"She Hurries From Herself":

Female Suicide and Victorian Ideology in Dickens and Corelli

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Bachelor Thesis

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8742 words

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Introduction

"I have no purpose but to die." With these words, Lady Dedlock, one of the main female characters in Charles Dickens' 1853 novel *Bleak House*, transforms what had until then been a farewell letter to her daughter into a suicide note. "It was right that all that had sustained me should give way at once," she writes, "and that I should die of terror and my conscience" (Dickens 'BH' 910). Claiming that her conscience will lead her to her death, Lady Dedlock here suggests that her suicide can be attributed to some kind of unredeemable, moral lapse, and those who have read the book will indeed be able to attest that this misdeed mainly originates in the fact that the daughter to whom she addresses her last letter was born out of wedlock. Seven years after *Bleak House* had first been published, Dickens incorporated a similar situation into his 1860 novel *Great Expectations*. In this case, it is Miss Havisham who admits her great wrongdoings only hours before she, too, kills herself. Kneeling at the feet of Pip, the novel's protagonist, she apologizes profusely for having hurt him and her ward Estella, and exclaims "What have I done! What have I done!" (Dickens 'GE' 398). And again, more than thirty years later, Marie Corelli described in her 1895 *The Sorrows of Satan* how Lady Sibyl in her suicide note wonders "whether it is not after all the education and training I have had that have made me what I am, or whether indeed I was born evil from the first" (Corelli 293).

These three novels, their publishing dates together spanning a substantial part of the Victorian era as analogous to Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, thus each feature a female character who commits suicide after having been morally compromised in some way or form. Their deaths therefore occur on an ideological level and correspond directly to contemporary moral and social codes. These codes together comprise an extensive range of monolithic ideological certainties that structured Victorian England, and which were both created in and reflected by Victorian literature. While life in nineteenth-century England, for example, was characterised both by an unbounded sense of optimism about the nation's technological, scientific and imperial progress, and by a deep-seated sense of anxiety about the nature of such progress, Victorian novels like the ones by Dickens and Corelli are often interpreted by late twentieth and early twenty-first-century critics as "both symptom and expression of Victorian responses to modernity" (Pykett 24). Correspondingly, Victorian literature might both reflect conventional ideology and instil a sense of that ideology into its readership by not only exerting a considerable amount of influence on the public opinion on controversial subjects, but also by appealing to those sentiments or ideologies which are already there in the minds of many readers. Novelistic appeals which are founded on ideological generalization, contends Rachel Ablow in her analysis of the role of feeling in the Victorian novel, "require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity" (202).

The duality that thus defines the relationship of Victorian literature and Victorian ideology necessarily complicates the nature of the correlation between Dickens' and Corelli's novels and

contemporary moral and social codes. The link that these works lay between ideology and suicide, between the transgression of social norms and the representation of suicide as an inevitability in the light of moral wrongdoings, grants validity to the interpretation that these works posit suicide as the natural consequence or punishment of unconventionality. However, at the same time the vigorousness and pervasiveness with which these works embroider societal critique, both overtly and covertly, also poses an elaborate challenge to conventional social codes. By analysing and comparing the ways in which Charles Dickens and Marie Corelli depict female suicide in these novels, in this paper I therefore wish to answer the question to what extent these depictions either endorse or condemn conventional Victorian ideology regarding suicide and femininity. To do this, I shall in the first part of this paper discuss the main characteristics and contemporary implications of conventional Victorian ideology by placing these works within the framework of the ideological and social context in which they first appeared.

Chapter One – Ideology and Anxiety

"She was intensely sympathetic," writes Virginia Woolf in her 1942 essay "Professions for Women."

> She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure (Woolf n.p.).

Woolf indeed has hardly any need to say it, for many readers will immediately recognise that the woman she describes here with such scathing satire is the well-known figure of the Victorian 'Angel in the House.' More than a 'real' woman, the Angel in the House was a discursive figure built up entirely out of the social codes and gendered norms that governed the lives of many women during the nineteenth century. An "utterly unselfish" being, she was an idealized figure whose life was severely constrained and governed by "prescribed models of conduct and expectations" (Moore 24). Yet while Woolf's description of the Angel in the House is an entirely cynical and mocking account of 'old-fashioned' Victorianism written nearly half a century after the death of Queen Victoria, seventy-seven years before John Ruskin published a lecture in which such views were, at that time, almost entirely symptomatic of the norms and ideals of the majority of the Victorian middle class. His 1865 "Of Queens' Gardens" presents, according to many modern-day critics, in undiluted form many of the Victorian stereotypes which have nowadays become so very famous (e.g. Auerbach 'Woman' 59, Millet 121). Arguing that man's power is active, his intellect "for speculation and invention," Ruskin shows himself an avid defender of the so-called 'separate spheres ideology' by conversely claiming that woman's intellect "is not for invention or recreation, but sweet ordering":

> Her great function is praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. . . . This is the true nature of home – it is the place of peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. . . . And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her (Ruskin 21-22).

