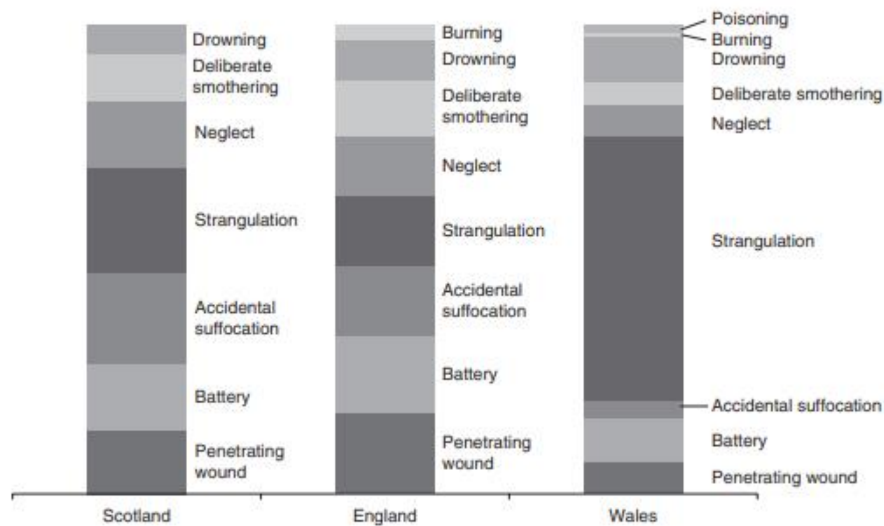

Figure 2

Known cases of infanticide in Britain, 1700 - 1830

The signs around an infant's neck could be considered as a clear proof of voluntary strangulation. However, women usually justified them as the marks left by the umbilical cord stuck around the neck.[35] An example of strangulation was reported by *The Morning Chronicle* in 1851, when a young woman called Maria Stewart confessed:

> When I laid hands on it, held it to my breast and let it suck it began to cackle and I thought someone would hear it, and that I must kill it. I put my hand over the mouth and nipped the throat with my fingers, and then took my garter and tied or put it around the neck so that it might die okay. I killed it because I thought I should not have a father for my child…It is the second little girl I have murdered, I strangled the both.[36]

As Kilday writes "Babies were also thrown from windows, flung over cliffs and hit off inanimate objects such as trees and the side of buildings. Sometimes common household goods or items of clothing were used in attacks (…)."[37] In fact, the instruments used to commit the crime were not calculated. On the contrary, women tended to use what was around them at the moment of parturition, so the weapons were commonly related to the place they were and the job they had.[38] Another subtle method

[34] Kilday, *op. cit*.
[35] Kilday, *op. cit*.
[36] Mathieson, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8. This case is also proof of how illegitimacy and the fear of being excluded from society played a huge role in child-murder.
[37] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
[38] Ibid.

was giving food known to be indigestible for an infant or choosing not to call the doctor when a baby fell ill.[39]

New-born babies were also very often abandoned, in this way they could either be discovered or die because of exposure to nature and wild animals.[40] Abandonment was not easier than infanticide as it might seem. Especially for servants who concealed their pregnancy, to be discovered while away from their workplace, or because of the baby's cries, posed a considerable risk. Foundling hospitals were established to facilitate the abandonment of children. The first one was instituted in Milan in 787.[41] For what regards Britain, the creation of the London's Foundling Hospital dates back to 1739.[42] Usually, this is how the abandonment process functioned: a revolving door or a turntable was placed just outside the hospital, in this way the mother could set the infant on one side, then she rang a bell, and a caregiver came to take the infant on the other side of the table. The mother was left anonymous and unseen.[43] In London things were slightly different, as the facility was not equipped with a turntable. However, mothers were free to bring their infants, as long as the new-borns were less than two months old and healthy (at least until 1756).[44] Although initially foundling hospitals appeared to be a solution to the problem of child-murder, society quickly found three reasons to shut them down. The first was the cost. The number of children left into care was so high, that the economic weight started to be too much to bear. Secondly, infanticidal rates did not decrease as they expected. This was because these institutions were not appropriately equipped for nursing such a high number of infants and the effect was just a delay of their death. And last but not least, society started to believe that this kind of help would have encouraged illicit sexual relations and consequent pregnancies, rather than diminish them.[45]

The Victorian era saw an advancement of scientific knowledge. Through the help of forensic medicine, crimes became medicalised, and juries often relied on autopsy rather than on mere testimonies.[46] However, doctors were not always trustworthy, particularly when it came to death certificates. Birth and death registration

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[39] Sauer, *op. cit.*
[40] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[41] Ibid.
[42] Sauer, *op. cit.*
[43] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Mathieson, *op. cit.*

was a delicate topic of the 19th century, and it is easy to see how its inefficiency contributed to the ease with which child-murder was committed.[47] Local registrars had the duty to compile the archives with births, deaths, and marriages. However, it should be noted that neither registration of births nor of babies born dead was compulsory in England until 1874. In fact, there are several cases that exemplify how serious the situation was. In 1844, the registrar of Lincoln reported a case of a local gravedigger that buried "thirty or more" children with no certainties of them being dead, as long as he received his money. A very similar situation happened in 1862, when the bodies of thirteen children were discovered in a churchyard, with proofs that at least two of them were alive at the moment of birth.[48]

Before 1874 people were subject to the 1834 Registration Act,[49] which not only excluded birth registration, but also imposed death registration to be applied not at the time of death itself, but only at the time of burial. As a result, deaths that occurred in ambiguous circumstances were better concealed. Despite the new act, accuracy of the data was still not guaranteed. In fact, illegitimates were often registered as legitimates, and new-born victims of infanticide were frequently recorded as stillbirths.[50] Furthermore, the 1874 Registration Act granted a six-week period of time before registration, which was long enough for mothers to commit the crime and leave no trace behind. This was probably due to the fact that infants under two months old were more expected to die and burial insurance did not pay for such a premature death, so a doctor's certificate was not considered necessary.[51] As I mentioned before, despite scientific advancements, the medical information provided to the registrars remained untrustworthy. The 1874 Act required death certificates to be signed by a Registered Medical Practitioner.[52] In particular, the doctor had to write the symptoms of his last visit, but it was not specified the maximum time limit since this last visit:

> (…) weeks may have passed since the doctor saw the patient, and it was notorious that they could be easily induced by relatives to fill in certificates giving the last symptoms they

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[47] Behlmer, *op. cit*.
[48] Behlmer, *op. cit.*
[49] This law only applied to England and Wales. Scotland followed the Scottish Registration Act of 1854, which was "more advanced than the English: registration of births was compulsory; and it expressly allowed for application to registrars for burial certificates to be accompanied by a death certificate signed by a 'medical person' who was in attendance upon the deceased during his last illness." Rose, *op. cit*., Chapter 14, p. 2.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] The profession of Registered Medical Practitioner follows the 1858 Medical Registration Act.

> could remember as the cause of death (…) For instance, if the doctor saw an emaciated baby, he need only write 'atrophy' on the form; if he suspected a history of wilful neglect it was entirely up to his own conscience whether to refuse a certificate and perhaps notify the coroner directly, or to write some alerting comment on it for the registrar's attention.[53]

In the majority of cases, even if a doctor suspected that the infant had been killed, he did not report it. There could be a variety of reasons behind this choice. It was feasible, for instance, that a doctor did not want his testimony to be used to prosecute an unmarried woman. But also, that he did not want to get involved by asking too many questions, risking to "lose custom."[54] And last but not least, doctors were not paid to compile these certificates. The problem was that omitting information or falsifying data meant to hinder the work of coroners and judges.[55] Too frequently did doctors write vague symptoms on certificates, using words like 'deterioration,' 'weakness,' 'malnutrition,' which did not provide any kind of useful information about the child's background.[56] In 1873, Mary Ann Cotton was convicted for the murder of her stepson. On the death certificate the indicated cause was 'gastric fever,' but a subsequent autopsy revealed that he was actually poisoned. Again, in 1888, Mary Ann Whitfield killed her two sons. The certificates stated 'congestion of the lungs' and 'kidney disease,' but in reality they died by laudanum poisoning.[57]

1.3 Baby-farms, Midwives and Wet-Nurses

There were not many options left for those women who neither wanted to commit infanticide, nor to keep the baby. One of these was the practice of baby-farming, which initially seemed like a solution but quickly evolved into another covert method of child-murder. Baby-farming was a system which involved women handing their infants over to another woman in exchange for a one-time payment or a weekly fee for childcare.[58] Mothers in difficulties benefited from this service for various reasons. For example, unmarried women had the chance to avoid the social shame of having an illegitimate child; but also, they averted the risk of losing their job and the economic consequences

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[53] Rose, *op. cit.*, Chapter 14, p. 6.
[54] Ibid.
[55] I deeper analyse the figure of the coroner later on in the chapter.
[56] Rose, *op. cit.*
[57] Ibid.
[58] Hunt, *op. cit.*

of having an infant.[59] The problem was that the conditions in which these children were left into care were squalid, and statistics show that mortality rate in the 1870s reached 90% only in baby farms.[60] It seems that death generally occurred when payment ceased, in this way baby-farmers could maximize their profit.[61] Rose reports a testimony from 1870 of a servant, Sophia, who worked in a baby-farm. She revealed that infants were voluntarily neglected and constantly beaten. Apparently, at night they were left sleeping on the floor with no pillow and nourished with food they could not digest. It was a business based on murdering children.[62] People were so outraged by this practice that in 1860 an anonymous poem was published to denounce Charlotte Winsor, a murderous baby-farmer:

> This dreadful woman, Charlotte Winsor,
> Took children in to nurse,
> A devil she was in human form
> We could not call her worse;
> She would tamper with their young mother,
> With if you would like to pay,
> For a few pounds, say three of four,
> I will put your child away.
> (…) She would murder them – yes, strangle them
> For this paltry gain,
> By putting them between beds,
> Or pressing the juglar vein (…).[63]

There are some aspects of this poem that it is worth highlighting. The mother is described as "young," or "poor," whereas the baby-farmer as a "dreadful woman" or a "devil." These two categories of women represent on the one hand the ideal Victorian woman and on the other the criminal woman, whose existence was not acknowledged by the Victorians.[64] In fact, baby-farms were regarded more as a threat to the idealised

[59] Ibid.
[60] Sauer, *op. cit*.
[61] Hunt, *op. cit*.
[62] Rose, *op. cit*., Chapter 5, p. 5.
[63] Mathieson, *op. cit*., p. 13.
[64] Ibid.

conceptualization of motherhood and womanhood, rather than to infants.[65] A remedy emerged in 1872, with The Infant Life Protection Act, which had the aim of controlling baby-farms and their abuses.[66]

Women could also rely on midwives' ambivalent assistance. In the Victorian period midwives attended 90% of all births. It was more convenient for poor people to be nursed by an obstetrician rather than a doctor, both because it was cheaper and because the midwife was usually part of the woman's local community.[67] The ideal midwife had to be an older woman and a mother, but with grown up children so that she could be available at all times. Furthermore, she had to be strong in order to handle the stress of labour.[68] However, midwifery could easily become a vile practice. Obstetricians were in fierce competition and would have done anything to win patients, including provide dodgy add-on services like murdering new-borns and making them appear stillborn.[69] For example, in 1895 *The Sun* made an investigation on a so called "Mrs X" and revealed that the woman was used to arrange stillbirths for £30, then burying the infants in her backyard.[70] A figure similar to the midwife is that of the wet-nurse. Wet nursing "can be defined as the 'breastfeeding of another woman's child either in charity or for payment'."[71] Wet-nurses have always been employed, even long before the 19th century. In the pre-modern period, they were engaged especially by wealthy women who did not want to breastfeed because they thought that it could serve as a form of contraception.[72] The role of the wet-nurse was also strictly connected to foundling hospitals, as babies who were admitted to hospitals were usually taken to a wet-nurse and lived with her until they were at least four years old. Sometimes, after leaving their babies to the hospital, the mothers specifically requested to be designed as the infant's wet-nurse, so that they could be paid to take care of their own child.[73] The criteria used to select a wet-nurse were different from those employed to choose a midwife. She had to be young, healthy, with strong hygiene habits, and preferably with a large breast. The quality and quantity of milk was also meticulously examined. Finally, wet-nurses had the duty to provide a home in the countryside for the baby, away

[65] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[66] Hunt, *op. cit.*
[67] Rose, *op. cit.*
[68] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[69] Rose, *op. cit.*
[70] Ibid.
[71] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

from the corruption and filth of the city.[74] Similar to what happened with foundling hospitals and midwives, there first appeared to be no drawbacks, but just after a few years, even wet-nurses began to decline. The reason was attributed to the apparent negligence of these caretakers, probably because they accepted too many infants in order to boost their profits. As a result, they ran out of milk and had to use alternative and industrial feeding products that were lethal for children of such a young age.[75] Evidence suggests that some women purposefully got pregnant in order to work as wet-nurses and earn money, while leaving their children in the care of a less expensive nurse. Because of this, it is believed that even wet nursing contributed to an increase in infanticide.

Finally, it should be mentioned that up to 1860 only two lying-in hospitals in London accepted unmarried women and allowed them to give birth there, the Queen Charlotte's[76] and the General Lying-In Asylum. The only other support women could enjoy was that of two societies, the Daniel Cooper's 'Society for the Rescue of Young Women and Children' and Jane Dean Main's 'Refuge for Deserted Mothers and Children,' respectively established in 1853 and 1864.[77]

1.4 How to Get Away with Murder

At this point one should wonder what could possibly be the reasons for committing such a dreadful crime. I am going to group these motives into four different categories: shame, willingness, economic gain, and 'insanity.'

During the 18th and 19th centuries shame was strictly interrelated to women's sexual activity. Especially when sexual relations were not consensual, for instance in the case of assaults or incest, women might have preferred to eradicate the 'problem' in order to avoid the humiliation associated to their abuse. These types of murders were defined "crimes of outrage," because these women felt such an intense disgrace as to fear a dangerous future.[78] For example, one of the consequences of an illegitimate pregnancy generally included the dishonour of the entire family. As Kilday explains

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] The Queen Charlotte's allowed in pregnant unmarried women only if it was their first time. Rose, *op. cit.*
[77] Ibid.
[78] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

"the head of the household could be publicly derided for his inability to control the sexual behaviour of family members;"[79] this social pressure made young mothers-to-be terrified of their parents' reaction.[80]

The fact that women could be criminals was a taboo for 18th and 19th-century Britain. That is why it was so difficult for Victorians to accept that infanticides could be committed deliberately as well. Some women saw infanticide as a straightforward, efficient, and useful way to escape the obligations of motherhood. Not everyone concealed their pregnancies to avoid disgrace, some people did it just not to be arrested.[81] In 1761 a servant called Christian Munro murdered her infant by slitting its throat and then buried it in a field. When she was sent to trial, she confessed that she simply did not want the "bairn" of a child, or to hear its cries.[82]

Figure 3

Giovanni Segantini, *The Evil Mothers*[83]

[79] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
[80] Evidence of this is the story of Magdalen Bowman, a young lady who in 1790 drowned her illegitimate son, confessing that she was afraid of her mother and father. Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., p. 165.
[83] In the midst of an icy winter landscape, a young woman is writhing, caught in a tree. Ensnared by its branches, her child suckles at her breast. But the mother struggles against the infant with all her might. In

The Victorian society also “did not believe” that a woman could put her financial needs ahead of a child. The 1834 New Poor Law Report of the Commission stated: "We do not believe that infanticide arises from any calculation as to expense. We believe that in no civilised country, and scarcely any barbarous country, has such a thing been heard of as a mother killing her child in order to save the expense of feeding it."[84] However, reality was a little different than what they imagined. First of all, if a woman employee was discovered being pregnant by her masters, she would have been fired without further notice, losing both her job and her means of support.[85] After the diagnosis, it was barely possible for her to find another job, and especially for an unmarried woman this meant losing all possibilities to economically sustain herself. At this point, for many women, killing their new-borns was the only way they could survive.[86] Rose narrates the case of a woman called Elizabeth Scott, who, in 1841, applied for the allowance provided by the New Poor Law, in order to feed herself and her infant. She was given one shilling and six pence a week.[87] Reportedly, one shilling had to be used for rent, leaving her with just six pence to sustain herself and her child. Again, in 1858, Mary Newell admitted of having abandoned her three-month-old baby in the Thames, after the father of the new-born turned his back on her, refusing of giving her money.[88] Another possible reason for women (in this case, particularly married ones) committing infanticide for financial purposes, regards burial insurance. Parents made weekly payments of a penny, and in return, if the infant died for natural causes, they would receive £3 - £5 which theoretically had to be used for burial costs, but in reality, only £1 was actually needed.[89] In order to increase their profits, parents usually insured their new-borns in many different clubs. The economic gain was so advantageous that, as a result, poor people often gave birth to children and then murdered them, with the only aim of receiving burial money. Sauer claims that asserting that a child was in the “burial club” was a common expression among women of the lower classes to indicate that the child would soon be dead. In order to decrease the number of people using this

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his 1894 painting *The Evil Mothers*, Giovanni Segantini addresses the controversial subject of unwanted pregnancies (Belvedere Museum, Vienna).

[84] Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[85] Kilday, *op. cit.*

[86] Ibid.

[87] Rose, *op. cit.*

[88] Hunt, *op. cit.*

[89] Sauer, *op. cit.*

atrocious strategy, a law prohibiting life insurance for people under the age of six was passed in 1846.[90]

The number of verdicts convicting accused women was decisively low compared to the number of infants found dead during the 19th century. Even when there was unmistakable proof, in the majority of cases these murderous mothers were absolved. But why?

The figure that investigated this type of crimes was the coroner. He had the authority to decide whether to hold an inquest on a case or not.[91] Coroners were chosen by the county ratepayers and they did not need any professional qualification, at least not until the Coroners Act of 1926. Statistics suggest that out of 1000 cases, only 50 underwent thorough inquest investigations. Coroners tended not to hold "unnecessary" inquests, in order not to make an enemy of local authorities, who otherwise had to at least pay an autopsy.[92] In the majority of cases, they relied on the fact that if the investigated murder presented a doctor's certificate, even if it was untruthful, the cause of death was still theoretically known.[93] Apart from the coroners' superficiality, other reasons played a huge role in the acquittal of criminal women during the Victorian era. What happened was essentially that male juries hesitated in condemning infanticidal women, because they strongly believed that any woman possessed maternal feelings, and that the only reason why a child-murder could occur, was because of insanity. And when evidence showed that there was no sign of insanity, they assumed that the infant was born already dead.[94] According to statistics, in 1860, 126 children were found dead, but only 81 women were arraigned; again in 1865, out of 221 dead new-borns, only 120 women were charged.[95] In most of the cases, although women went to trial, they were not condemned for the crime they committed, that is to say murder, but for a less serious crime, like concealment of birth (even when there was no sign of concealment).[96] Finally, even when the court did impose a death sentence, it was rarely carried out.[97] In the 19th century trials were not transcribed, however through articles published on *The*

[90] Ibid.
[91] Rose, *op. cit.*
[92] Ibid.
[93] It is worth mentioning that one of the reasons wrote on verdicts by coroners was "Visitation of God." Ibid.
[94] Emmerichs, *op. cit.*
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Kilday, *op. cit.*

Times or *The Sun*, it is possible to detect the atmosphere in court. For instance, *The Times* in 1859, reported that during the trial of Agnes Bradley the judge "became painfully affected, so much so, that at one time he buried his face in his notebook and shed tears, and seemed almost unable to proceed with the evidence."[98] Rose reports different examples of episodes testifying the absurdity of some trials. In 1862 at Ipswich, a girl was initially condemned for concealing her birth, even though her new-born was found with its throat cut "from ear to ear."[99] When the baby was discovered, she fainted and for this reason the jury completely acquitted her, stating that "there could be no concealment on her part if she were unconscious."[100] Again, in 1860 a girl named Ann Billington was sent to trial for murdering her child, found with a weapon in its throat. However, the juries found her guilty only of concealment of birth, since they could not determine whether the child was still attached to its mother's body when the crime was committed.[101] This last episode gives me the opportunity to explore another interesting excuse the courts used to absolve women. During a process for infanticide, prosecuting lawyers had to demonstrate not only that the child had lived, but most importantly that it had lived independently from the mother. Separate existence was required by law, because they believed that "the umbilical cord transmitted the mother's blood circulation through the child."[102] So, even in the case of a baby found with its head ripped from its neck, if its lower extremities were still attached to the mother's womb, she could not be charged of murder.[103]

[98] C. L. Krueger, "Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Victorian Studies*, vol. 40, n. 2 (1997), 271-294, p. 275.
[99] Rose, *op. cit.*, Chapter 8, p. 6.
[100] Ibid., p. 7.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., Chapter 8, p. 2.
[103] Behlmer, *op. cit*.