Ruskin's views represent the predominant ideology of the greater part of the nineteenth century, within which it was the established view that the purity of the 'perfect lady' should be seen in terms of sexual ignorance, that her place should be solely in the home, and that her function was to praise and assist the (especially male) members of her family. Thus, throughout the Victorian era "the perfect lady as an ideal of femininity was tenacious and all-pervasive, in spite of its distance from the objective situations of countless women" (Vicinus x).

Yet the prevalence of such views was not left altogether uncontested. Four years after the publication of "Of Queens' Gardens," a hugely influential plea for female emancipation came in John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Although many of Mill's claims had already been made in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, it was Mill's work which became the nucleus of the increasing amount of challenges to conventional ideals of femininity which arose during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Cunningham 7). That which Ruskin saw as the natural disposition of feminine character, Mill argues is nothing more than "the predictable outcome of a highly artificial system of cultivation" (Millet 127). Mill contends that all women are brought up in the belief "that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men" and that they therefore think it incumbent upon them not to exert self-will, but to exist in total submission to the control of others. "All causes," he writes, "social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men" (Mill 26-27). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, such relatively unprecedented contentions fuelled the fire of the 'Woman Question' that started to rage throughout the nation with increasing intensity. After The National Society for Women's Suffrage had been formed in 1867 and started to regularly present bills to Parliament, female emancipation gradually became a topic of public and parliamentary debate, and the situation of many women became subject to a considerable amount of legal, professional, and educational changes. These developments culminated at the end of the century with the emergence of the 'New Woman,' a discursive figure that commonly signifies the extent of the shifts regarding notions of femininity that English society at the fin de siècle underwent (Rosa 419). The New Woman, whether she be a representative of one of the newly established women's movements or an especially transgressive character in one of the many novels which were written by women during this time, posed a direct challenge to conventional ideals of masculinity and femininity. New Woman novels of the 1880s and 1890s openly discussed taboo subjects like female sexuality, divorce, rape and adultery without the customary moral retribution, and thus ruthlessly hacked away "the foundations of idealised femininity on which much of the Victorian moral structure was built" (Cunningham 19).

In the eyes of many Victorians, however, the New Woman personified what had gone wrong with English society. Nineteenth-century England generally still viewed woman's subordination to man as a natural fact, and the Victorian family as standing at the basis of its society. The increasing challenges to conventional ideals came at a time when endeavours and inventions in the fields of technology, science and imperialism dramatically changed people's lives and made them wonder whether such progress would not eventually and inevitably lead to degeneration. As a category, gender stood at the centre of these reflections, and its relatively sudden instability also destabilized contemporary understanding of nation and empire (Rosa 417). Statements such as "in the lauded lands of women's emancipation, the decline of a race is clearly shown" (from Hansson's *Studies in the Psychology of Women*, quoted in Ledger 32) indicate that women who challenged the roles traditionally assigned to them were seen by many as a threat to the future

of the empire (Rosa 420). Sensation novels, whose popularity flourished during the last decades of the century, dramatized such degenerationist fears by wondering whether, if civilization was only skin-deep, there might not be "a savage beneath the skin of every civilized man, waiting to reclaim him" (Pykett 227).

Such anxieties about 'the monster within' relate closely to contemporary fears about suicide. During the 1830s and 1840s, graphic accounts of a number of sensationalised suicides in broadsides and broadsheets had awakened public interest in suicide, and when in the last quarter of the century the growing availability of statistics caused more suicides to be recorded and rates to seem higher than ever, agitation about what many believed to be a 'Suicidal Mania' soared (Gates 152). The sense that "something fearful" was undermining the will to live pervaded the works of Victorian artists, and added to the general indeterminacy of suicide as it necessarily defies understanding and resists attempts at explanation (154). After suicide was no longer seen as a crime but as a symptom of greater social evils, the mid and late-Victorian determination to discover the social causes of suicide led survivors to conduct a "painful self-examination in the search for motives" (38). For those who have determined another's reasons for choosing to commit suicide might very well find themselves challenged at defending or explaining their own motivations for choosing to persevere in life's eternal struggle. Thus, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, for many Victorians who had come into contact with suicide or suicide-related problems it became increasingly clear how fine a line there was between the self that relied on determination and willpower to conquer life's difficulties, and the self that realized that suicide in the face of those difficulties might not be such an immoral, sinful act after all.