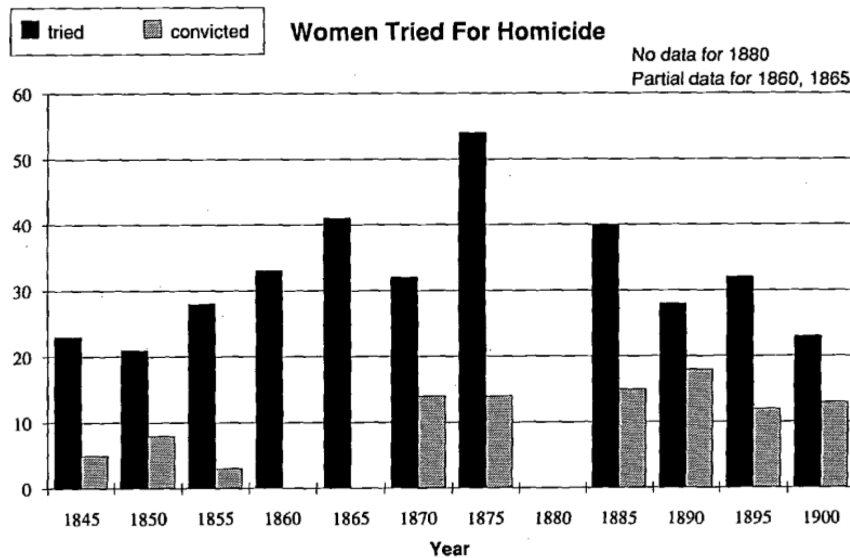

Figure 4

During the Victorian era, women were specifically labelled as child-murderesses. This was because, in light of the statistics reported by Emmerichs, in 1870 out of "thirty-two murder trials of women" nineteen regarded "the killing of new-born infants," and in 1875, out of fifty-four trials "at least thirty-seven (…) were for infanticide."[104] Even if at a lower percentage, even men took charge of this crime. Sometimes they offered abortifacients to pregnant women, other times they tried to kill either them or the neonates, as soon as they were born.[105] Men usually committed child-murder mainly for three reasons. First of all, since the majority of the babies they were expecting were illegitimate, they wanted to hide at all costs their adulterous and illicit sexual relationships. Secondly, they were concerned about upholding their reputation among their neighbours. Finally, they did not want the economic burden of an illegitimate child.[106] Unlike women, if a man was tried for murder, he was probably sentenced to death. This happened because society considered men as more rational, more able of keeping their instincts under control. So, if a man showed his violent and aggressive nature, he was perceived as dangerous to society, and so punishable. On the other hand, women were seen as unreasonable creatures to be pitied.[107]

[104] Emmerichs, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
[105] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[106] Ibid.
[107] Mathieson, *op. cit.*

It was very hard for the 18th and 19th-century societies to acknowledge that women could be criminals just like men. Women had to be pure, chaste and they needed to possess an innate desire of becoming mothers. This deeply ingrained ideology was in sharp contrast to the high occurrence of infanticides during this period of time. As a result, they chose to refer to women as insane rather than embrace their criminality. During legal proceedings, insanity was utilised to defend infanticide and acquit the accused. In particular, doctors of the 19th century defined it a peculiar kind of madness, strictly related to the act of giving birth, which, according to them, represented a trauma for women, and they called it "puerperal madness."[108] The symptoms associated with this illness were: "sleeplessness, rapid pulse, pallor or flushed skin, vivid eyes, furred tongue and constipation and delirium; great excitability, expressed through constant chattering, delusions, singing, swearing, tearing clothes and lewd sexual displays."[109] It is clear that these signs were not enough to attest a medical condition, especially some of them – like singing, swearing, tearing clothes– were not even actual evidence of any type of illness. In 1845 the Lunacy Act and the County Asylums Acts were passed, which strengthened the idea of insanity as a serious medical condition that needed to be treated in specific mental health institutions. These laws allowed juries to use the idea that women may have mental illnesses to excuse their illegal behaviour, and so absolve them from all accusations. As Mathieson states:

> The medicalisation of infanticidal cases in the nineteenth century was dependent on medical professionals 'pathologising' puerperal mania, consequently treating the accused as subjects of 'medical rather than legal attention and treatment rather than punishment.'[110]

The testimony recounted by the English jurist Justice Bramwell (1808 - 1892) is an illustration of such. He participated in a case where the defendant was a woman who openly admitted to having killed her infant. However, the jury acquitted her using the defence of momentary insanity, since they did not believe that a mother could conduct such a terrible crime:

> She cut its throat, and she rushed out into the street and said that she had done so.... I cannot in my own mind believe that that woman was as mad as the law would require her to be . . . but it was an act of such a character that the only address to the jury was "'This woman may have had a sudden condition of mind come upon her, in which she really did not know what

[108] Mathieson, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[109] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
[110] Mathieson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

> she was doing." She was a very decent looking young woman; everybody in the court wept, the counsel on both sides and the jury and everybody; and the result was that she was acquitted.[111]

Even though it might seem positive that women were not conducted for infanticide, the reasons behind this choice were not so beneficial for women. The moment puerperal insanity was acknowledged as a justification for infanticide, women became even more ostracized and were treated as inferior individuals, since "they were once again considered non-autonomous beings, who were dominated, controlled and ultimately defined by the unpredictable nature of their emotions and sensibilities."[112] There might have been cases in which insanity was the true reason why such crimes occurred, but most certainly there were cases in which women were one-hundred-percent aware of what they were doing and why. This thesis aims at returning to women the right to be criminals, rather than be classified as frail creatures to be pitied because of their poor mental health.

1.5 Abortifacients and Contraceptive Methods

The Victorian society tried to provide numerous remedies to the mass-infanticide that occurred during the course of the century, but it was easier said than done. Legislation was changed several times, for example fathers started having more economic responsibility over their illegitimate children, baby-farms and wet-nurses became illegal, postpartum care improved and more charitable accommodations were provided.[113] However, despite the best efforts put forth in these ideas, little was actually done to enforce these changes.[114] The last execution for infanticide was held in 1849, on a woman named Rebecca Smith.[115] Both the rate of births and the prevalence of infanticide started to drop in the final two decades of the 19th century. This was most likely due to a better awareness of contraception methods as well as an incremented usage of abortifacients.[116] As a result, according to statistics, from 1896 to 1900 only 44

[111] Damme, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
[112] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
[113] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[114] Ibid.
[115] Damme, *op. cit.*
[116] Emmerichs, *op. cit.*

people were condemned for concealment of birth, compared to the 103 women from 1871 to 1875.[117]

At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, abortion was considered a dangerous practice, especially for the sake of women. In fact, surgery was still experimental in 1800s, and nearly one-third of patients who underwent procedures as complex as abortions were at the highest risk of dying.[118] Abortifacient medications were also an option, but women tended not to use them because they could seriously affect their health. Sometimes, women tried to have an abortion by themselves, rarely they had the help of a professional figure.[119] It might be absurd to believe that, at least until the 19th century, abortion was not a legal offence. This was due to the fact that the foetus was not regarded as an independent organism until the mother felt its first movements, which usually happened during the fourth and fifth month. After this period of time, if abortion was committed the mother could be fined or imprisoned.[120] Things started to change from the 19th century onwards, when people started believing that the foetus was actually alive from the moment of conception. In particular, the 1803 Act stated that committing abortion was illegal at any stage of pregnancy, but if the operation was carried out before 'quickening,'[121] then the mother would be punished by a fine or imprisonment, whereas after quickening, she was punishable by death.[122] However, there are no known cases of execution due to abortion.[123] Laws became stricter because medical knowledge advanced,[124] making abortion less risky. The press started to discuss about a so-called "flight from maternity," a new 'trend' which involved the middle class desire of having smaller families.[125] In 1832 *The Legal Examiner* published an article that stated: "The mind instinctively recoils at the idea of the destruction of human life, however imperfectly and immaturely it may be developed…This universal sentiment is of itself sufficient to justify penal enactment for the suppression of abortion."[126] Basically, according to *The Examiner* abortion had to be suppressed for mainly three reasons: A) everyone had to enjoy human rights, even an

[117] Sauer, *op. cit.*
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] The moment in which the foetus starts to move.
[122] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[123] Sauer, *op. cit.*
[124] For example, in 1846 anaesthetics were used for the first-time during surgery. Ibid.
[125] P. Knight, "Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England", *History Workshop*, n. 4 (1977), 57-68.
[126] Sauer, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

embryo; B) a law was necessary to prevent women from harming themselves; C) if abortion went unpunished, then sexual illicitness went unpunished as well, and this, according to them, could break society apart.[127] In the 1840s, the first professional abortionist emerged. Evidence shows that in Nottingham, one professional abortionist carried out nine abortions in two months, and *The Lancet* revealed that abortionists advertised themselves through leaflets.[128] As the years went by, they started to provide an actual plan that allowed women to undergo to how many abortions as they wished, for the cost of only £15.

The Malthusian League was founded in London in 1977. It was the period of the 'Great Depression,' so wages were very low, and unemployment was high.[129] Malthusian League members, and especially its major promoters Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, had the aim of promoting contraception in order to limit the family size, because they thought this could be a remedy against the extreme poverty of the period.[130] The League was established based on Malthus's economic theories. While economists of the time thought that an increase in the population meant incrementing wealth as well, Malthus believed that over-population caused poverty and epidemics. He published all his theories in his book *An Essay on The Principle of Population* (1798). Based on these ideas, the Neo-Malthusians claimed that early marriage and small families constituted the ideal condition to solve all societal issues. First because, according to them, both celibacy and marrying late in life led to an increase of prostitution and consequently of sexually transmitted infections. Secondly, for people who married early, it was fundamental to make a 'family planning' and to use contraception.[131] Only in this way could poverty be defeated. As a result, wages could get better, and also child-care conditions could improve. Neo-Malthusians published their ideas on a journal called *The Malthusian*, even though they had to overcome the opposition of both the government and ecclesiastics that considered birth control illegal and sinful.[132] The two founders of the League, Bradlaugh and Besant were arrested in 1877 for publishing a pamphlet called *Fruits of Philosophy* containing the instructions

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[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Knight, *op. cit.*
[130] C. Nunez-Eddy, "The Malthusian League (1877–1927)", *Embryo Project Encyclopedia*, 2017. Available: The Malthusian League (1877–1927) | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia (asu.edu), Accessed 2023, April.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.

on how to prevent pregnancy. The book was illegal because at the time it was prohibited to publish literature about reproduction. The jury condemned Bradlaugh and Besant for voluntarily distributing an ‘obscene and immoral’ book. The trial became immensely widespread, so much so to increase the sales of *Fruits of Philosophy* from 1000 to 125000 copies sold.[133]

Leaflets circulating during those years suggested some physical activities that would eventually hurt the foetus, like sneezing, jumping, coughing and making exercises.[134] In 1898 it was demonstrated that 12.000 women bought an abortifacient. In fact, in these years diachylon became very popular,[135] even though sometimes its use led to poisonings.[136] Other herbal abortifacients were savin, ergot of rye and pennyroyal. But also gin and gunpowder, gin and salts, washing soda and so on.[137] Some medicines could be used both as abortifacient and birth control, for example the quinine could be used both “as a spermicide or as a drug to procure abortion.”[138] Evidence shows that a midwife from Birmingham boiled copper coins and made women drink the resulting water. It should be noted that all these oral methods provoked “vomiting, muscular contractions and convulsions, which might cause abortion as a side-effect” and “in many cases abortion failed to occur.”[139] In fact, being them often untrustworthy, people mainly relied on the “safe period,” that is to say the period occurring between menstruation. Nonetheless, they did not know that this period was actually the most fertile. Sheaths could be used but they were very expensive compared to the average family wage.[140] By 1880s recipes that worked as birth control existed, but they were not easy to attain:

> Spermicidal solutions for use with sponges or syringes had to be mixed by the woman herself, using quinine and other ingredients in a process resembling a, chemical experiment. One recipe for contraceptive powder, for instance, involved mixing 35 parts of powdered starch, I5 of boric acid, 10 of gum arabic, 2 1/2 of tannic acid and 2 1/2 of citric acid. Successful female contraception required time, space, perseverance and above all, money.[141]

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Knight, *op. cit*.
[135] A lead-based drug which when taken by mouth often induced abortion. Sauer, *op. cit*., p. 98.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Knight, *op. cit*., p. 60.
[138] Ibid., p. 58.
[139] Ibid., p. 60.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., p. 59.

This is the main reason why women turned to abortion as a solution: it was cheaper and it did not need pre-organisation, which was ideal since most of the times they had to act in secret and as quickly as possible. Abortion could be accomplished by taking drugs or by using some tools, like knitting needles. This method was clearly more agonizing. Knight reports the case of a woman who tried to abort through the use of a hairpin. She scratched her womb until she gave birth to a five-months old dead foetus.[142] Another example is that of a woman paying £3 to a midwife to help her abort, and she mangled her uterus. The business surrounding abortifacients was publicized on local journals and oftentimes they fooled women by selling medicines that had no real effect. Sometimes men used these drugs as an excuse to blackmail women. Knight illustrates the case of the Chrimes brothers, who sent their clients a fake letter from a "public official" saying that they would be arrested for having attempted abortion unless they paid two guineas.[143]

The difference with infanticide is that abortion was becoming a common practice even among married women. According to Sauer, the reason was to be associated with the desire to live a more convenient and luxurious life, which could not be attained with a child.[144] Moreover, abortion gave women a degree of freedom they never experienced before: they had complete authority over their fertility.[145] Apparently, women who attempted abortion were not marginalised by the local communities. On the contrary, in the majority of cases they were even protected: in Nottingham, a woman was accused of selling abortifacients and local women volunteered as witnesses to testify that they actually benefited from taking those pills.[146] On the other hand, women certainly had to fight against the clergy and the government. In 1913, a *Church of England Memorandum* stated that abortion is "a grievously sinful attempt to destroy the life which God has given, from which the conscience of every woman ought to turn away in horror."[147] Especially during the Victorian era, just like with infanticide, abortion was considered a threat against the accepted female role in society, that is to say the child-bearer and the housewife. The *British Medical Journal* published an article wrote by a doctor, who affirmed:

[142] Ibid., p. 60.
[143] Ibid., p. 62.
[144] Sauer, *op. cit.*
[145] Kilday, *op. cit.*
[146] Knight, *op. cit.*
[147] Ibid., pp. 62-63.

> It is a disgrace that so many women prefer the evils and dangers of plumbism to the fulfilment of their natural functions as women… Are the girls of today properly educated to be able to fulfil the duties of motherhood?[148]

Society assumed that all women wanted to become mothers, and when they failed to do so, in their eyes it was as if they failed to accomplish their duty on earth. But not everyone desired motherhood, as testified by a woman who wrote to The Malthusian League, saying: "My life is spent in weary dread of again becoming a mother."[149] It was their destiny, and they could not escape from it. Margaret McGregor defines maternity as a trap: "A net spread in which they were bound to find themselves entangled sooner or later."[150] Doctors could not accept that women laid claim to their bodies, as evidently showed by a conversation between a doctor and her client reported by Knight:

> There was one day four or five years ago, a lady called at my home. She said 'I do not wish to give you my name, but I wish you to tell me if I am in the family way'. I confirmed that she was in fact five or six months pregnant, and she then said, 'I wish you very much to take in hand the destruction'. I said, 'why?', and she answered, 'it is not convenient just now to have a child'. I tried to talk her out of it, but found she was quite set upon it, and I said, 'I do not do that sort of thing', and she said, 'Oh, I thought that doctors did it', and added, 'I suppose you can do nothing for me'. I said 'No', I did not say I was sorry, I just simply said, 'no, I can do nothing for you.[151]

It is very interesting to highlight Knight's opinions about this case:

> This episode was described with the intention of discrediting and dehumanising women who sought abortions. But from a modern standpoint it is much more illustrative of the failure of doctors to comprehend the feelings of women faced with unwanted pregnancies, and of the determination such women showed in pressing their wish for abortion against all the odds.[152]

By taking into consideration the fact that this quote dates back to 1978, it is surprising, in the most disheartening way, to notice that the situation is actually not very dissimilar from our contemporaneous one. It is even more astounding the fact that women of the 21st century can easily feel represented by these phrases pronounced by some women in 1914: "We must let men know that we are human beings with ideals and aspirations to

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[148] Ibid., p. 63.
[149] Ibid., p. 64.
[150] Ibid., p. 64.
[151] Ibid., p. 65.
[152] Ibid., p. 65.

something higher than to be mere objects on which they can satisfy themselves" and again "I think the time has come for women to assert their rights (not votes for women, that will come as a natural sequence) but of deciding how many children they can afford, both physically and financially, to bear and rear."[153]

During the 18th and 19th century infanticide was used as a giant excuse to hide the real problems that society had. Poverty, inadequate childcare, women's low salaries, weak social services. It was comforting for them to hide this harsh reality behind the finger used to point at murderous mothers. It would have probably been easier to simply help unmarried women, allowing them to have a decent life. But to do so, meant to break the strong social pillars that Victorian society was built upon, it meant revealing what was behind the "*gentile façades"* of the Victorian villas: sin, vices, immorality. They preferred focusing on the fear of these murderesses, and they used this fear to fortify the already existing stereotype about the "fallen women." The 1922 Infanticide Act stated that all mothers were "potentially insane in the first few months after giving birth."[154] The acquittance of the murderous mother was actually her greater conviction: she committed the crime of contradicting the sacred values of female purity and family, and that is why she could not be condemned for not wanting to be a mother. In the eyes of the jury, she was always going to be a mother, an insane one, but still a mother. Condemning her for refusing to be a mum, meant freeing her.

1.6 Contextualising *The Thorn* and *Adam Bede*: Romanticism and the Victorian Era

The works I examine for the purpose of this thesis are *The Thorn* (1798) and *Adam Bede* (1859). The latter was published sixty-one years after the former, hence the audiences that welcomed the two publications were facing different historical events and social changes. The last decade of the 18th century was characterised by Romanticism, the First Industrial Revolution and the Anglo-French war; whereas *Adam Bede* was published during the climax of Queen Victoria's reign. Starting with the

[153] Ibid., p. 67.
[154] Higginbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

historical setting in which *The Thorn* was written, in this last paragraph I briefly discuss the most significant historical occurrences and societal shifts that defined the eras in which *Adam Bede* and *The Thorn* were published.

In England, the literary movement of Romanticism originated at the end of the 18th century and lasted until circa 1830. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Blake are the six poets who mostly enriched the cultural scene of the age. Even though they all belong to the same artistic wave, each and every one of them has distinct stylistic peculiarities. They did not identify themselves as 'Romantic,' it was only a century later that English historians started using this term to discuss about them.[155] In this thesis, I examine Wordsworth's poetic language, particularly in *The Thorn*.