Nineteenth-century writers were fascinated by the perceived increase and the indeterminacy of suicide, and they extensively elaborated on the moments of slippage that they felt suicides represented, and in which feeling was sharply divorced from obvious meaning (Ablow 205). Yet the anxieties clinging to the concept, the fact that suicide was seen as an act that eluded the social order, also prompted a majority of Victorian authors to displace suicide to other selves. These predominantly white, upper-class men constructed suicide as the province of so-called exotic actors and presented foreigners, monsters, and especially women as being particularly prone to suicide. Women's motives for ending their lives in these stories, which usually consisted of rejected love or repressed passion, constructed suicide as a particularly irrational act of which the educated, rational male had nothing to fear (Higgonet 241). The fact that statistics showed that, consistently, fewer women than men committed suicide could not deter the authors of such stories; Victorian fiction (and Victorian art in general) contains a veritable plethora of mad or lovelorn women who, after a fall from respectability, drowned themselves in rivers or flung themselves from great heights (Gates 126-127). A romantic stereotype of female suicide burgeoned in kitchens and music halls, in parlours and drawing rooms, and images of a "distraught girl flinging herself from a high bridge, or a beautiful woman's damply draped body 'Found Drowned' and lying by moonlight near Waterloo Bridge" reached virtually every corner of Victorian society (Anderson 197).

Combined with the anxieties generated by the increasing amount of challenges to the monolithic ideological certainties of Victorian England, the deep-seated fears about the indeterminacy of suicide and the impossibility to thoroughly understand and know the self transformed Victorian society into "a culture obsessed by images of its unspeakable fears" (Jalland 398). What had in the first half of the nineteenth century been indisputable certainties about the role and function of women, about willpower and its contribution to perseverance, about the future of the empire, became during the latter half of that century subjects of heavy debate and uncertainty (e.g. Ledger 22, 31-32, Rosa 416-417, Cunningham 10, Moore 31). At mid-century the Brontë sisters, for instance, "burst upon the literary scene complete with pen names and novels that seemed designed to challenge the gender differences organizing the traditional country house," and that inspired many Victorians to wonder what had happened "to the principle that men and women could achieve personal fulfilment only within the norms of masculinity and femininity" (Armstrong 174). These changes revealed the essential fragility of the very basis of that society; the Victorian family, and once again these anxieties were both created in and reflected by nineteenth-century novels, most of which blatantly questioned the stability of the family by opening "with a scene of family rupture, frequently a maternal deathbed or a tale of wanton abandonment" (Dever 1). Readers revelled in the picture of the 'unfamilial' family, and the novels of both Dickens' and Corelli give special prominence to portraits of unhappy and inharmonious families (Armstrong 185). While the characterization of the home "as an enclave of family warmth and harmony and its superintendence by a woman who embodies the domestic ideal are key elements in the ideology of the Victorian middle-class family" (Waters 121), *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *The Sorrows of Satan* portray the exact opposite.

Chapter Two – The Fragile Family, The Bad Mother

It seems paradoxical that the Victorian family, commonly revered as the very glue that held the threatened and besieged Victorian society together, should be the source of so much trouble, dysfunctionality, and downright misery in the nineteenth-century novel. Jane Eyre, for example, flees her horrid adoptive family only to be subjected to the horrors of Thornfield Hall, while Maggie Tulliver's childhood is marred by several family crises. As one of the figureheads of nineteenth-century authorship, Charles Dickens, too, was an expert at portraying frayed households. In *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens,* Catherine Waters contends that a statistical analysis of Dickens' novels yields a grand total of 318 "full or partial orphans" (120). Esther's desolate and traumatic upbringing by her mother's sister draws attention to the fact that in *Bleak House*, families are often represented more as a burden than as a source of comfort or happy domesticity. Throughout most of the novel's plot, Esther's situation in life is that of an orphan, and similarly in *Great Expectations* the three main characters have lost both their parents at an early age. Describing domestic life in Satis House as merely dysfunctional seems highly euphemistic, while Lady Sibyl's short life in *The Sorrows of Satan*, appropriated as it is by a father who sold her hand in marriage to the highest bidder, the heinous inheritance of a dead mother who is rumoured to have passed her inherent evilness on to her daughter, and a husband who seems to have bought her for those very reasons, could hardly be seen to kindle the warm flame of domesticity. The ambivalence of Dickens' and Corelli's depictions of the Victorian family here is obvious. Modern-day critics commonly emphasize the prevalence within their works of idealised notions of domestic warmth and the Angel in the House to posit these two authors as celebrants of the hearth and of a woman's central place within the family (e.g. Waters 120-121, Dever 34), yet both authors also invested a considerable amount of imaginative energy in disrupting these ideologies by portraying grotesque or fractured families. In these novels, family dynamics play an important role with regard to the plot and the inner lives of the main characters, yet their influence is almost always troublesome and destructive.

This seemingly paradoxical relationship between literary representation and underlying ideology might be better understood through the analysis of the Victorian family's most central figure: the mother. The ongoing fight for women's emancipation throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century incited the predominantly male Victorian establishment to combat what it saw as women's – and consequently the family's – degeneration by strongly emphasizing motherhood as an indubitable female duty. Anxieties about the decline of the English race at the hands of those 'unwomanly' women, about their sexual degeneracy and their supposed abandonment of maternity, combined to create a veritable cult of motherhood. Conventional ideals of femininity, such as those Ruskin incorporated in his "Of Queens' Gardens," were transposed to ideals regarding maternity. "The mother, already a figure of some mythic proportion," writes Brenda R. Weber, thereby

"became the critical signifier of sex/gender appropriateness, a sign that read as domestic, nurturing, and other-oriented" (548). While women's movements posed ever stronger challenges to conventional ideals of femininity and domesticity, at the same time the idealization of motherhood thus became an incontrovertible part of the Victorian landscape. Maternity was not only hailed as a "national, imperial and racial duty," but also as a grounding point that anchored "key cultural oppositions such as masculine versus feminine, . . . spiritual versus corporeal, pure versus impure" (Klaver 2). As the sanctification of motherhood thus secured its irrefutable place within conventional Victorian ideology, "the successful or failed performance of maternity became the ubiquitous subject of social debate and textual representation" (1).

This emphasis on success or failure suggests that the antagonism which defined the literary and ideological representation of the family has also permeated Victorian ideologies of maternity. "The mother is the actual and symbolic site of generation," writes Carolyn Dever in *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*, "the earliest influence on development, and the domestic anchor of the most basic socioeconomic unit . . . yet throughout nineteenth-century narratives she is almost always already gone" (xii). Dever contends that within the predominant domestic topos of the Victorian novel, the family is represented in terms of maternal death or desertion:

> The ideal mother is the ghost that haunts the Victorian novel. Paradoxically, the world of Victorian fiction, so preoccupied with women's power in the domestic sphere, only rarely embodies that power in the figure of a mother. Instead, Victorian novels almost invariably feature protagonists whose mothers are dead or lost, swept away by menacing and often mysterious outside forces (Dever xi).

Like the Victorian family, the figure of the ideal mother is thus both sanctified and undermined by nineteenth-century narratives, and the three novels by Dickens and Corelli in this respect are no exception. In *Bleak House,* Esther's pleas to her godmother to tell her something of her mother – "'What did I do to her? How did I lose her? Why *am I* so different from other children?'" – clearly indicate that Esther regards her efforts to determine who her mother was as a central part of her quest to establish her own identity (Dickens 'BH' 30, my italics). The mother is thus posited as an essential part of the self, yet throughout the greater part of Esther's narrative, Lady Dedlock is notoriously absent. Having been told that her mother is her disgrace, Esther has more or less assumed her mother to be dead even before, in their one and final reunion, Lady Dedlock asks her to consider her so from that point onwards (582). The vital importance of the mother to the prosperity of future generations is similarly emphasised in *Great Expectations*, in which Miss Havisham might not have any biological children but nevertheless is a thoroughly bad adoptive mother not only to Estella, whom she uses to wreak revenge on men, but also to Pip, who regards her as his "fairy godmother" (Dickens 'GE' 158). Miss Havisham's twisted machinations and poisonous ministrations – her bad mothering, in short – land Estella in a marriage to an abusive

husband and both she and Pip in a state of emotional contortion. Similarly, in *The Sorrows of Satan* Lady Sibyl – who, as said, has inherited her evilness from her own evil mother – might not be a mother herself, but Corelli's representation of her as an avid reader of New Woman novels who has thereby stored her brain with "a complete knowledge of things evil and pernicious" nevertheless emphasises her failure to conform to conventional maternal ideals and actually *be* a mother (Corelli 297). Indeed, Lady Sibyl tersely assures her conventional husband that he only has to read "'the 'new' fiction . . . to be sure that your ideas of domestic virtue are quite out of date'" (270).