The period of time between the years 1785 and 1830 was characterised by many innovations. England changed from an agricultural country to an industrial one. Two major revolutions, the American and the French, turned the tide of the entire world.[156] At the beginning, the French Revolution captivated the interest of the English people, who actively supported the ideals presented by the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789). However, over time the revolution became more and more violent. In 1792, during the "September Massacres" more than a thousand people were killed, and soon after the king and queen were beheaded. At this point France had already lost the support of England, but things got even worse when the French Republic attacked the Rhineland and the Netherlands, forcing England to start a war against them. Finally, in 1804 Napoleon became the emperor – and dictator – of France.[157] During this period of tumult, England reacted with an alarmed counter-revolutionary reform that emanated strict laws in order to suppress any kind of hypothetical favouritism for the enemy (the French). For example:

> Public meetings were prohibited, the right of habeas corpus (the legal principle protecting individuals from arbitrary imprisonment) was suspended for the first time in over a hundred years, and advocates of even moderate political change were charged with treason.[158]

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was transforming the entire working system, substituting more refined machineries for hand-labour. On the one hand this enhanced

[155] S. Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, United States of America: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid., p. 3.

the economy of the country and its technological progress. On the other, it caused some tragic consequences for the population. Many people lost their jobs, the countryside was more and more invaded by factories and the gap between the rich and the poor increased considerably. In 1776 Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he claimed that the government should not have a say in the economic scheme of the country and people should be responsible for their own earnings. This 'anarchy' for most of the population meant low wages, long shifts, and abusive working conditions. The Anglo-French war ended in 1815 and with the troops coming back to the country, the demand for labour outweighed the supply. This resulted in an unemployment crisis that lasted until 1820. [159]

Writers of the time conferred huge importance to the creative power of the imagination. Intellectuals intensified the ability of re-interpreting reality according to their own sensibility. In the preface of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which was published in 1800, two years after the first edition of the poetry collection, Wordsworth stated that the centre of a poem should not be an element of the outer world. On the contrary, the most important part is always the mind of the poet and how his or her consciousness interprets the outer world:

> For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.[160]

The importance of the poet's mind was transferred also in the way poetry was written. In fact, before Romanticism, first-person poetry was reputed as less eminent, whereas now it became the most used form and it "was often described as the most essentially poetic of all the genres."[161] Spontaneity also became a major peculiarity of Romantic poetry. A poet usually studied the classical forms of poetry and followed the rules they established while writing his or her own poems. With Romanticism instead, the act of writing had to be spontaneous, and as Keats said: "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."[162] Percy Shelley also stated that a poem should grow into the poet's mind like a baby into a mother's womb, since,

[159] Ibid.
[160] William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", in C. W. Eliot (ed.), *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books (The Harvard Classics)*, New York: P. F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1969.
[161] S. Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[162] Ibid., p. 10.

according to him, it is “an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study.”[163] During this period of time the fascinating, and at the same time enigmatic, psychological processes of the mind were also deeply explored. For example, Coleridge focused on dreams and nightmares, Keats examined the strange connection between death and erotism, and Byron analysed the power that the Satanic hero had on human consciousness.[164] Finally, Romanticism was an age of individualism, poets believed in the sovereignty of the self-made man. In fact, much of the poetry of the period depicts the lonely poet who writes a poem as a result of their loneliness, just like in Wordsworth’s *The Daffodils* (1807): “I wandered lonely as a cloud (…).”[165] In this circumstance, the wild nature becomes the perfect place to express themselves without the constraints of the newly urbanised society.[166]

The Reign of Queen Victoria lasted from 1837 to 1901. Overall, it was a period of great development for Britain; London, in particular, became the centre of the Western economic progression. Society, in fact, was now based on commercial trades and industries, rather than just on agriculture. The country benefited from numerous discoveries, for instance in the field of communication – with the telegraph and the intercontinental cable –, within the discipline of art – with photography –, of medicine – with anaesthetics – and in the field of education – with universal compulsory education –.[167] The fast process of industrialization brought at the same time negative and positive outcomes. On the one hand, people – especially of the lower classes – suffered the shift from the supremacy of the agricultural world to the industrial one. Victorians felt a sense of disorientation in this new technological world, and this caused a general sense of anxiety.[168] The first half of the 19th century was characterised by many catastrophes: “a series of bad harvests, produced a period of unemployment, desperate poverty, and rioting.”[169] In addition, the job market was in turmoil and working conditions were abusive and severe. Cities, like Manchester, were over-populated and people were forced to live in unsanitary circumstances. However, on the other hand, the country’s prosperity significantly increased, chiefly thanks to the manufacture and the exportation

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[163] Ibid., p. 11.
[164] Ibid., p. 14.
[165] William Wordsworth, “The Daffodils”, in W. Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, Poole: Woodstock Books, 1997, 49-50, p. 49.
[166] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[167] Ibid., p. 979.
[168] Ibid., p. 980.
[169] Ibid., p. 983.

of cotton and wool. By expanding these trades and through investments all over the world, “London became, from 1870 on, the world's banker.”[170]

A crucial innovation that has forever changed the trajectory of Britain is the train. In 1830 there was the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, which was the first public railway of the entire world to use steam-power. Not only did the train contribute to the change of the natural landscape, but it also had a fundamental role in commercial relationships between distant cities.[171] The economic growth almost led England to Revolution, since middle-class men felt excluded from the benefits of this expansion. In order to avoid the turmoil that occurred in France, the Parliament issued a Reform Bill in 1832, which allowed all men with a property worth £10 (*per annum*) to vote. As a result, middle-class’ financial goal was obtained as well.[172] The years between the first and the second half of the 19th century were the most prosperous for the Victorian society. People did not consider industrialization as a threat anymore, as agriculture started blossoming again, and working conditions improved (both for adults and for children) thanks to the enactment of the Factory Acts. It was during this period that the British Empire took shape:

> In the 1850s and 1860s there was large-scale immigration to Australia; in 1867 Parliament unified the Canadian provinces into the Dominion of Canada. In 1857 Parliament took over the government of India from the private East India Company, which had controlled the country, and started to put in place its civil service government. In 1876 Queen Victoria was named empress of India. Although the competitive scramble for African colonies did not take place until the final decades of the century, the model of empire was created earlier, made possible by technological revolution in communication and transportation.[173]

British Imperialism brought wealth to the country, but cruelty and inhumanity to the rest of the world. Finally, at the end of the century, Britain faced a serious economic depression caused by the commercial competition with the United States, and a massive rate of emigration.

From a literary point of view, the Victorian Period saw a significant increase in the number of educated people. According to the statistics that Greenblatt reports, “in 1837 about half of the adult male population could read and write.”[174] The technological

[170] Ibid., p. 980.
[171] Ibid., p. 982.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid., p. 985.
[174] Ibid., p. 993.

advancements benefited literature as well, since publishing houses were able to print using different machines and materials ("presses powered by steam, paper made from wood pulp rather than rags, and, toward the end of the century, typesetting machines,")[175] that were cheaper than in the previous centuries. Also, the production of books, periodicals, and newspapers also increased dramatically. In fact, 170 new periodicals were published in London alone in the first thirty years of the century, according to Greenblatt:

> There were magazines for every taste: cheap and popular magazines that published sensational tales; religious monthlies; weekly newspapers; satiric periodicals noted for their political cartoons (the most famous of these was Punch); women's magazines; monthly miscellanies publishing fiction, poetry, and articles on current affairs; and reviews and quarterlies, ostensibly reviewing new books but using the reviews, which were always unsigned, as occasions for essays on the subjects in question.[176]

Magazines were fundamental for the circulation of information. They made people aware of the social problems surrounding them, they influenced them, and entertained them through the publication of the novels of major writers of the period, such as George Eliot, Dickens, Ruskin and so on. Starting with Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), novels began being published in serial form. This type of publication enhanced the readers' amusement and allowed the authors to construct the stories also on the basis of the audience's reactions. Literature became a means "not only [to] delight but [to] instruct (…) and that it would illuminate social problems."[177] Hence, the publication of literary works about infanticide. No matter what kind, be it satirical, gothic, or a romance, the novel quickly emerged as the primary literary form in Victorian literature. Novels had the power both to express the inner consciousness of the author and to portray a realistic world in which people could identify themselves (just like in Eliot's case). Even though each book was different in its characters and plot, in some way they all displayed Victorian stress upon respectability and social class. Most of the times, the novel had the aspirations of the main protagonist. The 19th century was also the century of the flourishing of women writers; George Eliot, Jane Austen, the

[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid., p. 993.
[177] Ibid., p. 994.

Bronte sisters, they all fought the conventions that society imposed upon women and their career.[178]

[178] Ibid., p. 996.

CHAPTER TWO

William Wordsworth's *The Thorn*

2.1 The Life and the Poetic Realm of William Wordsworth

Some say, if to the pond you go,
And fix on it a steady view,
The shadow of a babe you trace,
A baby and a baby's face,
And that it looks at you;
Whene'er you look on it, 'Tis plain
The baby looks at you again[179]

Born in Cockermouth (West Cumberland) in 1770, William Wordsworth faced many obstacles during his lifetime. His mother died when he was just 8 years old, while his father died when he was 13, so he was separated from his beloved sister Dorothy and given in foster care to Ann and Hugh Tyson. They lived in a cottage in Hawkshead, and this gave Wordsworth both the chance to wander around uncontaminated natural landscape and also to attend grammar school there.[180] In 1787 he was enrolled at St. John's College, Cambridge University, where he graduated four years later.[181] Although at the beginning he was enthusiastic about his life as a Cambridge student, his expectations were soon shattered. He considered Cambridge a superficial place based on appearances, not on the students' efforts. For example, when the director of the school died, Wordsworth was asked to write a poem to commemorate him. However, Wordsworth refused to create an elegy based on false emotions, as he did not feel any kind of grief.[182] During his time in college he went to France and was immediately captivated by the country. In fact, he came back there in 1791 in order to learn the language. In France Wordsworth started advocating the beliefs of the Revolution because he thought it could improve the society positively. He also fell in love with a

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[179] William Wordsworth, "The Thorn", in W. Wordsworth, S. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads with a Few Other Poems*, London: Penguin Books, 1999.
[180] E. Mason, *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 2.
[181] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
[182] Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

French woman, Annette Vallon, and they soon had a daughter. However, Wordsworth was not able to economically sustain his family, so he was obligated to return to England. Because of the war, he never came back to his lover and daughter.[183] The experience of losing his family, the disappointment he felt for the failure of the revolution and the mixed feelings he had towards both England and France, led him to a psychological crisis. In 1795 he went to live with his sister Dorothy, who became his greatest companion. Simultaneously, he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge and experienced the peak of his career.[184] The relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge not only flourished in a long-term friendship, but also in an intellectual collaboration, up to the point that some of their poems contain the same words and concepts. Together, they wrote the *Lyrical Ballads* published anonymously in 1798. When Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy started living in Alfoxden House, just four miles away from Coleridge, the three of them spent most of their time together. However, this close relationship agitated their neighbourhoods, who thought they were traitors of England. People feared an incursion by France, and, knowing that Wordsworth was well aware of French politics and literature, they panicked and notified the Government.[185] As a result, Wordsworth and his sister lost their house.[186] A few years later, Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, with whom he had 5 children, two of which died. In the same period, one of his brothers, a sea captain, died as well. Also, his partnership with Coleridge took an unexpected turn when in 1810 they argued and took a step apart from one another. Finally, in 1830, his beloved sister Dorothy fell both physically and mentally ill.[187] Despite all these tragic events, Wordsworth's success grew more and more, and in 1843 he became poet laureate of Great Britain. He died in 1850, and only a year after his death, his most celebrated, autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, was published.[188]

Wordsworth considered himself a "Bard", that is to say, a poet who praises classical figures of the past, like "(…) Milton, the biblical prophets, and figures of a national music, the harp-playing patriots, Celtic or Anglo-Saxon (…)"[189] and aspires to them. As a Bard, he felt responsible for the guidance of the entire population in an age

[183] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[186] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid., p. 10.

of tumult like that of the revolution.[190] He is defined the poet of "the remembrance of things past,"[191] as he believed that the emotions one feels, should be reminisced only after the event, when the mind is in a state of quietness. For example, in *The Daffodils* Wordsworth describes his experience of observing the flowers dancing on the lake. His feelings are so intense, that only later, when he is in the tranquillity of his home, he is able to truly comprehend what has happened:

> For oft when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude,
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the Daffodils.[192]

Wordsworth praised the relationship between men and nature. With the term 'nature' he did not only mean the natural environment, but the entire spectrum of instinctual emotions that humans feel: "An animating force that impels us to attend to situations through love and sympathy, rather than calculation or analysis (…)."[193] That is why he strongly disagreed with the precepts of Enlightenment. He did not believe that rationality could help men become morally virtuous. On the contrary, he considered passions crucial for men to govern both politics and the society.[194] According to the principles of the Enlightenment, life should be made of progress and evolution, an idea that Wordsworth despised. For him, life cannot be just a succession of logical steps, a linear journey towards improvement, life is also instincts, heart, irrationality, luck.[195] Moreover, enlightenment was becoming a threat for natural landscape as well. With the industrialization and the urbanization of the countryside, little attention was paid to uncontaminated nature and its inhabitants. In this sense, the advancement that Enlightenment so much highlighted, was only in terms of profitability: how can I use

[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid., p. 245.
[192] Wordsworth, *The Daffodils*, cit., p. 50.
[193] Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

the land and the people who live there in order to make them cost-effective for me?[196] In Wordsworth's opinion, nature is also a synonym for community. Nature does not help men escape from society, but it offers new ways of approaching it.[197]

Wordsworth accused the majority of the 18th-century poets of using poetry just for the sake of entertainment, and not to convey true emotions. He thought that words are the best instrument to interpret and express the profoundness of humans' consciousness. Using them just to amuse a parterre of readers is hugely disrespectful to the authenticity of the inner self.[198] Wordsworth claimed the superiority of poetry over prose, since poetry, with its stylistic features (figures of speech, rhythms and so on) converts a deeper significance of thoughts and feelings.[199] He made great use of blank verse, because it allowed him to go beyond the rhyming rules that his poets predecessors strictly followed. Through the use of blank verse, he could be freer, especially when emotions took over his language. He claimed that blank verse is useful for readers because it forces them to pause after each line, allowing them to reflect more on the meaning of the words they read, and consequently on the emotions those words evoke. Moreover, the blank verse was recognised as the verse of John Milton, to whom Wordsworth deeply aspired.[200]

2.2 The *Lyrical Ballads* and its Preface

In 1798 Coleridge and Wordsworth published the *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*. The collection opens with Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, and other than this, it contains only three poems written by Coleridge. The rest of the volume includes nineteen poems written by Wordsworth, ending with *Tintern Abbey*. The themes addressed by the two poets are completely different. While Coleridge's poetry has a supernatural side tone, Wordsworth focused on celebrating nature and on the importance of humans' feelings. In particular, he praised the experience of pain and how it can lead to positive outcomes for individuals. He believed that only through suffering, people

[196] Ibid., p. 27.
[197] Raph Pite, "Wordsworth and the Natural World", in S. Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 180-195, p. 181.
[198] Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
[199] Ibid., p. 45.
[200] Ibid., p. 50.

can become more sympathetic towards one another.[201] In this sense, it is clear how much Eliot took inspiration from Wordsworth's ideology. Both believe sadness to be a natural part of life, but, according to them, people should not deal with it by grieving, on the contrary they should use it to be more understanding and compassionate towards other people.[202] With his poetry, Wordsworth did not want to portray reality objectively, he wanted to enrich reality through imagination, as his aim was to keep humans' sense of wonder alive.[203] He was fascinated by the feelings that people experience during their everyday life: "For him, there is something fundamental and compelling about the extraordinary feelings ordinary people have about workaday matters."[204] In 1800 Wordsworth published under his name a second edition of the volume, adding a preface in which he presented his ideologies. With the third edition of the collection, which dates back to 1802, Wordsworth enlarged the preface even more. In it, he expressed his disdain for the poets of the 18th century, according to Greenblatt he wanted to "overthrow the reigning tradition."[205] In fact, in some way, this preface set an example for all the writers of the Romantic period. Moreover, he repudiated the idea of a scale of importance of literary genres that places epic and tragedy on the top, and comedy, satire and short lyric at the bottom.[206] He also claimed that poetry should not be written according to the rule of "decorum," meaning that there should not be any kind of connection between the social status of the protagonist of a literary work and the genre of the literary work itself.[207] In fact, in most of his poems, he portrayed characters belonging to the lowest social classes – like peasants, delinquents, marginalised people and so on –, in this way associating what was considered the highest literary form (poetry) with the poorest fraction of society. Also, he did not use the eminent type of language usually employed in poetry, because he believed that a good poem is made of words inspired by the reminiscence of the poet's authentic feelings, it does not need an illustrious language to be valid.[208] Most of all, Wordsworth expressed his fear about the fast industrialization process that was taking place, and the alienating effect it could have on people's minds. As a result, he strongly asserted the importance of literature as an instrument to keep the sentimental part of humans alive.

[201] Ibid., p. 70.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[204] Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
[205] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[206] Ibid., p. 262.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.

2.3 Analysis of Wordsworth's *The Thorn*

The Thorn is probably one of Wordsworth's poems that best reflect the tumultuous spirit of the age. As previously mentioned, at the end of the 18th century, English people were panicking over a hypothetical incursion of the French, and Wordsworth himself became a victim of the community's irrational alarm. Even though in a different way, this poem perfectly captures what Wordsworth had to endure during that occasion. The protagonist is Martha Ray, a woman left alone by her fiancé, accused of having killed her newborn simply because nobody could find the body of the baby. This cost her her dignity and her privacy, since everybody in town freely expressed their own personal, often judgemental, opinion on her story. The poem is from the point of view of an external narrator, a character that Wordsworth better portrays in a note to *The Thorn* published together with the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). In this introduction he explains that the narrator is a middle-aged sea-captain, who retires and moves to this village. To fit in the community, he starts chatting with everyone. Through this poem, Wordsworth wanted to show how people of a small town can influence each other with their ideas, and even though they should feel different emotions, in some way even their sentiments grow to mirror one another: "It was my wish in this poem to shew the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns of passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed."[209] I will proceed by attaching the entire body of the poem, and by analysing the most significant lines.[210]

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[209] William Wordsworth, "Note to *The Thorn*", in W. J. B. Owen (ed.), *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, 96-99, pp. 96-97.

[210] For the purpose of this thesis, I examine the 1820 version of the poem. The attached text is taken from S. Greenblatt's *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, specifically the eight-edition published in 2006. In the volume, the poem is mistakenly dated 1798. In the article ""The Thorn": Wordsworth's Insensitive Plant" by Thomas L. Ashton (1972), the author analyses both the original version of 1798 and that of 1820. By comparing the latter with the poem reported by the *Norton Anthology*, I found out that the one displayed by the *Norton Anthology* corresponds to the modified version of 1820. The dating error is no surprise, since Wordsworth constantly revised his poems. Later on in the chapter I explain why Wordsworth modified the original version of the poem and I compare the two texts of 1798 and 1820 to highlight the differences between them.

The Thorn

I

"There is a Thorn—it looks so old,

In truth, you'd find it hard to say

How it could ever have been young,

It looks so old and grey.

5 Not higher than a two years' child

It stands erect, this aged Thorn;

No leaves it has, no prickly points;

It is a mass of knotted joints,

A wretched thing forlorn.

10 It stands erect, and like a stone

With lichens is it overgrown.

II

"Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown,

With lichens to the very top,

And hung with heavy tufts of moss,

15 A melancholy crop:

Up from the earth these mosses creep,

And this poor Thorn they clasp it round

So close, you'd say that they are bent

With plain and manifest intent

20 To drag it to the ground;

And all have joined in one endeavour

To bury this poor Thorn for ever.

III

"High on a mountain's highest ridge,

Where oft the stormy winter gale

25 Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds

It sweeps from vale to vale;

Not five yards from the mountain path,

This Thorn you on your left espy;

And to the left, three yards beyond,

30 You see a little muddy pond

Of water—never dry

Though but of compass small, and bare

To thirsty suns and parching air.

IV

"And, close beside this aged Thorn,

35 There is a fresh and lovely sight,

A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,

Just half a foot in height.

All lovely colours there you see,

All colours that were ever seen;

40 And mossy network too is there,

As if by hand of lady fair

The work had woven been;

And cups, the darlings of the eye,

So deep is their vermilion dye.

V

45 "Ah me! what lovely tints are there

Of olive green and scarlet bright,

In spikes, in branches, and in stars,

Green, red, and pearly white!

This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,

50 Which close beside the Thorn you see,

So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,

Is like an infant's grave in size,

As like as like can be:

But never, never any where,

55 An infant's grave was half so fair.

VI

"Now would you see this aged Thorn,

This pond, and beauteous hill of moss,

You must take care and choose your time

The mountain when to cross.

60 For oft there sits between the heap

So like an infant's grave in size,

And that same pond of which I spoke,

A Woman in a scarlet cloak,

And to herself she cries,

65 'Oh misery! oh misery!

Oh woe is me! oh misery!'

VII

"At all times of the day and night

This wretched Woman thither goes;

And she is known to every star,

70 And every wind that blows;

And there, beside the Thorn, she sits

When the blue daylight's in the skies,

And when the whirlwind's on the hill,

Or frosty air is keen and still,

75 And to herself she cries,

'Oh misery! oh misery!

Oh woe is me! oh misery!'"

VIII

"Now wherefore, thus, by day and night,

In rain, in tempest, and in snow,

so Thus to the dreary mountain-top

Does this poor Woman go?

And why sits she beside the Thorn

When the blue daylight's in the sky

Or when the whirlwind's on the hill,

85 Or frosty air is keen and still,

And wherefore does she cry?—-

O wherefore? wherefore? tell me why

Does she repeat that doleful cry?"

IX

"I cannot tell; I wish I could;

90 For the true reason no one knows:

But would you gladly view the spot,

The spot to which she goes;

The hillock like an infant's grave,

The pond—and Thorn, so old and grey;

95 Pass by her door—'tis seldom shut—

And, if you see her in her hut—

Then to the spot away!

I never heard of such as dare

Approach the spot when she is there."

X

100 "But wherefore to the mountain-top

Can this unhappy Woman go,

Whatever star is in the skies,

Whatever wind may blow?"

"Full twenty years are past and gone

105 Since she (her name is Martha Ray)3

Gave with a maiden's true good-will

Her company to Stephen Hill;

And she was blithe and gay,

While friends and kindred all approved

no Of him whom tenderly she loved.

XI

"And they had fixed the wedding day,

The morning that must wed them both;

But Stephen to another Maid

Had sworn another oath;

115 And, with this other Maid, to church

Unthinking Stephen went—

Poor Martha! on that woeful day

A pang of pitiless dismay

Into her soul was sent;

120 A fire was kindled in her breast,

Which might not burn itself to rest.

XII

"They say, full six months after this,

While yet the summer leaves were green,

She to the mountain-top would go,

125 And there was often seen.

What could she seek?—or wish to hide?

Her state to any eye was plain;

She was with child,0 and she was mad;

Yet often was she sober sad

130 From her exceeding pain.

O guilty Father—would that death

Had saved him from that breach of faith!

XIII

"Sad case for such a brain to hold

Communion with a stirring child!

135 Sad case, as you may think, for one

Who had a brain so wild!

Last Christmas-eve we talked of this,

And grey-haired Wilfred of the glen

Held that the unborn infant wrought

140 About its mother's heart, and brought

Her senses back again:

And, when at last her time drew near,

Her looks were calm, her senses clear.