In these three novels, the mother is thus posited not only as the source of all things, but also as essentially failing. These works therefore explore the tension that exists in these women's lives between ideology and reality, and play with the idea that the sanctified and revered ideal of the mother as the source of all creation and the symbol of the future of the nation could hardly reflect the situation of England's 'real' mothers, who of course could never live up to the sense of perfect selflessness, purity, and instinct for self-renunciation conventionally connoted by this ideal. Their failure primarily originates in what Carolyn Dever has termed the "built-in conflict between an iconographic ideal" – the ethereal, transcendental Madonna – and the "insistence of physicality" which is inherent in the state of 'real' or natural motherhood (19). Dever argues that Victorian maternal ideology primarily relies on an abstract ideal of virtue which posits the virtuous mother as a pure, immaterial and disembodied being, yet it is the necessarily embodied nature of the mother that ensures she is never able to comply with this ideal (21). The physicality which is inherent to childbirth and especially procreation ensured that women inevitably failed at being good mothers, and emphasises the importance of sexuality within this framework. Victorian novels like the ones by Dickens and Corelli commonly posited the maternal body always as also a sexual body, and ascribed "dense sexual connotations" even to "apparently nonsexual concerns such as maternal health and breastfeeding" (Klaver 9). Contiguously, the failure of Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham and Lady Sibyl to be good mothers mainly expresses itself through acts of sexual transgression which emphasize their embodiment. Lady Sibyl, for example, quite literally offers her body to the devil, who reacts to the offering with undiluted disgust at her sexuality:

> 'I hate you! Yes – I hate you, and all such women as you! For you corrupt the world, - you turn good to evil, - you deepen folly into crime, - with the seduction of your nude limbs and lying eyes, you make fools, cowards and beasts of men!' (Corelli 262).

The female body, and female sexual desire, thus in *The Sorrows of Satan* inspire revulsion exactly because it is so much at odds with the conventional Victorian ideal of female purity. Similarly, Lady Dedlock's failure to be a good mother is posited mainly as a result of her sexual desires; the illegitimacy of her liaison with Esther's father has made it impossible for her to raise her child, and has thereby rendered her unable to provide Esther with a stable sense of self and to prevent her

suffering. And while Miss Havisham might seem to be not even remotely cast as sexual, it is the fact that she "passionately loved" and "perfectly idolised" her Mr Compeyson which made her unsusceptible to any warnings about the unreliability of her fiancé (Dickens 'GE' 181). Correspondingly, so much emphasis is placed on Miss Havisham's body and its deterioration that it has become a predominant part of her character. While she once had "the rounded figure of a young woman," since then it has "shrunk to skin and bone" (58), her body is repeatedly compared to a corpse or a skeleton (e.g. 58, 60, 64), and she herself asserts that "I *am* yellow skin and bone" (86, my italics). Miss Havisham thus *is* her body.

Essentially, however, it is not so much their sexuality or embodiment that transforms these women into bad mothers, but the willpower and the exertion of agency which is implied by it. Their main failure as mothers resides not in the fact that they are sexual or embodied, but in the fact that they act on these traits. They do not passively conform to conventional ideals of motherhood by renouncing their sense of self and by submitting to male dominance or supremacy, but they actively engage in transgression of these conventional ideologies through their embodiment and sexuality. The fundamental oppositions that define the lives of these three female characters, the irreconcilable dichotomies between ideology and reality, between the chaste and the erotic, and between the transcendental and the embodied, can only be resolved and negotiated through the trope of maternal absence. Victorian literature in general, contends Carolyn Dever, relies heavily on this trope to negotiate these paradoxes, as maternal death or desertion offers a way to get past the female body and to construct an entirely abstract ideal of virtue that functioned solely on a symbolical level (21, 34). According to Dever, maternal loss is one of the constitutive principles of conventional Victorian ideology as it allows the maternal ideal to be constructed on a level of untested abstraction (2), and the trope of maternal absence to become "one of the most powerful tools in the maintenance of the nineteenth-century maternal ideal" (6). The sexuality and embodiment inherent to the lives of Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham and Lady Sibyl are irreconcilably in conflict with the ideological structures with which society wishes to interpret their lives, and eventually, these works pose suicide as the only solution to this 'problem.'

The deaths of these three female characters draw attention to the fundamentally destructive nature of the tension between ideology and reality. There would have been no need to commit suicide if this relationship had not been so essentially antagonistic, if Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham and Lady Sibyl had not acknowledged the validity of conventional ideology and its ineradicable tie to reality, yet the lives of these three women end prematurely precisely because they do acknowledge the power that ideology holds over their lives. This tension and the dichotomy it creates between the fallen and the virtuous woman turns their lives into a slow descent towards death. Victorian conventional ideology admitted the existence of only these two kinds of women – the virtuous and the fallen – and the extreme rigidity of these categories shaped the fate of these three characters (Watt 3). The aforementioned feelings of guilt that they confessed to just moments before their deaths indicate that these characters have internalized conventional ideology, and that

they see their acts of transgression as marking their definitive fall from virtue. Their lives turn into private trials with respect to their desires, and their inability or unwillingness to escape the social contract make them consider themselves subject to a form of death-in-life (Polloczek 467-469). Many modern-day critics use this term to refer to the disheartened, suicidal existence that many female characters in Victorian literature are subject to, and in which they, paradoxically perhaps, submit to acts of complete self-renunciation which conventional ideology expects of them and which their acts of transgression had hitherto evaded. Thus, Lady Dedlock presents herself in her farewell letter to Sir Leicester as "the unworthy woman on whom you have wasted a most generous devotion – who avoids you, only with a deeper shame than that with which she hurries from herself" (Dickens 'BH' 856), and Miss Havisham spends her days looking like an animated corpse and existing in "utter loneliness" before she, too, confesses to her guilt and shame (Dickens 'GE' 395). Finally, Lady Sibyl's admission that, since she was "put up for sale" (Corelli 298) she has imbibed "that complete contempt of life and disbelief in God, which is the chief theme of nearly all the social teachings of the time" emphasises both her disheartened view of life and the deathlike indifference she feels toward it (147).

The fervour with which these women have thus internalized conventional codes acknowledges the tension between ideology and reality and offsets the destructive working of this conflict. At the end of their narratives, Lady Dedlock dies from exposure in an effort to save the reputation of her husband, Miss Havisham professes her guilt and sets herself aflame, and Lady Sybil confesses to her evil nature and poisons herself. Their lives of transgression emphasize the inevitability of the conflict between maternal ideology and reality and posit ideological codes as social constructs. This, and the fact that these codes are depicted as inherently destructive, shows that both Dickens and Corelli to some extent criticize conventional ideologies by emphasizing their injurious effects on the lives of women. On the other hand, however, the deaths of these female characters also constitute and corroborate conventional ideology by incorporating maternal absence to resolve the tension between ideology and reality. By effacing their bodies and their sexuality from the equation, these works position the existence of these women on a purely symbolical level, and thus support the idea that sexuality and embodiment are traits which cannot belong to good, selfless and will-less mothers. The fact that these women commit suicide because they have thoroughly internalized conventional social codes, which makes them acknowledge their guilt and evil nature, and the fact that they 'solve' the problem of their sexuality and agency by killing themselves, can thus also be seen to be constitutive of Victorian maternal ideology. To provide a more extensive, and perhaps also a more satisfactory, answer to the question to what extent their suicides contribute to either endorsement or condemnation of conventional maternal ideology, in the next and final part of this thesis this subject shall be placed within the frameworks of genre and aestheticism.

Chapter Three – Genre, Aestheticism, Melodrama

It is tempting to answer the central question of this thesis by simply classifying Dickens' work in general as domestic or realist fiction, and Corelli's work as sensational or fantastic fiction, and thereby to conclude that the former would naturally exhibit a sympathetic understanding of female suicide by focusing on its social causes, while the latter would predictably offer outright condemnation of female unconventionality by giving a highly sensational account of the perpetrators' inevitable death. After all, many modern-day critics have drawn similar conclusions about this perceived dichotomy between realist and sensational fiction: "Unlike popular novels by Charles Dickens," writes Beth Palmer, for instance, "sensation novels did not seem to have any moral impetus . . . Sensation aimed to stimulate readers' nerves, not their moral faculties" (87). From the 1860s onwards, developments in print technology, the abolition of taxes on knowledge, and the implementation of the Education Act of 1870 ensured a growing demand in Britain for "cheap, one-volume fiction" accessible to Britain's burgeoning readership (Weintraub 171). Meeting these demands, the sensational novel emerged alongside the prevailing realist novel and quickly dominated the bestseller lists (Pykett 211). Contemporary reviewers criticised these novels mainly for their fantastic storylines, their focus on 'incident' or plot instead of 'character,' and their representations of female sexuality which posited female protagonists not only as "passive victims of male power," but also as actively desiring subjects (222-223). Mid-twentieth-century literary scholars often ignored this obviously ideological dimension of sensation fiction by characterising it as being radically different from realist fiction, yet around the turn of the century criticism also started to focus on the nature of sensation novels' "relationship to realism and on the question of their subversiveness or transgressiveness" (213).