XIV

"More know I not, I wish I did,

145 And it should all be told to you;

For what became of this poor child

No mortal ever knew;

Nay—if a child to her was born

No earthly tongue could ever tell;

150 And if 'twas born alive or dead,

Far less could this with proof be said;

But some remember well,

That Martha Ray about this time

Would up the mountain often climb.

XV

155 "And all that winter, when at night

The wind blew from the mountain-peak,

Twas worth your while, though in the dark,

The churchyard path to seek:

For many a time and oft were heard

160 Cries coming from the mountain head:

Some plainly living voices were;

And others, I've heard many swear,

Were voices of the dead:

I cannot think, whate'er they say,

165 They had to do with Martha Ray.

XVI

"But that she goes to this old Thorn,

The Thorn which I described to you,

And there sits in a scarlet cloak,

I will be sworn is true.

170 For one day with my telescope,

To view the ocean wide and bright,

When to this country first I came,

Ere I had heard of Martha's name,

I climbed the mountain's height:—

175 A storm came on, and I could see

No object higher than my knee.

XVII

"'Twas mist and rain, and storm and rain:

No screen, no fence could I discover;

And then the wind! in sooth, it was

180 A wind full ten times over.

I looked around, I thought I saw

A jutting crag,—and off I ran,

Head-foremost, through the driving rain,

The shelter of the crag to gain;

185 And, as I am a man,

Instead of jutting crag, I found

A Woman seated on the ground.

XVIII

"I did not speak—I saw her face;

Her face!—it was enough for me;

190 I turned about and heard her cry,

'Oh misery! oh misery!'

And there she sits, until the moon

Through half the clear blue sky will go;

And, when the little breezes make

195 The waters of the pond to shake,

As all the country know,

She shudders, and you hear her cry,

'Oh misery! oh misery!'"

XIX

"But what's the Thorn? and what the pond?

200 And what the hill of moss to her?

And what the creeping breeze that comes

The little pond to stir?"

"I cannot tell; but some will say

She hanged her baby on the tree;

205 Some say she drowned it in the pond,

Which is a little step beyond:

But all and each agree,

The little Babe was buried there,

Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

XX

"I've heard, the moss is spotted red

With drops of that poor infant's blood;

But kill a new-born infant thus,

I do not think she could!

Some say, if to the pond you go,

215 And fix on it a steady view,

The shadow of a babe you trace,

A baby and a baby's face,

And that it looks at you;

Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain

220 The baby looks at you again

XXI

"And some had sworn an oath that she

Should be to public justice brought;

And for the little infant's bones

With spades they would have sought.

225 But instantly the hill of moss

Before their eyes began to stir!

And, for full fifty yards around,

The grass—it shook upon the ground!

Yet all do still aver

230 The little Babe lies buried there,

Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

XXII

"I cannot tell how this may be,

But plain it is the Thorn is bound

With heavy tufts of moss that strive

235 To drag it to the ground;

And this I know, full many a time,

When she was on the mountain high,

By day, and in the silent night,

When all the stars shone clear and bright,

240 That I have heard her cry,

'Oh misery! oh misery!

Oh woe is me! oh misery!'"[211]

The name Martha Ray comes from a person that really existed. She was the mother of Basil Montagu, a mutual friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The real Martha Ray was tragically murdered in 1799 by a nobleman whom she turned down.[212] He declared "love's madness" drove him to commit the deed.[213] Some critics interpreted the two words 'Martha' and 'Ray' as a metaphor of her double nature. The surname, Ray, recalls the ray of sunshine, and it also rhymes with the word 'gay,' which is used in Line 108 to describe Martha's happiness in regards of her wedding: "(…) And she was blithe and gay (…)."[214] On the contrary, the name Martha can be analysed from a religious perspective, and in this sense, it indicates Mary's sister, who experienced a life full of sufferings and represented "the opposite of the purity and hope implied by the surname."[215] In the poem, the character of Martha is first introduced in Stanza VI: "(…) A woman in a scarlet cloak, And to herself she cries, 'Oh misery! oh misery! (…)."[216] She is presented as a woman that, no matter if there is sun or rain, every day and every night she goes on top of the hill and laments in despair: "And there beside the thorn she sits, When the blue day-light's in the skies, And when the whirlwind's on the hill, Or frosty air is keen and still (…),"[217] "In rain, in tempest, and in snow, 'Thus to the dreary mountain-top 'Does this poor woman go?"[218] Martha appears as a mystery to the inhabitants of the village; they are both scared of her ("And if you see her in her hut, Then to the spot away! — I never heard of such as dare Approach the spot when she is there")[219] and fascinated by her, since they spend much of their time speculating about her story. Martha does have a hut to live in, so the neighbours interrogate themselves on the reason why she is always wandering around the mountain. The narrator expresses the villagers' doubts, but he also provides an answer: "I cannot tell; I wish I could; For

[211] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 252-258.
[212] Ibid., p. 255.
[213] It is astonishing to notice how two centuries later "love's madness" is still the justification men use when they commit femicides.
[214] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
[215] M. Kirkham, "Innocence and Experience In Wordsworth's "The Thorn"", *Ariel-a Review of International English Literature*, vol. 5, (1974), 66-80, p. 71.
[216] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid., p. 255.

the true reason no one knows (…).”[220] To the eyes of the people, Martha is an enigma to solve. At least, she became one after what happened to her. In fact, some clear facts about her story are known. The narrator informs the readers that she was once a very happy woman, engaged with a man called Stephen Hill. In this stage of her life Martha is portrayed as an innocent young lady: “Gave with a maiden’s true good will, Her company to Stephen Hill (…).”[221]According to Kirkham, the poem associates Martha’s innocence to her inclusion into the community. Her marriage represents the expected event of a woman her age, and receives the approval of the neighbourhood: “(…) While friends and kindred all approved no Of him whom tenderly she loved.”[222] On the contrary, when her life stops respecting the expected norms of behaviour, she is not perceived as innocent anymore, and the villagers start becoming hostile towards her.[223] Stephen then betrays Martha, and the day they were to get married, he gets married to another woman instead: “And they had fix’d the wedding-day, The morning that must wed them both; But Stephen to another maid Had sworn another oath; And with this other maid to church Unthinking Stephen went (…).”[224] Stephen destroys the harmonious order of things. He is described as “unthinking” and in some way, this word justifies his behaviour. Kirkham claims that Stephen is as innocent as Martha, and this makes him “vulnerable to the moral dangers of "unthinkingness".”[225] Some believe that the character of Stephen recalls Wordsworth himself, when in his young age *innocently* abandoned Annette Vallon because of his *unthinkingness*. The experience of betrayal is crucial because it represents the turning point of Martha’s life, the moment when she loses her innocence. According to the villagers, in fact, a fire took over Martha’s body and soul, driving her mad: “A pang of pitiless dismay, Into her soul was sent; A fire was kindled in her breast, Which might not burn itself to rest.”[226] These lines are very significant because they contain more than one layer of meaning. The fire metaphorically depicts both madness and the conception of the baby. Martha loses her innocence because the betrayal makes her ‘mad,’ but also because she gets pregnant. The baby embodies her youth, which is now not externally expressed anymore, but it is

[220] Ibid., p. 254.
[221] Ibid., p. 255.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.
[224] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
[225] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
[226] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

a tiny, private part of herself that she literally carries within her body.[227] The pregnancy is strictly interconnected to the supposed insanity that the neighbourhoods attribute her, since both situations are the consequence of Stephen's mistake. However, the villagers are not sure whether the unborn baby contributed to her precarious mental health or if 'it' made her feel better:[228] "(…) And grey-haired Wilfred of the glen Held that the unborn infant wrought About its mother's heart, and brought Her senses back again (…)."[229] Kirkham claims that experiencing a tragic event leads to despair but it can also make a person stronger and braver, and this might have been the case of Martha Ray.[230] When the fire takes over Martha there is also another subtext to take into consideration and it is witchery. Even though this is not explicitly stated by the narrator, there are various hints that point to that direction. Apart from the scene of the fire – which almost seems a magic spell –, there is also the fact that everybody in town is afraid of her ["(…) I never heard of such as dare, Approach the spot when she is there."][231] Moreover, Martha appears to be in control of the earth and the weather. When the villagers protest against her, because they believe her to be a murderer, and are about to execute her, the earth shakes, and they are forced to stop:

> And some had sworn an oath that she
>
> Should be to public justice brought;
>
> And for the little infant's bones
>
> With spades they would have sought.
>
> 225 But instantly the hill of moss
>
> Before their eyes began to stir!
>
> And, for full fifty yards around,
>
> The grass—it shook upon the ground![232]

Finally, many times throughout the poem the narrator associates Martha to a multiplicity of weather conditions, from storms, thunders and rain to sun and wind. He seems to suggest that she is not afraid of them because she controls them, almost like a

[227] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
[230] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
[231] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
[232] Ibid., p. 257.

Shakespearean Prospero. However, the fact that she goes on top of the mountain no matter how tedious the weather is, might also metaphorically indicate her as someone who has no other option than to face life's challenges.[233]

The death of Martha's baby is another mystery to solve, in the eyes of the villagers. Nobody is really sure whether it was born dead or if Martha has killed it because of her despair. Opposed to the neighbours' violent accusations against Martha, the narrator appears to be more neutral. According to Kirkham, the narrator has a more "compassionate" attitude, rather than "judicative."[234] The cause of death remains doubtful because, again, it is connected with the loss of innocence. Do adults lose their innocent youthfulness involuntarily or because they willingly kill it? Wordsworth does not give an answer probably because he did not know the answer himself.[235] The main similarity between Martha and Wordsworth is the fact that they both try to integrate themselves into a community of people that treats them as outcasts and strangers. However, while Martha spent a period of her life being accepted by her neighbours as an integral part of the society, Wordsworth did not have the same experience in Alfoxden. In this sense, he is more similar to the narrator of the poem, who came in a town of unknown people to retire.[236] The encounter between the narrator and Martha opens up new hypotheses regarding Martha's behaviour: ""I did not speak—I saw her face; Her face!—it was enough for me; I turned about and heard her cry, 'Oh misery! oh misery!'"[237] First of all, the narrator does not inform the reader about what is wrong with Martha's face. Why is looking at her enough for him to go away? We are not allowed to know. Moreover, if we analyse the four lines, we realise that while the narrator is there with Martha, she stays silent, the moment he turns around she starts crying. This may signify that her despair is caused by her loneliness, by her forced isolation from the rest of the community.[238] This hypothesis is also re-enforced by lines 96-99: "Pass by her door—'tis seldom shut— And if you see her in her hut, Then to the

[233] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
[234] Ibid., p. 70.
[235] Ibid.
[236] T. R. Benis, "Martha Ray's Face: Life during Wartime in "Lyrical Ballads"", *Criticism*, vol. 39, n. 2 (1997), 205-227, p. 218.
[237] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
[238] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

spot away!"[239] Martha's door is almost always open, this might mean that she actually wants company but is rejected by the rest of the village.[240]

Wordsworth uses the same range of words to describe Martha and the places where the supposed infanticide occurred, the thorn, the little pond, and the hill of moss. It is as if they incarnate each other, in a romantic symbiosis of man and nature. In line 9, the narrator refers to the thorn by saying: "A wretched thing forlorn. It stands erect, and like a stone, With lichens is it overgrown."[241] In line 68, instead, he says: "This wretched Woman thither goes; And she is known to every star, And every wind that blows (…)."[242] They are both victims of the outside world, and at the same time they both bravely endure the difficulties life put them through. The little pond does the same as well: it is never dry despite the "thirsty suns and parching air."[243] According to Kirkham, the fact that the pond does not dry up may indicate that, despite all the sufferings, Martha's feelings are not desiccated either.[244] The thorn is an enigma as well, and just like Martha, it embodies a series of contradictions. It is described as both young ("How it could ever have been young (…)")[245] and old ("It looks so old and grey");[246] at the same time Martha is both naive and prophane.[247]

The Thorn was inspired by a real thorn Wordsworth many times observed while wandering around Quantock Hill. On a stormy day, he wondered: "Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?" and impetuously wrote the entire poem.[248] Three are the places where Martha supposedly killed her infant: the thorn, the pond, and the moss. The narrator subtly highlights the characteristics of each place that make all three of them perfect to murder or bury a baby. The thorn is described as "Not higher than a two years' child (…);"[249] the pond is said to reflect the image of a dead infant: "The shadow of a babe you trace, A baby and a baby's face, And that it looks at you;"[250] and finally the moss is thought to be scarlet red because of the blood spilled out of the

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[239] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[240] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
[241] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[242] Ibid., p. 254.
[243] Ibid., p. 253.
[244] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
[245] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
[248] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
[249] Ibid., p. 253.
[250] Ibid., p. 257.

baby at the time of murder: “I've heard, the moss is spotted red With drops of that poor infant's blood (…).”[251] All hints to childhood – the narrator also adds that all three places are the size of an infant’s grave – serve to create the atmosphere for the upcoming history of supposed infanticide.[252] In the fifth Stanza the narrator mentions three colours: “Green, red, and pearly white!”[253] The chromatic representation here possesses a deeper meaning. Green stands for natural fecundity; red is associated to blood and murder, in fact Martha is portrayed as a woman wearing a “scarlet cloak;”[254] and finally pearly white is the colour of innocence and ingenuity.[255] Parallel to the colours, the narrator also lists three different forms that the moss assumes: “In spikes, in branches, and in stars (…).”[256] Kirkham states that the significance behind them are related to, respectively, “ferocity, (…) a normally creative nature, (…) [and] unattainable purity of being.”[257] Nature in this poem seems to reflect the recollection of Wordsworth’s memories about his own relationship with nature during his early years as a poet. As a result, it appears both fascinating and unsettling, healing and impetuous.[258] The pastoral setting is also used as the perfect background to portray the innocent ‘infant murderer.’ Some critics believe that this choice “served to naturalize infanticide,” others think that it was a way to put the accused mother outside the “state’s jurisdiction.”[259]

2.4 Society’s influence and the Narrator’s voice

Society has a fundamental role in this poem. Martha’s neighbours cannot stand the ambiguity around her story. They do not accept to be in a state of confusion, so they try to fill the gaps on their own. In the eyes of the villagers, there are only two categories: Martha can either be innocent or guilty, there is no middle way. The uncertainty around her behaviour goes against all the principles upon which the social order is built, as a result it is an option completely ignored.[260] Even though the narrator tries to respect the

[251] Ibid.
[252] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
[253] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[254] Ibid., p. 254.
[255] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[256] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[257] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 75-76.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 271-272.
[260] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

delicacy of Martha's story by remaining neutral and not being judgemental towards her supposed infanticide ("I cannot tell; I wish I could; For the true reason no one knows,")[261] his desire to know what happened is evident in his obsessive attention for details that would otherwise remain unnoticed. For example, he knows that the thorn, the moss and the pond are all the size of a kid's grave.[262] The life of Martha after the betrayal of Stephen is entirely in the hands of the inhabitants of the town, as evidenced by the constant repetition of the words "they say" and "some say." The narrator presents a series of suppositions based on everyone's voices except Martha's.[263] As Benis points out, the reason why the villagers believe Martha to be guilty of murder, might be related to true historical facts. In fact, during the Stuart period, the English law associated vagrancy to other crimes like infanticide and concealment of an illegitimate pregnancy. Homeless people led to illicit sexual activities, illicit sexual activities led to immoral pregnancies, immoral pregnancies led to unwanted babies and unwanted babies led to infanticides. This was the logic behind the law punishing vagrancy. Martha is a vagrant, so it might be for this reason that her neighbours accuse her of killing her newborn.[264] In reality, in the eyes of the villagers, Martha's crime is just that of not being sane enough to be an integral part of their community. They are not able to decipher neither her journeys up and down the mountain, nor her sufferings, so they solve the riddle relying upon madness and murder. But actually, the body of the baby was never found, so Martha might have had an abortion.[265]

Benis notices that when the narrator recounts that the villagers wanted to bring Martha to public justice, the entire scene seems 'anachronistic.' That is because, as I have explained in Chapter 1, at the beginning of the 19th century in England it was very unusual for a woman accused of infanticide to be convicted, let alone to be brought to justice. As Benis states: "It is almost as if the poem is set, not in contemporary England, but much earlier in the century when the residue of puritan morals still very much influenced decisions to prosecute these cases."[266] However, it is true that in small villages everyone knew each other's business, and it was very easy to accuse a young woman of infanticide – people also searched for physical evidences in the woman's

[261] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[262] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid., p. 208-209.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid., p. 210.

body –,[267] so the "provincial paranoia" of Martha's neighbours is actually verisimilar.[268] This is also what Wordsworth had to endure during his time in Somerset. In fact, even though their neighbours were not sure of Wordsworth's political ideology, they accused him and spied on him anyway. The Home Government could not find anything offensive, but Wordsworth and his sister were still forced to leave their house because of the harsh treatment their neighbours reserved them. In 1798 Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle, publisher of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

> Wordsworth has been caballed against so long and so loudly, that he has found it impossible to prevail on the tenant of the Alfoxden estate, to let him the house, after the first agreement is expired, so he must quit it at Midsummer; whether we shall be able to procure him a house and furniture near Stowey, we know not.[269]

Even though Martha is presented as an outcast throughout the entire poem, she is not the real outcast, the narrator is. He is the one who had a completely different story before coming to town, a different life, different companions. Martha and him followed the exact opposite path. Martha was at first an accepted and integrated part of the community, later ostracized and isolated. The narrator instead, being new in town, first experienced life as a 'stranger,' and then became an integral part of the society.[270] His approach to Martha is ambiguous. On the one hand, he presents himself as a neutral voice ("I cannot tell; I wish I could; For the true reason no one knows"),[271] sometimes even taking her side ("But kill a new-born infant thus, I do not think she could!"),[272] but on the other hand, during their first (and maybe last) encounter, the moment he saw her, he immediately turned around, leaving her alone without even giving any explanation.[273] His reaction cannot be due to her supposed crime, since at that point he does not know anything about her story yet, and he does not even give her the possibility to speak. So, the reason behind his attitude must have something to do with her appearance.[274] Their status as outcasts connects them together and allows the narrator to identify himself in Martha. This might be why he does not think she has truly committed infanticide, despite all the rumours. Even though what he thinks is in

[267] For more information, please see Chapter 1 of this thesis.
[268] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
[269] Ibid., p. 214.
[270] Ibid., p. 215.
[271] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[272] Ibid., p. 257.
[273] Benis, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
[274] Ibid.

contrast with what the rest of the community thinks, it is fundamental for him to have an opinion on Martha's story, because everyone does. It seems that gossip brings the villagers closer together, so the narrator must participate into the debate to really be accepted as one of them. The poem is written as if the narrator is recounting the story to somebody else, another stranger, the 'questioner.'[275] This strengthens the idea that the sea-captain is now an authentic part of the society, since he is in charge of telling the story of Martha to the new-comers.

2.5 Two Versions of the Same Poem

In 1820 Wordsworth made some adjustments to the poem's original text. Some scholars argue that these changes were a response to the critique Coleridge made of Wordsworth's poetry, including *The Thorn*. Coleridge's commentary was part of the second volume of his *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817. It was both an autobiographical book, and a critical work on different literary works. Chapter 17 is dedicated to Wordsworth; in regard to *The Thorn*, Coleridge particularly criticised the way Wordsworth constructed the character of the narrator. For Coleridge, the 'sea-captain,' was dull and garrulous, and because of him, the entire poem became dull and garrulous as well:

> But in a poem, still more in a lyric poem (and the Nurse in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet alone prevents me from extending the remark even to dramatic poetry, if indeed the Nurse itself can be deemed altogether a case in point) it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity.[276]

Coleridge believed that the narrator was not necessary to convey the meaning of *The Thorn*. On the contrary, it should have been the poet himself to give voice to the poem.[277] Coleridge did not appreciate the way the narrator speaks, the use of repetitions and the fact that he does not just tell Martha's story, but he wants to display his story as well:

> It is indeed very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters, which an unfurnished or confused understanding interposes at

[275] Kirkham, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
[276] S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, J. Shawcross (ed.), London: Oxford University Press, (1817), 1962, p. 36.
[277] S. M. Parrish, "The Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy", *PMLA*, vol. 73, n. 4 (1958), 367-374, p. 372.

short intervals, in order to keep hold of his subject, which is still slipping from him, and to give him time for recollection; (…) But what assistance to the poet, or ornament to the poem, these can supply, I am at a loss to conjecture.[278]

In particular, he criticises "the last couplet of the third stanza; the last seven lines of the tenth; and the five following stanzas."[279] These happen to be exactly the lines Wordsworth changed in the version of 1820. The first modification is in the third stanza. The two last lines are, in fact, completely different.

1798 Version	1820 Version
You see a little muddy pond Of water, never dry; I've measured it from side to side: 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide[280]	You see a little muddy pond Of water—never dry Though but of compass small, and bare To thirsty suns and parching air.[281]

In the 1798 version, the narrator uses the first person to highlight how involved he is in the mystery surrounding Martha Ray, just like the rest of the community. In fact, he obsessively measures the pond to demonstrate that it could have easily been used as a child's grave. It is clear that in the 1820 version, Wordsworth completely diminishes the role of the narrator, just as Coleridge suggested. The first person disappears and there is no mention of the narrator's involvement into the story.

The next changes are the seven last lines of the tenth stanza.

1798 Version	1820 Version
Nay rack your brain—'tis all in vain, I'll tell you everything I know; But to the thorn, and to the pond Which is a little step beyond, I wish that you would go: Perhaps when you are at the place	Full twenty years are past and gone Since she (her name is Martha Ray) Gave with a maiden's true good-will Her company to Stephen Hill; And she was blithe and gay, While friends and kindred all approved

278 Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
279 Ibid., p. 36.
280 W. Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, (1798), 1991, 70-78, p. 71.
281 Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

You something of her tale may trace[282]	Of him whom tenderly she loved[283]

In the 1798 version, once again the centre of the poem is the narrator, while in the 1820 version the narrator's point of view is entirely cut to leave space for Martha's story. The parallel lines in the 1820 poem are still present in the version of 1798, but in the eleventh stanza, and with slight, but meaningful, changes. In fact, in the poem of 1798, the last two lines regarding Martha's story recite: "And she was happy, happy still, Whene'er she thought of Stephen Hill."[284] In 1820, these lines become: "While friends and kindred all approved, Of him whom tenderly she loved."[285] It is clear that Wordsworth's intention was to shift the focus from Martha's naïve happiness, to some more meaningful insight into her personality. In fact, the highlight upon the society's approval of Stephen, reveals Martha's deep desire of being an integral part of the community. From this moment on, the chronological order of events is different in the two versions. While in the eleventh stanza of the 1820 version the story is already at the point of the betrayal and Martha's madness, in the 1798 version the narrator is still focusing on what he knows about the story and the suggestions he can give to his speaker:

1798 Version	**1820 Version**
I'll give you the best help I can: Before you up the mountain go, Up to the dreary mountain-top, I'll tell you all I know. 'Tis now some two and twenty years, Since she (her name is Martha Ray) Gave with a maiden's true good will Her company to Stephen Hill; And she was blithe and gay,	And they had fixed the wedding day, The morning that must wed them both; But Stephen to another Maid Had sworn another oath; And, with this other Maid, to church Unthinking Stephen went— Poor Martha! on that woeful day A pang of pitiless dismay Into her soul was sent;

[282] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
[283] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
[284] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
[285] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

And she was happy, happy still Whene'er she thought of Stephen Hill.[286]	A fire was kindled in her breast, Which might not burn itself to rest.[287]

The four last lines of the 1820 version are very significant. The corresponding lines in the poem of 1798 are the last four lines of the twelfth stanza, and they recite:

A cruel, cruel fire, they say
Into her bones was sent:
It dried her body like a cinder,
And almost turn'd her brain to tinder.[288]

In the version of 1798, the fire is sent to Martha's bones, whereas in the version of 1820, it is sent into her breast. The breast is extremely linked to the act of breastfeeding, and so it becomes a metaphor for the connection between Martha and her baby, the mother and the child. The fire does not represent only the pain she has to endure because of Stephen's betrayal, but also the forced introduction of sin – the illegitimate baby – into her body. The breast is also the house of the heart. The focus shifts from her brain (in the 1798 version) to her heart, and so to her passion (in the 1820 version).

Wordsworth seems to welcome Coleridge's criticism again in the last two lines of, respectively, the thirteenth stanza (1798) and twelfth stanza (1820). In fact, while in the poem of 1798 the attention is on what the narrator thinks and feels about Stephen, in the version of 1820 Stephen's condition is dealt with ironic sympathy. In the original version, the narrator condemns Stephen for his betrayal. In the 1820 poem, the narrator acknowledges Stephen as a sinner, but he does not condemn him. On the contrary, he ironically says that only death could have saved him from his fault.

1798 Version	**1820 Version**
Oh me! ten thousand times I'd rather That he had died, that cruel father![289]	O guilty Father—would that death Had saved him from that breach of faith![290]

[286] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[287] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
[288] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[289] Ibid.
[290] S. Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

In conclusion, it is clear that the adjustments Wordsworth added in 1820 served to shed more light upon the character of Martha, at the same time reducing the voice of the narrator. These new lines were deeply significant in the discovery of Martha's wish for social approval, which makes her a vagrant not on a voluntary basis, but someone who was forced to isolation because of her supposed crime. Moreover, the 1820 version of the poem also focuses more, through the metaphor of the heart and the breast, on the maternal connection of Martha with the baby in her womb. It is not just madness that she feels when she finds out about Stephen's other relationship, indeed the fire she feels in her heart is also linked to the new condition she is living, that of a mother.

2.6 An Alternative Interpretation: The Interior Monologue

For the purpose of this thesis, I analyse *The Thorn* as a poem about an infanticidal mother. Even though I consider Martha as an really-existed character, it needs to be highlighted that for some critics her story is a fantasy of the narrator's mind. In this last paragraph I analyse Stephen Parrish's interpretation of *The Thorn*, according to which it is actually a poem "first, about a tree, and second, about a man."[291] Although it is presented as the story of the rumours around a presumed infanticide, it is more than that. Parrish claims that the poem is actually a dramatic monologue of the narrator, revealing the deepest processes of his mind. It is a "a psychological study, a poem about the way the mind works."[292] In the note to the poem, published in 1800, Wordsworth explains that he willingly chose a character like the sea-captain to narrate Martha's story. That is because it is easier for a character like that one, a retired man looking for a new place to settle in, to believe to what people around him say and fall into the trap of superstition. In fact, Wordsworth's goal was that of showing how impactful can superstition be on humans' minds:

> This Poem ought to have been preceded by an introductory Poem, which I have been prevented from writing by never having felt my¬ selfin a mood when it was probable that I should write it well.—The character which I have here introduced speaking is sufficiently common. The Reader will perhaps have a general notion of it, if he has ever known a man, a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of

[291] S. M. Parrish, ""The Thorn": Wordsworth's Dramatic Monologue", *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, vol. 24, n. 2 (1957), 153-163, p. 154.
[292] Ibid.

> which he was not a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence; and from the same cause, and other predisposing causes by which it is probable that such men may have been affected, they are prone to superstition.[293]

Parrish claims that everything the narrator tells is just the work of his imagination. That is to say, that there actually is no Martha Ray. The woman in the scarlet cloak that he sees becomes just the product of his mind processing the stories the villagers narrate him. According to Parrish, Wordsworth's aim through *The Thorn* – and through the *Lyrical Ballads* in general – was to show how our mind reacts when stimulated by ecstatic emotions. If we follow Parrish's interpretation, *The Thorn* becomes "not a poem about a woman but a poem about a man (and a tree); not a tale of horror but a psychological study; not a ballad, but a dramatic monologue."[294] To support his thesis, Parrish analyses the poem and highlights the elements that sustain his interpretation. He claims that the narrator starts telling what his imagination suggests him from the second Stanza, when he describes the conditions of the thorn. In Stanza VI he introduces the figure of Martha, but when the questioner asks him why she cries all the time, he is not able to answer and just says, in Stanza IX: "I cannot tell; I wish I could; For the true reason no one knows."[295] According to Parrish, the reason why the narrator does not answer the question is related to his momentaneous lack of imagination. That is to say, he needs time to elaborate the rest of the story because none of what he is saying has actually happened in real life. In fact, two stanzas later, he does furnish an answer to the speaker's previous question, recounting him about Martha's love story, Stephen's betrayal, the supposed infanticide. He contradicts himself again between Stanza XIV and Stanza XVII. First, he says that: "But some remember well, That Martha Ray about this time, Would up the mountain often climb,"[296] suggesting that no one had seen Martha climbing the mountain for a long time. But then, some stanzas later, he recounts his first encounter with Martha on the mountain. These constant contradictions are typical of people who are telling something that is invented; they adjust the tale while speaking, and they do not remember what they have already told. Moreover, in Stanza IX, the narrator invites the speaker to visit Martha's hut, but he also scares him by saying that no one ever dares to pass by when she is home. This might be because there

[293] Wordsworth, Note to *The Thorn*, cit., p. 96.
[294] Parrish, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
[295] Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[296] Ibid., p. 256.

actually is no Martha. Parrish claims that the only real element here is the hut, and in order for the narrator to keep his story plausible, he cannot risk by telling the speaker to go visit the hut anytime, because then he would expect to find a woman that does not really exist.[297] According to Parrish, the narrator: “Stimulated by his memory of a tree, (…) begins to relate village gossip about a woman. Some of it is factual, some not.”[298] He thinks that Martha Ray really existed years before, and that the betrayal she endured might in fact be true. Other elements that really exist are “the tree, the pond, the mound, and the hut.”[299] Instead, the elements that are the product of the villagers’ superstition and of the narrator’s imagination are “the ghostly voices from the mountain head, the shaking grass and the stirring moss, the "shadow of a babe" on the pond.”[300] The narrator’s creativity is stimulated by the memory of the villagers’ superstition, in this way showing how superstition acts upon the mind – which was the aim stated by Wordsworth in the note to the poem –. Finally, the last element Parrish presents in support of his thesis regards Wordsworth’s categorization of the poem. In a letter to Coleridge that dates back to 1809, Wordsworth listed a series of poems that related to maternal affection (for example *The Sailor's Mother*, *The Idiot Boy*, *The Emigrant Mother* and so on) and classified them in two collections: “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman” and “Poems founded on the Affections.” *The Thorn* is mentioned in neither of them. It is included in the 1815 collection of the “Poems of the Imagination.”[301]

Whether Parrish is right or not I cannot tell. I believe that both the interpretations – *The Thorn* as a poem on a supposed infanticide and *The Thorn* as a poem on the power of imagination – can co-exist, as they both add greater value to Wordsworth’s poetic genius.

[297] Parrish, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
[298] Ibid., p. 158.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid., p. 161.

CHAPTER THREE

George Eliot's *Adam Bede*

3.1 Portrait of Mary Ann Evans

> "I met nobody, for it was very early, and I got into the wood…I knew the way to the place…the place against the nut-tree; and I could hear it crying at every stop…I thought it was alive…I don't know whether I was frightened or glad…I didn't know what I felt. I only know I was in the wood, and heard the cry. I don't know what I felt till I saw the baby was gone. And when I'd put it there, I thought I should like somebody to find it, and save it from dying; but when I saw it was gone, I was struck like a stone, with fear. I never thought o' stirring, I felt so weak. I knew I couldn't run away, and everybody as saw me 'ud know about the baby. My heart went like a stone: I couldn't wish or try for anything; it seemed like as if I should stay there for ever, and nothing 'ud ever change. But they came and took me away."[302]

Mary Ann Evans was not the typical Victorian woman. Ever since the beginning of her life, she strongly asserted her independence: from her father, with whom she allegedly started a "Holy War"[303] after she lost faith in the Anglican church; from the standards that Victorian society imposed on women, since she was very well educated – she even knew Latin and Greek – and she had a relationship with George Henry Lewes, a married man with children. Evans made her debut in the literary world in 1850, when she started writing for the *Westminster Review*, of which she became the assistant editor a year later.[304] She was well aware of the fact that her father and her brothers did not approve of her conduct, but that did not stop her, neither in life nor in death. In fact, her religious beliefs and her illicit relationship cost her the burial in Highgate Cemetery,[305] rather than in the "Poet's Corner" in Westminster Abbey.[306] However, despite living an atypical life, Eliot's enterprising spirit did not affect her female characters. In fact, some feminist scholars, like Lee R. Edwards and Ellen Moers, criticised Eliot for creating female characters who did not have the possibility of making their way into the world, thus providing negative role models for women readers of the time.[307] In the case of

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[302] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 468.
[303] N. Yıldız, "The female monsters or the monstrous others: George Eliot and her Hetty Sorrel in Adam Bede", *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 23, n. 42 (2022), 583-607, p. 587.
[304] Ibid.
[305] This cemetery was, in fact, a burial place for religious dissenters. Ibid., p. 588.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Ibid., p. 589.

Hetty Sorrel, the figure I mostly focus on for the purpose of this research, Eliot's 'anti-feminism' results in both the narrator's description of Hetty and the tragic finale of her story. Mitchell argues that Eliot's condemnation of Hetty's vanity is not a way to denounce the dehumanization of the female body: "Hetty is scorned, not for assuming so readily her position as viewed object, but for being aware of this position in the first place."[308] In the same way, Hetty's attitude towards children in general and especially towards her own newborn is not employed to object against Victorian ideology of motherhood, since in the end she is punished with exile and, unlike all the other characters, she is not given the same sympathetic treatment.[309] According to Creeger, Eliot's ambiguity has its roots in her conservatism.[310] In all her works, and especially in *Adam Bede* (1859), it is clear how deeply she feared anything escaping humans' control. For example, she believed that progress would damage society and that passions should be regulated by reason. The only way individuals could survive the unforeseen changes of existence was living by two principles: duty and sympathy. It was precisely this sense of duty that made Mary Ann Evans stay in London during the years of her relationship with George Henry Lewes, a status that the majority of society regarded as immoral. The conflict between her 'earthly pleasures' and the rigidity of Victorian society engendered in Eliot "psychosomatic headaches and renal disorders."[311] Her anxiety increased once her father died. She believed that, once free to express her sexuality without the constraint her father personified, she would become selfish and devilish: "I had a horrid vision of myself…becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence."[312] Selfishness was, in Eliot's vision, the ultimate humans' sentence. She called it "the prison of the self"[313] and the only way one can get out of it, according to her, is through compassion and sympathy. People can either be born innately sympathetic or they have to go through a long and challenging journey in order to free themselves from that narcissistic cage. The complete expression of Eliot's thinking can be found in her novels. In the case of *Adam Bede*, the male protagonist,

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[308] N. Anne Marck, "Narrative Transference and Female Narcissism: The Social Message of "Adam Bede"", *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 35, n. 4 (2003), 447-470, p. 449.
[309] C. Leilei, "Hetty Sorrel, Infanticide and the Articulation of the Ideology of Motherhood", *Comparative Literature: East & West*, vol. 6, n. 1 (2005), 43-54, p. 46.
[310] George R. Creeger, "Introduction", in G. R. Creeger (ed.), *George Eliot. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 1-11, p. 2.
[311] Ibid., p. 3.
[312] George Eliot, "To The Brays, [30 May 1849]", in G.S. Haight (ed.), *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 54.
[313] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Adam, is the perfect example of such a successful journey. At the beginning of the novel, Adam's attitude is self-centred. He is particularly severe towards his father, a very old, alcoholic man. In Chapter 4, "Home and its Sorrows," Adam, after a long day of work, returns home to discover that his father did not make the coffin that was scheduled to be delivered to their clients the following day. When he finds out, he is completely incapable of putting himself in the shoes of his father and being *compassionate* towards him. He just gets furious, up to the point of refusing to eat. Due to the extreme *sense of duty* he feels, he immediately gets back to work in order to complete the job on his father's behalf:

> A deep flush of anger passed rapidly over Adam's face. He said nothing, but threw off his jacket and began to roll up his shirt-sleeves again. "What art goin' to do, Adam?" said the mother, with a tone and look of alarm. "Thee wouldstna go to work again, wi'out ha'in thy bit o' supper?" Adam, too angry to speak, walked into the workshop. (…) "Why, thee canstna get the coffin ready," said Lisbeth. "Thee't work thyself to death. It 'ud take thee all night to do't." "What signifies how long it takes me? Isn't the coffin promised? Can they bury the man without a coffin? I'd work my right hand off sooner than deceive people with lies i' that way. It makes me mad to think on't. I shall overrun these doings before long. I've stood enough of 'em."[314]

Things change once Adam's father dies. The experience of sorrow and grief reveals itself to be crucial in his journey towards the liberation of the narcissistic self: "but Adam's mind rushed back over the past in a flood of relenting and pity. When death, the great Reconciler, has come, it is never our tenderness that we repent of, but our severity."[315] This experience enables Adam to develop his empathy for other people. This is made clear at the end of the novel, when he finds out that Hetty, the woman he adores, loves Arthur instead. Adam forgives them both and moves on:

> "I wouldn't shake hands with you once, sir, when you asked me— but if you're willing to do it now, for all I refused then..." Arthur's white hand was in Adam's large grasp in an instant, and with that action there was a strong rush, on both sides, of the old, boyish affection.[316]

Hetty represents the exact opposite example of Adam's path. It seems that she is not even able to make steps forward, let alone to cross the finish line. Her heart remains "hard as a pebble"[317] till her very last appearance, and that is why she is punished by

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[314] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit, p. 46.
[315] Ibid., p. 60.
[316] Ibid., p. 511.
[317] Ibid., p. 170.

being exiled from the novel's happy ending. A great deal of issues that Eliot addresses throughout her books are, in summary, humans' egoism, the necessity of pain, duty and its consequences ("acceptance, endurance and renunciation"),[318] and the achievement of redemption by means of sympathy.[319]

3.2 The "Infinite Value" of Realism

In Chapter 17, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little," Eliot jumps out of the storyline for a moment to debate of realism. First of all, it is necessary to establish that her idea of realism is different from Zola's deterministic one. While Zola believed that external circumstances are capable of shaping humans' destiny, for Eliot both failures and successes are determined only by the self.[320] Eliot's idea of realism is more similar to that of the German writer Riehl. She defines it the "faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence."[321] But most of all, Mary Ann Evans was captivated by the aesthetic outlined by Ruskin in *Modern Painters* (1843-1860). In the review she wrote in 1856, and that was published on the *Westminster Review* in the same year, she assigns to Ruskin the "infinite value" of realism:

> (…) the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feelings, in place of definite, substantial reality.[322]

The humble and faithful study of nature must not be mistaken with the description of an objective version of nature. On the contrary, for both Eliot and Ruskin the truth coincides with the author's interpretation of "what is true," and consequently with his or her ability to express that truth.[323] However, it should be highlighted that this does not mean that Eliot wrote her characters in order to suit her preferences, in fact she claimed that:

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[318] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Enrica Villari, "«Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult» Adam Bede e il realismo di George Eliot", in S. Fornasiero e S. Tamiozzo (ed.), *Studi sul Sette-Ottocento offerti a Marinella Colummi*, Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2015, pp. 253-265, p. 254.
[321] J. Gribble, "The Hidden Shame: Telling Hetty Sorrel's Story", *Sydney Studies*, vol. 22 (2008), pp. 102-119, p. 104.
[322] George Eliot, "John Ruskin's Modern Painters, Vol. III", in A. S. Byatt and N. Warren (ed.), *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, London: Penguin Books, 1990.
[323] Gabriele Wittig Davis, "Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and George Eliot's Concept of Realism", in *English Language Notes*, vol. 18, n. 3 (1981), p. 196.