This suggests that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between domestic or realist fiction, and sensational or fantastic fiction. The increased interest of modern-day scholars in these genres has brought into being a high number of overlapping and sometimes even contradicting definitions. The Victorian realist novel has, for instance, been described as both constantly examining conventional wisdom and morality and as reinscribing social conventions (e.g. Levine 87, Pykett 213), while the representation of marginalised, lower-class characters has been described as a main characteristic both of the sensational and of the realist novel (e.g. Levine 89, Williams 200-201). Similarly, both genres have been interpreted as paying specific attention to the domestic as part of characters' lived experiences (e.g. Armstrong 185, Rena-Dozier 811). Further complications in defining realism and sensationalism arise with the realisation that many realist novels included "anti-realist" elements – for instance, both in *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* Dickens incorporated the so-called ghost-story which is typically considered part of fantastic fiction – and that many sensational novels were something like "generic hybrids" which combined "the

journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the exotic, realism and melodrama" (Levine 85, Pykett 222).

The separation between realism and sensation is thus by no means a given, and genre in itself therefore does not carry any direct implications for the relationship between Corelli's and Dickens' works and conventional ideology concerning femininity and suicide. However, the previously mentioned juxtapositions capturing the hybrid character of many sensation novels do point to a concept that *can* lead to a further understanding of this relationship. Melodrama, defined by the OED as a "dramatic piece characterized by exaggerated characters and a sensational plot intended to appeal to the emotions," might again seem especially characteristic of sensational fiction, yet by now it is perhaps unsurprising that nearly all of "the great Victorian novelists write with an awareness of melodramatic technique" (Williams 216). Partly this might be because in modern-day scholarship the term 'melodramatic' has come to have a great number of meanings, yet one of melodrama's main features found both in sensational and realist fiction is "the triumph of virtue over villainy" (194-195). The relevance of melodrama to the depiction of female suicide in *Bleak House, Great Expectations* and *The Sorrows of Satan* and its implication for these novels' relationships with conventional ideology lies in this obviously ideological dimension of the melodramatic in fiction. In these works, virtue does, in one way, triumph over vice in that the ideological transgressions of these female characters, and their failure to conform to maternal ideals, does lead to their deaths. However, having hitherto only paid attention to the causes of their suicides, closer scrutiny of the scenes in which the women actually kill themselves and of the aftermath of their deaths, does reveal that the concept of melodrama in this respect carries a deeper level of significance.

The triumph of virtue over villainy in many Victorian cultural artefacts that dealt with female suicide often translated itself into the figure of the drowned woman. Nineteenth-century paintings, plays, penny dreadfuls and newspapers regularly deployed the trope of the sinful, wilful, or lovelorn young woman who had lost her main reason for existing – a man – and whose pale, motionlessly floating, and above all beautiful body stands in stark contrast to her moral transgression. Consider, for example, one stanza of Thomas Hood's 1844 poem "The Bridge of Sighs," in which Hood encourages the reader to "Make no deep scrutiny / Into her mutiny / Rash and undutiful: / Past all dishonour / Death has left on her / Only the beautiful" (lines 21-26). In a persuasive interpretation, Barbara T. Gates argues that this poem illustrates the cleansing character that many Victorian artists attributed to female suicide: "Once she is plucked from the River, Hood sees her as washed clean of her sins . . . This poor woman has been wilful, but has been punished and bathed into attractiveness by the river – left clean, limp, will-less, but dead" (136). The beauty of the female corpse thus emphasizes the regular application of female suicide by Victorian artists as a moral instrument of punishing evil, yet eventually also as rewarding the good (Cregan-Reid 21). Such common depictions of suicide thus are exemplary instances of the melodramatic in Victorian

art, which renders the fact that Dickens and Corelli did not entirely conform to these conventions all the more interesting.

While Dickens and Corelli both on the whole did indeed write their novels with the so-called "awareness of melodramatic technique" (Williams 216), the scenes in which these female characters kill themselves are very much disposed of the melodramatic insofar as they do not depict the female dead or dying body as beautiful. On the contrary; these suicides are ugly, unattractive events that are rather unpleasant to read about. Miss Havisham's decomposing body can, of course, hardly be seen as particularly desirable while she is alive, and the scene which will ultimately lead to her death increases its repulsiveness:

> I saw her running at me, shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all about her . . . we were on the ground struggling like desperate enemies, and that the closer I covered her, the more wildly she shrieked and tried to free herself . . . Then, I looked round and saw the disturbed beetles and spiders running away over the floor. (Dickens 'GE' 402-403).