> My strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath.[324]

Wittig Davis points out that the main difference between Eliot and Ruskin is that while the former focuses more on the beauty in what she considers 'truth', the latter *uses* beauty to express truth.[325] For Mary Ann Evans, art should imitate life just as it is, no matter how tedious it might get:

> I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.[326]

To make her beliefs even clearer she uses an example inspired by Houdon's bust of Gluck. Houdon had the opportunity to forge the 'perfect' human face, but he did not, he limited himself to shape Gluck's real face with the features nature chose for him, even if that meant being "insignificant,"[327] and that is exactly what she wanted to do through her writing. Imagination also plays a huge role in the depiction of the literary realism. According to Wittig Davis:

> The "life" of the picture, i.e., the existence of the work of art, possesses a reality of its own grounded in the imagination. The fictionality of the work of art is just as "real"' as phenomenal external reality upon which realistic art depends for its source material. This material is then refined and molded into a new form, the work of art, through a process ultimately dependent upon the artistic imagination rather than rules or regulations.[328]

Eliot calls this imaginative power the 'Genius' that all artists possess. However, she agrees with Ruskin's idea of 'pathetic fallacy': he believed that all kind of strong emotions generate a state of excitement that involuntarily distorts an individual's

[324] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 193.
[325] Wittig Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
[326] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 194-195.
[327] "(…) he has left the nose as pug and insignificant, and the mouth as common, as Nature made them; but then he has done what, doubtless, Nature also did." Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[328] Wittig Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

impression of the external world.[329] This misleading sentimentality is opposed to the humble and truthful study of nature. The latter is in some way salvific for individuals since it preserves them from the incumbency of extreme individualism.[330] It is for this reason that Mary Ann Evans lashed out at women novelists of her time. In *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,* she criticises their works because she considers them too attached to their fantasies and too little to reality:

> The heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity she has a superb contralto and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues.[331]

In conclusion, both Eliot and Ruskin believe that realism in art is rendered through the filter of the artist’s consciousness. So, is art only subjective? No, it is not. Truth can be reached through a faithful mediation of external reality. Authors experience the objective reality subjectively, and then express it in their art as faithfully as their Genius allows them.[332]

As I already mentioned, many female intellectuals – like Lee R. Edwards and Ellen Moers – criticised Eliot’s treatment of her heroines. Among them there is also Virginia Woolf, who lamented the fact that despite the initial aspirations of Eliot’s female characters, they never succeed in their endeavours in the end. George Levine, in his *Introduction: George Eliot and the Art of Realism* (2001), wrote that this happened because of Eliot’s extreme adherence to reality.[333] The limits that women of the 19th century had to endure were inescapable in Eliot’s vision, even though one might argue that she was wrong in not considering the possibility of an exception, as her own life was. Even though Eliot did not like didactic novels, she did have the aim to write them somehow. Her desire to reproduce nature as it is, equalled at the same time the desire of instructing men and women of her time. She felt responsible for the examples she set in

[329] George Eliot, “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young”, in A. S. Byatt and N. Warren (ed.), *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, London: Penguin Books, 1990.
[330] Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
[331] Yildiz, *op. cit.*, p. 590.
[332] Wittig Davis, op. cit., p. 201.
[333] Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

her novels, as she herself admitted: “[any] man or woman who publishes writings…assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind.”[334]

3.3 An Introduction to the Novel

For the purpose of this thesis, I analyse *Adam Bede*, particularly in relation to the character of Hetty Sorrel and the theme of infanticide. Even though the book was published in 1859, the story takes place between 1799 and 1807.[335] The year of the publication of the novel is very significant, since it was in that period that a child-murder epidemic was devastating England.[336] However, while England was being accused by the newspapers all over the world of being “a nation of infanticides,”[337] Eliot presents a different version of the country. While infanticidal women were being absolved from all accusations, in the society *Adam Bede* portrays Hetty is not forgiven, on the contrary she is exiled, and her punishment is crucial to the novel’s happy ending. Numerous works on the subject were published in the 19th century, as a result of how urgently the problem of child-murder was felt. Eliot was surely influenced by Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) and Wordsworth’s *The Thorn* (1798), the two other publications I examine later on in the chapter.[338] But she was also affected by Dickens’ *The Chimes* (1844), in which he analysed the consequences of the New Poor Law, and by Elizabeth Barret Browning’s *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point* (1848), a child-murder poem. Other inspirational works were Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) and Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855), which both account for the concerns regarding the burial clubs.[339] More significantly, Eliot's depiction of Hetty's crime was greatly based on a true story told to her by her aunt Elizabeth Samuel. The so-called ‘germ’ of the book can be traced back to 1802, when Samuel “had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess.”[340] Eliot’s aunt’s help

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[334] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[335] J. McDonagh, “Child-Murder Narratives in George Eliot's Adam Bede: Embedded Histories and Fictional Representation”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 56, n. 2 (2001), pp. 228-259, p. 232.
[336] See Chapter 1.
[337] McDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
[338] Ibid., p. 229.
[339] Ibid., p. 231.
[340] “We were sitting together one afternoon at Griff, probably 1839 or 1840, when it occurred to her to tell how she had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess; how she had stayed with her, praying through the night, and how the poor creature al last broke out into tears, and confessed her crime. My aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution; and she described to me the great respect with which this ministry of hers was regarded by the

was crucial for that girl – who was called Mary Voce according to literary historians – because she made her confess and seek redemption. This foreshadows what happens in Chapter 45, "In the Prison," when Dinah, a methodist preacher just like Elizabeth Samuel, encourages Hetty to reveal her crime.[341] Mary's method of committing the crime differed from Hetty's: Mary poisoned her newborn, while Hetty abandoned her baby. Moreover, it seems that Mary executed the deed in retaliation for her husband, who scolded her for her extramarital affairs. Despite being portrayed as a childlike figure, Hetty also suffers the consequences of her sensuous impulses.[342]

Hetty Sorrel was orphaned when she was just a child and for this reason she was raised by her relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Poyser. Both of them treat Hetty with resentment, especially Mr. Poyser, who struggles to accept the fact that Hetty's parents spent all their fortune and left the entire family in a state of abject poverty. [343] As a result, he essentially punishes Hetty for her parents' mistakes: "For what could Hetty have been but a servant elsewhere if her uncle had not taken her in and brought her up as a domestic help to her aunt (…)?"[344] Mrs. Poyser, instead, constantly feels the need to severely scold Hetty, since she does not have a mother to do so. However, Mrs. Poyser's attitude involuntarily reveals her envy:

> Her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, who professed to despise all personal attractions and intended to be the severest of mentors, (…); and after administering such a scolding as naturally flowed from her anxiety to do well by her husband's niece—who had no mother of her own to scold her, poor thing!—she would often confess to her husband, when they were safe out of hearing, that she firmly believed, "the naughtier the little huzzy behaved, the prettier she looked."[345]

According to Marck, Hetty reacts by isolating herself into her narcissistic world.[346] She projects her feelings onto both herself, and her beauty objects, as Chapter 15, "The Two Bed-Chambers," shows, and she also imagines her future so intensely, to the point of living more into her fantasy than in the actual world:[347]

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official people about the jail. The story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, and I never lost the impression of that afternoon and our talk together." Yildiz, *op. cit.*, 592.

[341] McDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
[342] Ibid., p. 256.
[343] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 460.
[344] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 108.
[345] Ibid., p. 92.
[346] Marck., *op. cit.*, p. 460.
[347] Ibid., p. 461.

> (…) perhaps some day she should be a grand lady, and ride in her coach and ride in her coach, and dress for dinner in a brocaded silk, with feathers in her hair, and her dress sweeping the ground, like Miss Lydia and Lady Dacey (…) only she should not be old and ugly like Miss Lydia, or all the same thickness like Lady Dacey, but very pretty, with her hair done in a great many different ways, and sometimes in a pink dress, and sometimes in a white one—she didn't know which she liked best.[348]

The mirror becomes an essential object in this scene. Hetty uses it to objectify her beauty, which is, in her eyes, the only parameter to determine her value as a person: "She could see a reflection of herself in the old-fashioned looking glass (…). A queer old looking-glass! Hetty got into an ill-temper with it almost every time she dressed."[349] However, the narrator suggests that even her physical appearance is not as impeccable as she dreams of, since the glass is "fixed in an upright position, so that she could only get one good view of her head and neck (…)."[350] The narrator makes fun of the situation, comparing Hetty's habit of looking at her reflection to a religious ritual, and Hetty herself to a fanatic devotee: "But devout worshippers never allow inconveniences to prevent them from performing their religious rites, and Hetty this evening was more bent on her peculiar form of worship than usual."[351] It is a way to highlight how frivolous it is to let beauty govern one's worth. Hetty dreams of having spectators from all over the town admiring her charm, and this unconsciously reveals her wish for social approval: "And Mary Burge and everybody would perhaps see her going out in her carriage – or rather, they would *hear* of it."[352] Marck notices that Hetty is aware of the fact that she cannot include the Poysers in her vision, saying that: "it was impossible to imagine these things happening at Hayslope in sight of her aunt."[353] Mrs. Poyser is like a barrier between the imagined world of Hetty and the reality surrounding her, and functions as a constant reminder of "criticism, punishment and shame."[354] In Hetty's fantasy she is not only beautiful, but she is also the wife of Arthur Donnithorne. If she really married Arthur, she would acquire a higher social status, obtaining in this way the respect of the Poysers:

> Captain Donnithorne couldn't like her to go on doing work: he would like to see her in nice clothes, and thin shoes and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks to them; for he must

[348] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 166.
[349] Ibid., p. 163.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid., p. 164.
[352] Ibid., p. 166.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

> love her very much—no one else had ever put his arm round her and kissed her in that way. He would want to marry her and make a lady of her; she could hardly dare to shape the thought—yet how else could it be?[355]

As Marck underlines, through the marriage with Donnithorne, Hetty would "triumph over her oppressors."[356] Jewels also function as a metaphor to state one's worth. For example, at first Hetty wears glass earrings:

> And she would take out the little ear-rings she had in her ears—oh, how her aunt had scolded her for having her ears bored!—and put in those large ones. They were but coloured glass and gilding, but if you didn't know what they were made of, they looked just as well as what the ladies wore.[357]

But once she becomes more important to Arthur, she starts wearing real jewels:

> No, she was not thinking most of the giver when she smiled at the ear-rings, for now she is taking them out of the box, not to press them to her lips, but to fasten them in her ears—only for one moment, to see how pretty they look.[358]

Hetty appears to be incapable of feeling true love towards another person, in this case Arthur, because she is just attracted by the social class he personifies.[359] She lacks all kinds of feelings that belong to the love-sphere, including affection and empathy. For instance, the sight of the new-born chicks disgusts her and taking care of her young cousin Totty is her worst nightmare:

> Totty was still a day-long plague, worse than either of the others had been, because there was more fuss made about her. And there was no end to the making and mending of clothes. Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs that the shepherd was always bringing in to be taken special care of in lambing time; for the lambs WERE got rid of sooner or later. As for the young chickens and turkeys, Hetty would have hated the very word "hatching," if her aunt had not bribed her to attend to the young poultry by promising her the proceeds of one out of every brood.[360]

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[355] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., pp. 165.
[356] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 457.
[357] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., pp. 165.
[358] Ibid., p. 273.
[359] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 456.
[360] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., pp. 169-170.

3.4 The Deceiving Power of Beauty and the Anti-Maternal Feelings

Hetty is constantly described as both an animal-like and a child-like figure:

> It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief—a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you.[361]

The narrator's choice can be interpreted in two different and opposite ways. It can be either a way to sympathize with Hetty, since describing her as a child brings her closer to the figure of the new-born baby she kills, and they both become victims of somebody else – Arthur –;[362] or it can be a satire of the "infantilization of women."[363] According to this view, Eliot's intention is to illustrate the grave harm that idealising women as children may cause.[364]

Hetty's beauty holds the power to deceive most of the people she encounters, especially Adam. The narrator defines it a beauty "with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you."[365] This charm fools Adam into thinking not only that she can love him back, but also allows him to sympathize with her despite his behavioural austerity.[366] Eliot wants Hetty's beauty to be dishonest in order to demonstrate how hard it is to believe that a good-looking person can be evil.[367] In fact, the narrator justifies Adam's "ingenuity":

> Before you despise Adam as deficient in penetration, pray ask yourself if you were ever predisposed to believe evil of any pretty woman—if you ever COULD, without hard head-breaking demonstration, believe evil of the ONE supremely pretty woman who has bewitched you. No: people who love downy peaches are apt not to think of the stone, and sometimes jar their teeth terribly against it.[368]

[361] Ibid., p. 92.
[362] McDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
[363] R. Gould, "The History of an Unnatural Act: Infanticide and "Adam Bede"", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 25, n. 2 (1997), pp. 263-277, p. 264.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 92.
[366] Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 262.
[367] Yildiz, *op. cit.*, p. 595.
[368] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 167.

Hetty's beauty is also strictly related to her egoism. As Creeger points out, something only becomes significant if it affects her, in some manner.[369] For example, when she finds out about Mr. Bede's death, at first, she is interested because she thinks it is Adam who is dead. Not because she actually feels sorry for him, but because he nurtures her vanity. When she realises her mistake, she goes back to being unbothered:

> "Adam Bede—drowned?" said Hetty, letting her arms fall and looking rather bewildered, but suspecting that her aunt was as usual exaggerating with a didactic purpose. "No, my dear, no," said Dinah kindly, for Mrs. Poyser had passed on to the pantry without deigning more precise information. "Not Adam. Adam's father, the old man, is drowned. He was drowned last night in the Willow Brook. Mr. Irwine has just told me about it." "Oh, how dreadful!" said Hetty, looking serious, but not deeply affected.[370]

The same is true for Arthur; she only shows him affection because she sees in him the possibility of social redemption.[371] Whereas with all the other leading characters the narrator allows the readers to have an insight into their minds, with Hetty this does not occur. Eliot uses Hetty as a sacrificial lamb: she segregates her in her own little world, in order to demonstrate both to the readers and to the society of Hayslope the "negative consequences of the narcissist's psychological detachment."[372]

The dissonance between Hetty's physical aspect and her personality only aims at leading the readers towards the execution of her crime. Hetty represents the anti-maternal woman, who functions as the shameful exception among all the good Victorian mothers. According to Manheimer, in the 19th century the mother represented the home, a metaphorical place in which society found a shelter in order to be protected against the horrors of the industrialization.[373] With her hate towards children ("Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs (…) for the lambs were got rid of sooner or later,")[374] Hetty constitutes a threat against this deeply-rooted ideal. She incarnates the "dark lady:" "seductive, dangerous, taboo."[375] While it is true that from a Victorian viewpoint Hetty is the epitome of everything a woman should not be, from a 21st-century one, it is easy to

[369] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[370] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 105.
[371] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[372] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 450.
[373] J. Manheimer, "Murderous Mothers: The Problem of Parenting in the Victorian Novel", *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, n. 3 (1979), 530-546, p. 531.
[374] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 169.
[375] Manheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

argue that her character is actually quite revolutionary. Not only does she fiercely oppose to what was considered a natural stage of a woman's life, that of desiring and having children, she also questions maternal love: "I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it. It was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck (…)."[376] Hetty's maternal feelings are expected, both from Mrs. Poyser – who is negatively astonished anytime she realises Hetty is not happy to take care of Totty – and the narrator as well, who does not miss a chance to ostracize her.[377] It is the fact that she rebels against these expectations that make her such an important figure for her epoch. There is also another leading female character who does not wish to have children: Dinah Morris. In Chapter 7, "A Vocation," she confides to Mr. Irwine that she has "no room for such feelings."[378] So, why is Dinah allowed to enjoy a happy ending while Hetty is portrayed as the unredeemed and unsavable egoist? That is because while Hetty's desire is only due to the ambition of becoming wealthy, with Dinah it is different. While Hetty does not seem to possess the womanly instinct of taking care of others (at least what Victorians thought to be a womanly instinct), Dinah does have maternal feelings, but she wants to project them onto all the people she helps and nurtures through her religious vocation as a Methodist preacher. For this reason, not only is she forgiven but she is also deeply respected by both the narrator and the citizens of Hayslope.[379]

3.5 The Opinionated Narrator

The narrator has a huge importance in this novel, since "he"[380] has the power to influence the readers' sympathy towards one character over another. This has its most damaging impact on the portrayal of Hetty. Through this novel Eliot wanted to warn the readers of the dangers of living a life based only on the gratification of the self. In order to do so, the narrator constantly reminds readers not to follow the bad example set by Hetty. But if the audience read the book critically, without being persuaded by the narrator's voice, they would realise that Hetty's psychological profile is way more complex than it seems. For example, the reader might feel disturbed by Hetty's death.

[376] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 492.
[377] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 459.
[378] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 101.
[379] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 459.
[380] We do not know anything about the narrator except for the fact that he is an anonymous historian who meets Adam later in life.

This sense of discomfort prevails over the awareness of Adam's successful journey, minimising in this way all the efforts of the narrator to convey the novel's didactic aim.[381] Eliot believed the readers to be fully absorbed into the storyline, to the point of being influenced in their outside life as well. That is why to her, all the people who sympathize with Hetty *the egoist*, must be egoists as well.[382] In some way, Eliot felt responsible towards her parterre. For this reason, she attributed to the narrator the duty of rectifying the readers' interpretation of the story. For instance, in order to contrast the readers' attraction to Hetty's beauty, the narrator strongly criticizes her vanity:

> Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning. Long dark eyelashes, now—what can be more exquisite? I find it impossible not to expect some depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience which has shown me that they may go along with deceit, peculation, and stupidity.[383]

The narrator has also the moral obligation of highlighting the positive values Eliot wanted to transmit. In fact, the focus is very often on the characters at work. However, the experience of working is portrayed differently depending on Adam and Hetty. While Adam works to help others and to feel accomplished, Hetty rejects her job as a butter-maker and even while working she is totally focused on herself:

> And they are the prettiest attitudes and movements into which a pretty girl is thrown in making up butter—tossing movements that give a charming curve to the arm, and a sideward inclination of the round white neck; little patting and rolling movements with the palm of the hand, and nice adaptations and finishings which cannot at all be effected without a great play of the pouting mouth and the dark eyes. And then the butter itself seems to communicate a fresh charm —it is so pure, so sweet-scented; it is turned off the mould with such a beautiful firm surface, like marble in a pale yellow light! Moreover, Hetty was particularly clever at making up the butter; it was the one performance of hers that her aunt allowed to pass without severe criticism; so she handled it with all the grace that belongs to mastery.[384]

In the same way, she is constantly described as someone who loves luxury and material things. It is true that Hetty feels fascinated by the thought of a more luxurious life, but it is the narrator who describes these characteristics as evil and tries to persuade the reader

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[381] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 451.
[382] Ibid., p. 452.
[383] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 168.
[384] Ibid., p. 93.

to think the same.[385] Moreover, it is true that Hetty wants to marry Arthur because she sees in him the possibility of gaining a higher social status, but it is the narrator who presents this ambition as wrong and "forces an interpretation of Hetty as neurotic, obsessed by unrealistic fantasy of ladyhood."[386] Hetty is determined and very conscious of her own beauty, but somehow these are depicted as features of a narcissistic person in need of redemption. And for the fact that she is not empathetic, the storyline seems to suggest that she is not deserving of sympathy as well. In order for the persuasion to take place, Hetty is deprived of having interior monologues, of telling her own story, her point of view, and in the few occasions she is able to do so, she is immediately interrupted by the voice of the narrator. Moreover, many important scenes are omitted in order to bereave the readers of the possibility to have a complete overview of her story. For example, there is not the scene of Hetty discovering her pregnancy, of her killing the baby, or of her meeting Arthur in the prison.[387] Through the omission of these events and the narrator's mediation, it is impossible for the readers to fully comprehend her story. The fact that Hetty remains silent almost all the time is very curious if compared to the other female characters. Dinah is a preacher, so it is her job to speak and communicate her beliefs, Mrs. Poyser has "the desperate determination to have her say out,"[388] and Mrs. Bede also shows a desire to be heard.[389] The reasons behind this treatment of Hetty's character can be found in the author's relationship with the character itself and the ideals it represents. The critics regarding Eliot's approach to Hetty are divided between those who think Hetty to be Eliot's opposite and those who believe her to be Eliot's "chief ally."[390] Based on the first theory, Eliot, like many other female writers of the time, created Hetty as a monstrous other of the self. It is as if Hetty becomes the repressed reflection of all the author's most rebellious thoughts, like the rejection of the patriarchal society. Eliot was forced to accept the constraints that the Victorian society imposed on women, but at the same time she rebelled against these suffocating boundaries. Hetty Sorrel seems to be the result of such controversy.[391] On the other hand, Hetty can also be read as the piece of Eliot's consciousness which she sacrifices in order to comply with the values of Victorian society. Eliot was an atypical

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[385] Marck, *op. cit.*, p. 452.
[386] Ibid., p. 454.
[387] Ibid., p. 465.
[388] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 378.
[389] Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
[390] Ibid., p. 104.
[391] Yildiz, *op. cit.*, p. 586-587.

woman; she had a relationship with a married man, and she was very well educated, but she still managed to enjoy a very successful career. In this sense Hetty becomes the expression of Eliot's feeling of guilt towards the Victorian society, since she did not embody the typical Victorian woman. That is why Hetty, who also commits sins and blasphemies in the eyes of the Victorians, represents the side of Eliot that needs to be sacrificed in her place.[392] Some scholars claim that Eliot wanted to explore the theme of unwanted motherhood and at the same time to fight the widespread belief that women were irrational.[393] According to this interpretation, Hetty's storyline functions as a social denunciation. The 'abnormality' of Hetty not only regards her unmotherly personality, but it has also to do with her non-participation in the communal life of Hayslope. She is a lone wolf mostly because of her 'unnaturalness.' The narrator describes Hetty as inadequate: due to her egoism she is unable to create deep bonds with the other citizens of the village. She is compared to a plant that does not have any roots: "There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flowerpot, and they blossom none the worse."[394] Hetty also embodies the dichotomy between instinct and intelligence. She is impulsive in the negative sense of the term: she is incapable of using rationality, which means that she is almost beast-like. However, at the same time she is described as a narcissist calculating individual.

3.6 From Prairie to Prison

The different locations of Hetty's scenes are impregnated of symbolical importance. Eliot thought about each and every detail of the book, to the point of associating each phase of Hetty's journey to a different setting. For example, the first encounter between Hetty and Arthur takes place at the Hall Farm Dairy. Since it is the first time Hetty and Captain Donnithorne meet, their relationship is at the very first and shy stages, so the environment is portrayed as 'pure' as well: "(…) such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in

[392] Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[393] Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
[394] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 169.

pure water (…).”[395] When their relationship starts to become more sexualized, so does the setting. The Grave of the Donnithorne estate is illustrated as

> (…) a wood of beeches and limes, with here and there a light silver-stemmed birch — just the sort of wood most haunted by the nymphs: you see their white sunlit limbs gleaming athwart the boughs, or peeping from behind the smooth-sweeping outline of a tall lime; you hear their soft liquid laughter — but if you look with a too curious sacrilegious eye, they vanish behind the silvery beeches, they make you believe that their voice was only a running brooklet, perhaps they metamorphose themselves into a tawny squirrel that scampers away and mocks you from the topmost bough.[396]

Last but not least, when Hetty finds out about her pregnancy and starts wandering in the hope of finding Arthur, she comes across the “dark shrouded pool in the Scantlands beyond Hayslope.”[397] Gribble claims that the pool represents Hetty’s moral weakness, which pushes her to conceal her pregnancy, her baby and her crime. Moreover, it can also be read as a metaphor for the pregnant body: “(…) mirroring Hetty's own 'dark eyes' and making vivid her sense of physical burden - the watery burden of tears, the weight of the growing child, its dark shroudedness in the watery concealment of the womb.”[398] When she realises that Arthur cannot be found anymore, she replaces him with the pool as the object of her research:

> At last she was among the fields she had been dreaming of, on a long narrow pathway leading towards a wood. If there should be a pool in that wood: it would be better hidden than the one in the fields ... there was a break in the hedge; the land seemed to dip down a little, and two trees leaned towards each other across the opening. Hetty's heart gave a great beat as she thought there must be a pool there.[399]

As the story continues, the pool changes its meaning following Hetty’s state of mind. After her long, lonely journey, she is awakened by a shepherd who wants to reunite her with society, but this enhances her sense of alienation. She wishes to die, and the pool becomes the symbol of this agony: “Life, now was as full of dread as death; - it was worse; it was a dread to which she felt chained, from which she shrank and shrank as she did from the black pool, and yet could find no refuge from it.”[400]

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[395] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 91.
[396] Ibid., p. 141.
[397] Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
[398] Ibid., p. 116.
[399] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 418.
[400] Ibid., p. 422.

Hetty confesses her crime to Dinah in Chapter 45, “In the Prison.” Through her very intense speech, she tries to explain that it was not her intention to kill the baby. She looked for Arthur to get the help she needed, but she could not find him. She was afraid of coming home because she could not stand the reaction of the people of Hayslope – and especially the Poysers – if they found out she was illicitly pregnant. She was desperate, and her crime is the result of her despair, owing to social stigma. In the Victorian society, if an immoral pregnancy was found out, the incriminated woman was insulted, ridiculed, and isolated. Given the circumstances, it should come with no surprise Hetty’s decision to ask for no help and to abandon the baby.

> Hetty sobbed out, throwing her arms round Dinah's neck, "I will speak...I will tell...I won't hide it any more." But the tears and sobs were too violent. (…) At last Hetty whispered, "I did do it, Dinah...I buried it in the wood...the little baby...and it cried...I heard it cry...ever such a way off...all night...and I went back because it cried." She paused, and then spoke hurriedly in a louder, pleading tone. "But I thought perhaps it wouldn't die—there might somebody find it. I didn't kill it—I didn't kill it myself. I put it down there and covered it up, and when I came back it was gone....It was because I was so very miserable, Dinah...I didn't know where to go...and I tried to kill myself before, and I couldn't. Oh, I tried so to drown myself in the pool, and I couldn't. I went to Windsor—I ran away—did you know? I went to find him, as he might take care of me; and he was gone; and then I didn't know what to do. I daredn't go back home again—I couldn't bear it. I couldn't have bore to look at anybody, for they'd have scorned me. I thought o' you sometimes, and thought I'd come to you, for I didn't think you'd be cross with me, and cry shame on me. I thought I could tell you. But then the other folks 'ud come to know it at last, and I couldn't bear that (...).[401]

She buries her baby as if she was burying first her improper passion and then her consequent disgrace. When she realises that the baby is gone, she says that her “heart went like a stone.”[402] This changing attitude is solicited by Mrs. Poyser herself during the trial, when she describes Hetty as ‘pale’ and ‘hard-looking.’[403] Hetty commits her crime in 1800, before Lord Ellenborough passed the new reform regarding infanticide, in 1803. She was punished following the rules of the 1623 Act, which stated that any woman who concealed their pregnancy or killed their baby was punishable by death. Probably, if the murder had been executed after the new law, Hetty would have been punished with just a few years of prison, charging her only of concealment.[404] Some

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[401] Ibid., p. 490-491.
[402] Ibid., p. 494.
[403] Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
[404] McDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

critics interpret the choice of setting the novel before the new act as a way to denounce the harshness of the old mandate. Hayslope represents a society "on the edge of legislative modernization,"[405] and in order to accomplish this revolution, everything reminding of the old order of things must be removed. As a result, Hetty the murderer gets banished and what stays is the family-ideal represented by Dinah and Adam. However, despite the brutality of the verdict, Hayslope needs to show-off as a compassionate community, and that is why Hetty's penalty is reduced to 'just' an exile.[406]

The confession takes place in a tiny cell, symbolising Hetty's insignificant heart.[407] The scene can be read through a Christian lens. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, claims that Christian confession implies a hierarchical relationship between the sinner and the saviour:

> The confession (…) is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile;[408]

In the scene portrayed in Chapter 45, "In the Prison," Dinah embodies the saviour, the *authority*, and Hetty the sinner: "Cast it off now, Hetty – now: confess the wickedness you have done – the sin you have been guilty of against your heavenly Father (…)"[409] Dinah here is not just a confidant and a friend, she mirrors the priest-like figure who solicits her to say the truth and bow before the Christian ideology. It is the prayer that Dinah recites that convinces Hetty of acknowledging her wrongdoing, proving once again the power of the 'Heavenly Father:'[410] "Saviour! It is yet time – time to snatch this poor soul from everlasting darkness. I believe – I believe in thy infinite love. (…) Thou – thou will breath on the dead soul, and it shall arise from the unanswering sleep of death."[411] It is very significant to notice that, even though Hetty has always proved herself to be apathetic towards children, during the last moments of her speech, she reveals to feel haunted by the crying of the baby, unveiling a noteworthy sense of guilt:

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[405] Ibid., p. 252.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Creeger, op. cit., p. 99.
[408] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, (1976), 1978, p. 44.
[409] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 489.
[410] Leilei, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[411] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 490.

> But oh, the baby's crying kept waking me, and I thought that man as looked at me so was come and laying hold of me (…) it was the baby's crying made me go—and yet I was frightened to death. I met nobody, for it was very early, and I got into the wood...I knew the way to the place...the place against the nut-tree; and I could hear it crying at every step...I thought it was alive...I don't know whether I was frightened or glad...I don't know what I felt. I only know I was in the wood and heard the cry. I don't know what I felt till I saw the baby was gone. And when I'd put it there, I thought I should like somebody to find it and save it from dying.[412]

The fact that she wanted the baby to be alive can be interpreted in two different ways. The first is that she actual felt some kind of affection towards her newborn, a sentiment that goes beyond her 'heart hard as a pebble.' The other alternative is that she succumbs to the deeply rooted view that society had of motherhood and is "unable to free from the maternal guilt generated from the ingrained notions of Good Mother."[413] The Christian subtext returns when Hetty leaves the baby to die and starts wandering in search for a shelter. She is tired, alone, scared, agonizing, and she feels "very sick, and faint, and hungry."[414] This harrowing path recalls the one undertook by the Madonna, when she could not find a place where to give birth to Jesus. The metaphor connects Hetty with the pitied figure of the Madonna.[415] The conclusion of Hetty's story suggests that no matter the outcome, it would always be biased by religiously-oriented ideologies. If she was punished, it was because of the monstrous and unacceptable mother she represented; if society had mercy on her, it was because of the belief that women were too vulnerable, irrational, and insane.[416] In the end she is exiled to the Australian colonies, where she will die some years later. Eliot's wish for a truthful representation of nature is here not entirely respected since, as stated in the first chapter of this thesis, the majority of women charged of infanticide were in the end absolved from all accusations. Throughout the book Hetty has to endure the negative judgement of the narrator because of her inability to feel sympathetic towards other people: "I think she had no feeling at all towards the old house (…). It was wonderful how little she seemed to care about waiting on her uncle (…),"[417] and again:

[412] Ibid., p. 491-492.
[413] Leilei, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
[414] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 493.
[415] Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
[416] Leilei, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
[417] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 169.

> It is generally a feminine eye that first detects the moral deficiencies hidden under the 'dear deceit' of beauty; so it is not surprising that Mrs Poyser (…) should have formed a tolerably fair estimate of what might be expected from Hetty (…).[418]

Eliot herself, chooses to send Hetty away despite her confession. As a result, Eliot, just like Hetty, appears to be unable to sympathize with others. Some might accuse her of hypocrisy since she punishes Hetty of a sin she herself is guilty of.

Some critics argue that Eliot chooses to expel Hetty from Hayslope in order to show that even a pastoral world like that one, which should have protected her, can be harsh and severe instead: "(…) her faults (…) are the faults of Hayslope and the England she inhabits."[419] However, one may consider Hetty Sorrel as a scapegoat to save the image of Hayslope as a harmonious society made of families and good mothering. She represents a serious threat because she dismantles all the pre-existing ideologies on which Hayslope is founded. With her fantasies about her future as Lady Donnithorne, she challenges the untouchable social hierarchy: lower classes have to stay low in order for higher ones to maintain their power. With her open sexuality she threatens the 'sacred' core of family stability. And finally, with her anti-maternal attitude she scares the patriarchal forces that build their power upon female domesticity.[420]

3.7 A Brief Comparison Between Eliot and Wordsworth

Wordsworth deeply influenced the work of George Eliot, especially in *Adam Bede*. In Chapter 17, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little," Eliot presents her ideas about realism and explicitly relies on the words Wordsworth uses in the Preface of the *Lyrical Ballads*, when he says:

> Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly,

[418] Ibid., p. 170.
[419] Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 264.
[420] Manheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 543.

> because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.[421]

There are many similarities between the two protagonists of the novel and the poem, respectively Hetty Sorrel and Martha Ray. They both are guilty of having committed the crime of infanticide, but they are also both victims of a society that isolates the different, the stranger, the outcast. In Eliot's novel there are many references to Martha Ray, for example Hetty wears a red cloak as well, in this way incarnating what the colour red symbolises: blood, evil, danger.[422] Also, the pool in *Adam Bede* recalls the pond in *The Thorn*, as they both represent the depth of experience, that "can never be fully known or explained, revealing how particular places, visual impressions, 'spots of time,' as Wordsworth calls them, carry within them the protean shapings of narrative (…)."[423] Both Hetty Sorrel and Martha Ray are peasants, they belong to the lowest class of society and they both bury their baby in the nature (Hetty in a pile of wood and Martha – supposedly – in a hill of moss). Finally, in *Adam Bede* there is an explicit reference to *The Thorn* when Arthur Donnithorne receives through post the collection of the *Lyrical Ballads* and comments it by saying: "Most of them seem to be twaddling stuff; but the first [*The Ancient Mariner*] is in a different style."[424]

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421 Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, cit.
422 Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
423 Ibid., p. 109.
424 Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 73.

CHAPTER FOUR
Proudly Fallen Women

In the last two chapters I outlined the picture of two murderous women, Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel, who established themselves as protagonists of an historical era characterised by an uncontrolled increase of infanticides. When *Adam Bede* was published, in 1859, British society was under the reign of Queen Victoria. It was in this time that the dichotomy between the Angel of the House and the Fallen Woman first appeared, and they soon established as the only conditions a woman could embrace. In this last chapter, I argue that both Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel may personify the "fallen woman" that so much frightened the obsessively controlling Victorian Society. Martha Ray can be considered as a Fallen Woman *ante-litteram*. Hetty could be regarded as an *ante-litteram* Fallen Woman as well, since the book is set in 1799. However, critics tend to consider her character as the full expression of the women-question that was disarranging Victorian society in 1859, when the novel was published. For the purpose of this thesis, I examine Hetty as the embodiment of the controversy between the Angel of the House and the Fallen Woman, reflected by the opposition between her appearance and her anti-maternal feelings. First, I depict the general characteristics of these two opposite categories of women, then I examine Martha's and Hetty's role as murderous mothers and contextualise them within this feminine Victorian dualism. "Fallen Women" were free women victims of a repressive and patriarchal society and the etiquette of "fallen" allowed them to keep their freedom. Hence, the title of the chapter.

Queen Victoria was the pillar of the British society. All her subjects aspired to her, especially women. She married her husband, Prince Albert, in 1940, and during their long-lasting marriage of twenty-one years, they had nine children. With her family, Queen Victoria set the example of the perfect mother and wife. Their close relationship strengthened the values of motherhood, marriage, and family, which further radiated into society.[425] However, this did not result in positive outcomes for Victorian women. The Victorian period was also an age of intense modernisation, which started at the end

[425] Suzanne Fagence Cooper, "Myth and Reality", in S. F. Cooper, *The Victorian Woman*, London: V&A Publications, 2001, 10-34, p. 14.

of the 18th century with the First Industrial Revolution and then proceeded with the second in the second half of the 19th century, covering the majority of Victoria's reign. Progress brought both capitalistic desire and conservative anxiety. People were fascinated by the idea of technological evolution and economical improvement, but they also feared change. As a result, to contrast this untamed growth, they needed some strong and never-changing values that could keep them attached to the core of their identity.[426] These values would be those suggested by the Royal institution: family, marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, in the First Industrial Revolution, during the shift of the century, Victorians were becoming intensely concerned with the preservation of their morality. As stated by Gorham, the principles affirmed by capitalism were in deep contrast with those of Christianity. While the first allowed and even encouraged unethical attitudes, like extreme competition, and embraced the Darwinian ideology of natural selection, the latter disapproved of them. To ease their consciences, Victorian males wanted to find a counterbalance to their "immoral" work lives, and they achieved it in the safety of their homes:

> The cult of domesticity helped to relieve the tensions that existed between the moral values of Christianity, with its emphasis on love and charity, and the values of capitalism, which asserted that the world of commerce should be pervaded by a spirit of competition and a recognition that only the fittest should survive. By locating Christian values in the home, and capitalist values in the public world of commerce, the Victorians were able to achieve an efficient moral balance. The home became a shelter for religious values, in their widest context including the values associated with personal relationships; the world of commerce could thereby be absolved from the necessity of acting on Christian principles. Moreover, its moral barrenness became bearable, because the idealisation of the home meant that, at least in theory, some refuge from the harsh public world was possible.[427]

This resulted in a clear division between the public sphere of life, which belonged to males, and the private sphere of life, which belonged to females instead. The public sphere included everything related to the work environment, the private sphere entailed family life. During the Victorian Era, the idea of the separation of the spheres began to take on greater relevance. It applied to many facets of a person's existence, including the cultural, social, political, and economic ones. One of the reasons that might have influenced the strengthening of this division can be reconducted to religion. According

[426] Deborah Gorham, "Women and Girls in the Middle-Class Family: Images and Reality", in D. Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, London: Routledge, (1982), 2012, 3-15, p. 4.
[427] Ibid., p. 4.

to the Bible, God had assigned distinct roles for men and women, which needed to be upheld in order to establish a harmonious and ideal society.[428] On the premises of the religious conduct suggested by the bible, already at the end of the 18th century, several volumes of instructions were published in order to educate men and women. In particular, Ross cites two of these books: Henry Venn's *The Complete Duty of Man* (1763) and Thomas Gisborne's *Enquiries Into the Duties of Men in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society*, which also had a sequel called *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797).[429] Both the manuals asserted that women had to

> [promote] the general comfort and well-being of the family, [mould] the minds of the young and improving the level of manners in society by their influence and example. An intellectual life was not to be aspired to. Education for the middle-class girl meant the attainment of fashionable accomplishments as well as such virtues as chastity, temperance and submission. A woman's intellect was considered to be inferior to that of a man's for any serious learning.[430]

Reverend Thomas Gisborne, in his volumes, claimed that a woman had essentially three roles; as Cross points out

> a woman's task was to contribute daily and hourly to the comfort of all those around her in the domestic circle; secondly, she was to shape and improve the manners and behaviour of men by her society and example; thirdly, she was to model the human mind in its early stages of growth, caring especially for girls until they became women and could then take on this same role of endless virtue, selflessness and dependence on others.[431]

Reverend Henry Venn, on the other hand, outlined the duty of women as follows:

> It is therefore nothing less than an open resistance to the ordinance of God; it is nothing less than a proud and self-exalting contempt of the word of God, in a wife to affect to rule, or to refuse to submit to the authority of her husband.[432]

Given that these books were already in use towards the end of the 18th century, it is simple to see how deeply ingrained these concepts were by the middle of the 19th. From a scientific point of view, the scientist that gave the most eminent contribution to the theme was Charles Darwin, especially with his *On the Origins of the Species* (1859).

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428 C. Ross, "Separate Spheres or Shared Dominions?", *Transformation*, vol. 23, n. 4 (2006), 228-235.
429 Ibid., p. 228.
430 Ibid.
431 Ibid., p. 229.
432 H. Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man or A System of Doctrinal and Practical Christianity to which are added Forms of Prayer and Offices of Devotion for the Various Circumstances of Life*, Bath: Hazard & Binns, (1808), p. 229.

However, it was in his *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) that he made a sharper division between the sexes. Darwin claims that rivalry between men enhanced their mental faculties, causing their intellect to be stronger than that of women:

> Man is the rival of other men; he delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness. These latter qualities seem to be his natural and unfortunate birthright. It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation. (…) If men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman.[433]

Moreover, he assigns to women the characteristics of "greater tenderness," "less selfishness" and "maternal instincts."[434] Darwin was the most celebrated scientist of his time, and his theories had a huge influence over the social structure. Hence, the fact that the separation of the spheres was supported scientifically by the most influential biologist of the time played a significant part in its establishment.

It is in this atmosphere that the etiquette of 'Angel of the House' first appeared. The phrase was coined by Coventry Patmore, an English poet, who in 1854 published a narrative poem called "The Angel in the House." In it, he depicts all the characteristics a woman should possess. I attach some lines taken from Canto IV to highlight the adjectives he uses to describe a woman:

> How artless in her very art; How candid in discourse; how sweet The concord of her lips and heart; How simple and how circumspect; How subtle and how fancy-free; Though sacred to her love, how deck'd With unexclusive courtesy; How quick in talk to see from far The way to vanquish or evade; How able her persuasions are To prove, her reasons to persuade; How (not to call true instinct's bent And woman's very nature, harm), How amiable and innocent Her pleasure in her power to charm; How humbly careful to attract, Though crown'd with all the soul desires, Connubial aptitude exact, Diversity that never tires.[435]

Artless, candid, sweet, fancy-free, amiable, innocent, humbly careful. These are just some of the qualities he assigns to the woman protagonist of his work. When Patmore

[433] Charles Darwin, "Mental Powers of Man and Woman", in C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1871], 1981, 316-355, p. 327.
[434] Ibid.
[435] C. Patmore, *The Angel in The House*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.

published the poem, women were already trapped in their roles as mothers and wives. He did not create the role of the angel in the house; rather, he simply connected the characteristics women were already required to embrace, to the title of "Angel of the House," which stuck with women ever since.

The Angel of the House is nothing more than the embodiment of the previously mentioned values that Royalty suggested, and that males demanded in order to maintain their morality. So, it is a role born out of the need and the interest of somebody else. The ideal woman was submissive, compassionate, naïve, self-sacrificing, chaste, mild tempered. She did not have any personal wish or desire; she took care of her home and family.[436] In fact, the ideal woman did not have a job either. Out of necessity, in the poorest families, women could work but they could only do certain types of jobs. For example, they could be domestic servants, they could work in factories, or they could be midwives, as mentioned in Chapter 1. It is obvious that they were only permitted to perform low-level occupations. Additionally, they were exploited for long shifts and paid significantly less than males, making their working circumstances far worse than those of men.[437] Women were expected to find a husband, as marriage was not only felt as a duty and a natural stage of a woman's life, but it was also the only way for them to achieve financial stability. According to the statistics reported by Suzanne Cooper, in 1851 only 29% of women over twenty years old were unmarried.[438] But it is important to note that once a man and a woman were married, he became the owner of all rights, including those pertaining to money, children, and even the wife:

> By marriage, husband and wife became one person in law - and that person was he. He had almost complete control over her body, and their children belonged to him. Unless a marriage settlement arranged things differently, the husband was entitled to all his wife's property, and he could claim any money she earned.[439]

The economic issue was strictly related to infanticides. A family of the lowest class had only two options: the mother could either get a job, which meant leaving the kids alone or in the care of unreliable individuals ("unscrupulous minders, who dosed them [the kids] with laudanum and treacle, a mixture that keeping them quiet, prepares them for

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[436] Gorham, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[437] A. Digby, "Victorian Values and Woman in Public and Private", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 78, (1995), 195-215, p. 205.
[438] Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
[439] Joan Perkin, "Angels in the House: Marriage and Domestic Life", in J. Perkin, *Victorian Women*, London: John Murray, 73-93, 1993, p. 73-74.

the silence of their impending grave,")[440] or she could stay at home, in the most dire of circumstances. Infanticide was almost certainly the result in both cases.

The role of women in the 19th century has been the subject of intense debate among critics, particularly in light of the contrast between the Angel of the House and the Fallen Woman. Many great authors, like J. S. Mill and Virginia Woolf have written about the condition of women, denouncing the injustices they had to endure during the 19th century. In particular, in 1869 J. S. Mill published an essay called "The Subjection of Women," in which he argues that the disparity between men and women is not beneficial for society. On the contrary, it prevents social advancement.[441] Woolf, on the other hand, in an essay called "Professions for Women" (1931), explicitly admits that she did not identify herself with the chaste, innocent, naïve woman. In fact, she actually wanted to destroy the concept of the Angel of the House and fight societal expectations of women.[442] On the premises of these much-celebrated works, I discuss about how the characters of Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel rebel against these oppressive social standards that Mill and Woolf denounced as well. Women were regarded as creatures that needed male protection. The 'Angel of the House' was a child-like figure who had to keep her purity preserved. The Victorian fixation with respectability is directly related to the concept of purity. A woman, in order to be respectable, had to be chaste. Once married, however, women had the obligation to practice sexual activity with their husbands, both for the latter's satisfaction and for the purpose of having children: "sex was not regarded as something that ladies should enjoy."[443] Women's sexual desire was largely disregarded in Victorian society since it was considered taboo.[444] As I previously mentioned, women were in charge of the private sphere of life, but most of all they were responsible of how the outside world perceived their private domain. Since the family's reputation relied on the husband/father, having a chaste wife and daughters was essential to make the family appear respectable from the outside.[445] Again, female desires were repressed to please everybody but themselves. Patriarchal society of course

[440] Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[441] E. S. Smith, "John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women": A Re-Examination", *Polity*, vol. 34, n. 2 (2001), 181-203.
[442] E. Showalter, "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers", *The Antioch Review*, vol. 32, n. 3 (1972), 339-353.
[443] S. Kuhl, "The Angel in the House and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society", 2016. Available: The Angel in the House and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society, Sarah Kuhl | open.conted.ox.ac.uk (beta), Accessed 2023, August.
[444] Ibid.
[445] Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

shaped women's consciousness, but some of them just pretended to be like men wanted them to be: "Men's idea was of a decoratively idle, sexually passive woman, pure of heart, religious and self-sacrificing. (…) An ivy-like wife who was also a doting and self-abnegating mother, clinging to her husband on whom she was totally dependent."[446] According to Deborah Gorham, still during the Romantic Period, the characteristics attributed to women were thought to reside naturally in their psychology. It was during the Victorian Age that this ideology fully flourished, to the point of considering monstrous or unnatural all women that did not conform to the 'Angel of the House' status.

> But since the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of femininity, which is based on a conception of human psychology that assumes that feminine qualities are 'natural', has been the major ideological agent in enforcing the subordination of women. Intimations of the concept are, to be sure, found earlier, but it is only at the end of the eighteenth century that a self-consciously constructed theory about psychological differences between males and females began to be developed. In the Victorian period, the era of the 'Angel in the House', the idea of femininity came to full flower.[447]

Hence, the etiquette of "Fallen Woman" was created. The Fallen Woman was frightening for both males and females. Men were scared of women powerfully engaged with their desires, aspirations, and sexuality. As a result, they tried to diminish these types of women, accusing them of madness, irrationality, and emotional frailty. 'Angel' women, on the other hand, felt threatened by the possibility of transgressing the rules and becoming blasphemous like their 'evil' sisters.[448]

But who was the Fallen Woman? The word "fall" refers to a change from one condition to another, usually one that is worse. It occurred when a woman violated the moral standards that society placed on the female sex, for example in the case of unmarried mothers, when a woman lost her virginity outside of the marriage, or in the most extreme event of a woman committing infanticide. In general, the "fall" indicates the loss of innocence.[449] It was intolerable for society to imagine a woman disobeying the rules, that is why Fallen Women were isolated, banished, and abandoned to

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[446] Perkin, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[447] Gorham, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[448] Annie Cossins, "Regulation of the Female Body: Was Infanticide a Moral Panic of the Nineteenth Century?", in A. Cossins, *Female Criminality Infanticide. Moral Panics and The Female Body*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 57-168, p. 57.
[449] M. Jafari, "Fallen Woman in Victorian Society: Eliot's Adam Bede and Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd", *The Criterion. An International Journal in English*, vol. 3, n. 4 (2012), 1-10, p. 2.

themselves. As I earlier mentioned, this patriarchal ideology was already very much present long before Victorianism, as demonstrated by a book published in 1791 called *Advice to unmarried women: to recover and reclaim the fallen; and to prevent the fall of others, into the snares and consequences of seduction*. Kuhl states that the book functions as a warning to female sinners: due to their transgressions, they should hold no hope in regard of their future, since no respectable households would accept them as servants anymore.[450] In fact, once a woman was labelled as "impure," society classified her as unredeemable. It should be highlighted that men did not have to respect the same rules of chastity. On the contrary, it was a common practice for them to frequent prostitutes or to have mistresses.[451]

The opposition between the Angel of the House and the Fallen Woman has its roots in the Christian tradition, in particular in the dualism of Mary and Eve. Mary is the virgin par excellence, embodiment of purity and self-abnegation for the sake of God. Eve, on the other hand, is the evil seducer, the woman who gave in to her earthly impulses, the one who caused not only her own fall but the fall of Adam as well. From a Victorian lens, the Angel of the House is the virgin Mary, and the Fallen Woman is the rebellious Eve.[452] Even though they appear as complete opposites, they do have something in common: they both exist for the sole pleasure of men. The 'Angel' meets his desire to retain his respectable social standing; the Fallen Woman, in the role of prostitute or mistress, pleases his sexual needs, probably unfulfilled in his marriage (since in a marriage the woman had to remain pure and sex was only aimed at procreation). The exaltation of one enhances the annihilation of the other: "each in a way creating a greater demand for the other. In fact one can say, that it would have been impossible for one to exist without the other. In other words, in order for the categories to be most effective, women needed to be pushed to the extreme ends of the spectrum (…)."[453]

The strongest virtue around which Victorian society was built was motherhood. Women were expected to become mothers and, most of all, to feel the need of having children. There could be no other choice except for maternal instinct to be innate, it was outrageous for a woman to wish not to have children. And as I previously mentioned, it

[450] Kuhl, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
[451] Ibid.
[452] Ibid., p. 171.
[453] Ibid., p. 176.

was even more outrageous for a woman to possess and fulfil her sexual desires without the aim of procreation, unless she was a prostitute. Since birth control was not allowed, it happened very often that unmarried women got pregnant, but it was very unlikely for a man to accept an illegitimate child. These women were abandoned in the poorest possible conditions; if they had a job, they had to hide all signs of pregnancy in order not to be fired, and once the baby was born, in most cases, they either abandoned or killed the infant in order not to lose their reputation and endure the shame that society would put them through. The unmarried infanticidal mother was the epitome of the fallen woman. She broke the rules of virginal purity, and she killed the fruit of that motherly love she had to innately possess. The unmarried infanticidal mother defied all the solid principles that kept Victorian society together. The only way they could fight her was to accuse her of madness. Nobody was willing to see infanticide not just as a horrific crime, which it was, but also as a reaction to the condition society forced women to live in. If only they allowed women to work during pregnancy, or if they supported unmarried mothers economically, or even if they did not publicly shame a woman carrying an illegitimate child, would things have been different? If only they respected women's choice of not having children, if only birth control was allowed and abortion was legally practiced by experienced doctors, would the rate of infanticides in the 18th and 19th centuries be lower? We shall never know.

It is in this atmosphere that the characters of Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel were created. *The Thorn* informs the readers that Martha was about to get married when she found out at the same time that she was pregnant, and that Stephen had betrayed her. So, even in the case she got married she still could not be qualified as 'Angel of the House,' since she violated the most sacred rule of all, that of chastity. When the poem tells: "A pang of pitiless dismay Into her soul was sent; A fire was kindled in her breast, Which might not burn itself to rest," it is subtly referring to sin entering her body. Once it was discovered that a woman had an illicit relationship with a man, a sense of shame immediately pervaded her. As Kilday states:

> Not only were women ashamed of being pregnant out of wedlock, they were also embarrassed by the fact that they had been seduced and abandoned by their paramours. (…) Many of the women accused of new- born child murder had engaged in sexual activity with

> a partner on either the promise or the presumption of marriage, which turned out to be illusory.[454]

This is exactly what happens to Martha. First, she is fully convinced that Stephen loves her, and she trusts his love to the point of losing her virginity to him (in this way, breaking the holy virtue of purity). Then, she finds out to be mistaken, since he has a parallel relationship with somebody else. But it is too late, as she is already pregnant and her sin will soon be visible to anybody, leaving her at the mercy of people's harsh criticism. According to Kilday: "In order to avoid opprobrium and alienation, either they had to become solitary figures, who bore the burden of their condition in silence, or they had to move away from established and existing systems of support."[455] If the story that the narrator recounts is true, then that is probably why Martha decides to isolate herself. The Fallen Woman was forced to endure her condition on her own, as the judgement of society would have been too much to bear, and they would have ostracized her anyway:

> No doubt the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond the human community, because of her uneasy implications for wives who stayed home.[456]

As the poem highlights, the villagers of Martha's town are in fact scared of her ("And, if you see her in her hut— Then to the spot away! I never heard of such as dare Approach the spot when she is there.")[457] As I previously mentioned, people could not accept a woman's "fall" – in this case symbolised by Martha's loss of chastity, – they were scared of a woman rebelling to society's conventions, and as they did not know how to react to this sense of fear, they accused women of madness. In fact, the narrator himself claims Martha to be insane when he says, in Line 128: "She was with child, and she was mad."[458] Moreover, none of the villagers is one-hundred-percent sure that Martha actually had a baby, but this goes against people's "right to know." In order to avoid conviction, Martha isolates herself, but her confinement angers her neighbours' wish to know, so she still falls victim of their fantasies and accusations. Finally, Martha's state

[454] Kilday, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
[455] Ibid., p. 145.
[456] Auerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[457] S. Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 254.
[458] Ibid., p. 255.

of vagrancy is constituted by her constant journeys up and down the hill. She is described as being almost an integral part of nature:

> And she is known to every star,
>
> And every wind that blows;
>
> And there, beside the Thorn, she sits
>
> When the blue daylight's in the skies,
>
> And when the whirlwind's on the hill,
>
> Or frosty air is keen and still[459]

And at times, she almost seems to control the weather: "Now wherefore, thus, by day and night, In rain, in tempest, and in snow, so Thus to the dreary mountain-top, Does this poor Woman go?"[460] In all these occasions, she always laments and cries: "And to herself she cries, 'Oh misery! oh misery! Oh woe is me! oh misery!'"[461] and again "tell me why Does she repeat that doleful cry?"[462] As Auerbach mentions, the Fallen Woman is seen as someone who bemoans and is demanded by the 'indifferent nature:' "In Victorian revisions, it is the woman alone who is wounded, sighs, laments, and is lost; indifferent Nature simply reclaims her."[463] Taken all these observations into consideration – Martha's loss of chastity, the shame she has to endure, the isolation she puts herself in and her suffered communion with nature – she can easily be seen as a Fallen Woman *ante-litteram*. Even though she is a character created in the Romantic atmosphere of 1798, she already embodied the kind of woman that Victorian society will condemn later in the century.

Hetty, on the other hand, appeared during the peak of the Victorian's women-question. Her character is slightly more complicated than that of Martha's, as she exhibits a controversial nature: her appearance recalls the 'Angel of the House,' while her attitude, thoughts and actions are the very exemplification of the Fallen Woman. Throughout the book Hetty's beauty is compared to that of children or kittens. In Chapter 15, "The Two Bed-Chambers," the narrator says that "there is such a sweet baby-like roundness about her face and figure,"[464] and again just a few lines later "She

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[459] Ibid., p. 254.
[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid.
[462] Ibid.
[463] Auerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
[464] Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 166.

is almost a child herself (…).”[465] In Chapter 7, “The Dairy,” he describes her beauty as “that of kittens, (…) or babies just beginning to toddle,”[466] and once more in Chapter 19, “Adam on a Working Day,” he states that “She was like a kitten, and had the same distractingly pretty looks.”[467] The two figures of the child and the kitten are not casually chosen by Eliot, as both are the emblem of purity and innocence, features typically associated to the Angel of the House. On the outside Hetty is an ‘Angel’ in all respects, however the narrator very soon reveals that her appearance is actually deceiving:

> Hetty’s was a spring-tide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence – the innocence of a young star-browed calf, for example, that, being inclined for a promenade our of bounds, leads you a severe steeple-chase over hedge and ditch, and only comes to a stand in the middle of a bog.[468]

In fact, despite what her physical aspect might suggest, Hetty’s behaviour does not respect the canons of the ‘Angel of the House’ at all. Another element that might deceive the readers is that of marriage. As I have mentioned, women during the Victorian era were expected to marry. Finding a husband was the only way they could enter society and be economically sustained. Hetty dreams of marrying, however her desire is much more twisted than that of a ‘typical Victorian woman.’ In fact, Hetty wants to marry Arthur just because she wishes to climb the social ladder and so to become a lady: “He would want to marry her, and make a lady of her,”[469] and again, a few lines later “(…) perhaps some day she should be a grand lady.”[470] Her desires are made even more evident by her approach to Adam. She does not love Adam, but she would be willing to marry him if he could guarantee her a high social status: “She thought, if Adam had been rich and could have given her these things, she loved him well enough to marry him.”[471] A pure Victorian woman, an ‘Angel,’ was not allowed to have these distorted ulterior motives. Her feelings had to be true, and her love had to be naïve. Hetty’s approach to relationships is in sharp contrast to her child-like aspect and is way more similar to the attitude of a Fallen Woman rather than to an ‘Angel of the House.’ In fact, in order to achieve her purpose, Hetty is even willing to lose her

[465] Ibid.
[466] Ibid., p. 92.
[467] Ibid., p. 228.
[468] Ibid., p. 93.
[469] Ibid., p. 165.
[470] Ibid., p. 166.
[471] Ibid., p. 109.

virginity and, in this way, to stain herself with sin. Just like Martha, Hetty's fall is characterised by the loss of her chastity, but in this case her guilt looks even more unforgivable to Victorian eyes, since while Martha was at least in love with Stephen, Hetty violates her virtuous purity just with the aim of belonging to a higher social class. The ideal Victorian woman could not have aspirations and ambitions, let alone to marry someone – and lose her virginity – for the sake of them. Moreover, Hetty is well aware of her beauty and how it affects the people around her. Most of all, she is vain, she loves her own beauty, and she even gets distracted by it. For example, in the butter-making scene, she is fully focused on how harmonious her arms are, rather than on her work: "And they are the prettiest attitudes and movements into which a pretty girl is thrown in making up butter – tossing movements that give a charming curve to the arm (…) little patting and rolling movements with the palm of the hand (…)."[472] Her almost erotic narcissism is evident in the scene of the bad-chamber as well, when she looks at herself in the mirror and "even the old mottled glass couldn't help sending back a lovely image (…)."[473] However, an 'Angel of the house' had to be 'fancy-free,' just like the poem by Coventry Patmore requested. The Victorian woman should not have been aware of her beauty, and most of all, she could not know the power that her beauty had over people. Hetty, on the contrary, was very self-confident:

> O yes! She was very pretty. Captain Donnithorne thought so. Prettier than anybody about Hayslope—prettier than any of the ladies she had ever seen visiting at the Chase—indeed it seemed fine ladies were rather old and ugly—and prettier than Miss Bacon, the miller's daughter, who was called the beauty of Treddleston.[474]

What I have outlined so far would be enough to identify Hetty as a Fallen Woman, but there is more than this. As I have already mentioned, the role of the woman in the 19th century was extremely linked to the role of mother. A woman could not desire not to have children, and she could not desire not to be a mother. When a woman was born, a mother was born as well. Hetty goes completely against this strong rooted principle: she despises children, and she does not want to be a mother. As highlighted in Chapter 15, "The Two Bed-Chambers," "And as for those tiresome children, Marty and Tommy and Totty, they had been the very nuisance of her life – as bad as buzzing insects that will

[472] Ibid., p. 93.
[473] Ibid., p. 164.
[474] Ibid.

come teasing you on a hot day when you want to be quiet."[475] Not only does she hate children, she even commits the most 'unnatural' crime of all: that of infanticide. When Hetty conceals her pregnancy and then abandons her baby to death she reaches the epitome of the Victorian Fallen Woman. Just like Martha, she is not able to face the shame that she knew would come with her condition, so she runs away. In the first chapter I have mentioned how an illicit pregnancy would have had harsh consequences on the family name and especially on the reputation of the accused's father. Hetty does not have a father but still, she fears her aunt, Mr Poyser, and she feels responsible for his public respectability:

> The horrible thought of want and beggary drove her once to think she would go back to her uncle and aunt and ask them to forgive her and have pity on her. But she shrank from that idea again, as she might have shrunk from scorching metal. She could never endure that shame before her uncle and aunt, before Mary Burge, and the servants at the Chase, and the people at Broxton, and everybody who knew her. They should never know what had happened to her. What could she do?[476]

The act of infanticide makes her an anti-woman, a monstrous figure that could not possibly exist in reality. Hetty's fall not only is constituted by her charm, her ambitions, her loss of chastity. Most of all, her fall is determined by the fact that she does not possess a natural motherly instinct and by her atrocious crime. In most of the infanticidal cases women would be absolved because judges thought them to be mad, and not criminals. This time, Hetty is not absolved, she is convicted. But once again society shows that they cannot bear the thought of a woman rebelling to the Victorian standards. Once again, just like with Martha, they are frightened by the sinful woman, but this time they express their fear by exiling Hetty in Australian colonies. They take the distance from the Fallen Woman, repudiating her and hoping, in this way, to erase her existence.

[475] Ibid., p. 169.
[476] Ibid., p. 413.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2018 Elena Ferrante wrote:

> The consequence is that not only is female power suffocated but also, for the sake of peace and quiet, we suffocate ourselves. Even today, after a century of feminism, we can't fully be ourselves, don't belong to ourselves. Our defects, our cruelties, our crimes, our virtues, our pleasure, our very language are obediently inscribed in the hierarchies of the male, are punished or praised according to codes that don't really belong to us and therefore wear us out.[477]

When Elena Ferrante wrote *Odious Women*, two-hundred and eighteen years had passed since 1800, and yet, an accomplished and much celebrated female author still felt the need to remark that women's crimes do not belong to women yet. Women's crimes are still treated, and I quote, "according to the codes" that somebody else has chosen for them. Men qualified women as pure, chaste, naïve, and from that moment on, patriarchal power took the decision not to accept any other version of them. From that moment on, women's crimes could be tolerated only in the case they were the product of a bad mental condition. On the 9th of April 2023, an anonymous woman left her newborn child into the care of the Mangiagalli Center of Milan. The hospital offers a public service called *Una Culla per la Vita* (A Cradle for Life) which allows any woman to *safely* leave her newborn baby in anonymous, if she does not want or does not have the possibility to take care of it. With the baby, a boy named Enea, there was a letter, which assured the doctors that he was completely healthy and that she loved him, but she could not keep him.[478] Without any regard for her privacy, or any respect for her choice, some Italian people made an appeal to invite Enea's biological mum to reverse her decision and take him back, even though she made explicitly clear that she lacked the financial resources to raise him. A responsible, adult woman legally and deliberately leaves a baby that she does not want to keep into the safe and competent hands of doctors, and still, people start a witch-hunt. If the role of the woman is still so tightly associated with the role of the mother and if a woman is still not free to make decisions about motherhood without feeling guilty, then what has really changed from the 19th century?

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[477] Elena Ferrante, "Odious Women", in E. Ferrante (ed.), *Incidental Inventions*, New York: Europa Editions, 2019.

[478] M. Grazi, "Milano, il neonato abbandonato a Pasqua ha trovato una famiglia", 2023. Available: https://luce.lanazione.it/attualita/neonato-abbandonato-cullaperlavita/, Accessed 2023, September.

This thesis not only aims at outlining the social and literary phenomena of infanticide in the 18th and 19th centuries, but it also wants to highlight the public pressures that women had to endure; most importantly, it wants to stand up for women's right to be whatever they wish to be or not to be, even if that means not desiring children or being a criminal. In the first chapter I explained why women were absolved during processes and I presented the topic of insanity. I demonstrated how people believed women to be too pure and honest to be capable of committing an atrocity like infanticide. As a result, the only possible reason had to be their poor mental health, hence the acquittal with the justification of madness. Through the analysis of Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrell I showed the huge role society played in women's decisions to hide and eventually kill their newborn baby. And, in the last chapter, with the description of the dichotomy between the 'Angel of the House' and the Fallen Woman, I stressed the ideal qualities women had to embody, or the negative consequences they had to tolerate in the case they did not fit into the 'Angel' role. My research aims to provoke thought, examine our conscience, and challenge our assumptions about whether or not things have changed since the 19th century. Even though it might seem inappropriate for me to take the sides of women murderesses, I embrace Elena Ferrante's words when she says:

> It's a condition that makes it easy to become odious to others and to ourselves. To demonstrate what we are with an effort at autonomy requires that we maintain a ruthless vigilance over ourselves. So I feel close to all women, and, sometimes for one reason, sometimes for another, I recognise myself in the best as well as in the worst. Is it possible, people say to me at times, that you don't know even one bitch? I know some, of course: literature is full of them and so is everyday life. But, all things considered, I'm on their side.[479]

[479] Ferrante, *op. cit.*

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Picture 3: Segantini, Giovanni, The Evil Mothers, 1894, olio su tela, 120x225 cm, Vienna, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere.

Picture 4: Wasserlein Emmerichs, Mary Beth, “Trials of Women for Homicide in Nineteenth-Century England”, *Women & Criminal Justice*, vol. 5, n. 1 (2008), p. 107.