Rather than lying decorously under Waterloo Bridge, her uncovered skin glowing softly in the moonlight and St Paul's Cathedral shimmering in the background, Miss Havisham is covered "to the throat" with "white cotton-wool" and laid to rest amidst the rotting remains of a decades-old breakfast table (403). Similarly, the corpse of Lady Sibyl, who during life was famous for her unparalleled beauty, in a ghostly and slightly disturbing scene is found by her husband "staring at itself in the silver-framed mirror" (Corelli 285):

> could it be Sibyl after all? Sibyl was beautiful, - *this* dead thing had a devilish smile on its blue, parted lips, and frenzied horror in its eyes! . . . I looked at my dead wife . . . sitting rigidly upright, and robed in the mocking sheen of her rose-silk peignoir, showered with old lace (Corelli 286).

Sibyl's near-nakedness is repulsive to her husband, and her emphasized embodiment and sexuality frighten him. The corpse of Lady Dedlock, finally, has also been robbed of its potential attractiveness; although she was, whilst living, a great beauty who stood at the height of the world of fashion, her dead body is found "miserably dressed," and the narrator reminds his readers that "no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion" (Dickens 'BH' 864). The spot where Lady Dedlock released her final breath is similarly unattractive:

> a dreadful spot . . . where I could dimly see heaps of dishonoured graves and stones, hemmed in by filthy houses . . . on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease. On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere, I saw . . . a woman lying (Dickens 'BH' 913).

These unattractive depictions of these women's bodies support the inference that both Dickens and Corelli did not, in accordance with the melodramatic 'inclination' that poses suicide as cleansing a woman of her sins and consequently transforms her into a beautiful virgin, represent their deaths as a just punishment for the transgression of conventional ideology. In this respect, at least, the absence of melodrama does warrant the conclusion that both authors interrogated the implications of the Victorian paradigm that a 'fallen' women could only through death regain her virtue.

The relationship between these authors' depictions of female suicide and the melodramatic triumph of virtue over vice contains, however, one other aspect that does reveal a fundamental difference between the ideological implications of Dickens' and Corelli's representations. This aspect is best revealed while taking a closer look at the scenes in which the living deal with their loss. Both in *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*, these deaths are felt as, indeed, a loss; in the former, Sir Leicester has granted Lady Dedlock his "full forgiveness" even before she is found dead on the steps of a pauper's graveyard (Dickens 'BH' 895). Furthermore, while some of Lady Dedlock's old friends wondered whether the "the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company," Dickens assures his readers that "the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to object" (981). In *Great Expectations*, it is Pip who, although very much the victim of Miss Havisham, recognizes the pain and heartbreak she has suffered and who likewise forgives her for hurting him and Estella: "I leaned over her and touched her lips with mine, just as they said, not stopping for being touched, 'Take the pencil and write under my name, 'I forgive her.'" (Dickens 'GE' 403). In these scenes, virtue does not triumph over villainy because Dickens shows that while both Lady Dedlock and Miss Havisham have made a series of moral mistakes, they have never been inherently evil to begin with. The "dead-and-gone Dedlocks" do not rise against "the profanation" of Lady Dedlock's company, and Miss Havisham ultimately is the victim of a man's evil intentions. And although this has been concluded any number of times in modern-day scholarship, it is therefore not less true that Dickens does pay more attention to the social causes of suicide and female transgression than to the outright condemnation of it. In contrast, however, Lady Sibyl is granted no pardon; when her husband finds her body, he immediately describes her as a "dead thing" with "a devilish smile" – an inherently evil character (Corelli 286). He is haunted by visions of his wife as "a wild, strange, tortured writhing figure, half nude, waving beckoning arms, and making desperate gestures . . . her eyes mingled menace, despair, and warning upon me! Round her a living wreath of flame coiled upwards like a twisted snake" (329). Corelli's judgment of Lady Sibyl's sexual transgressions is clear; they have made her a creature caught in hell and forever displayed in all her villainy. While Lady Sibyl's suicide thus is indeed a punishment for her failure to conform to conventional ideology, the death of Lady Dedlock and Miss Havisham is represented as the dreadful conclusion to a life destroyed by social structures and constricting conventions.

Conclusion

"What respect does not Hood pay to the beauty of the fallen!" jubilates a reviewer for *The Athenaeum* (quoted in Gates 137-138). This unmasked celebration of the latter's poem "The Bridge of Sighs" emphasizes the enormous ideological gap characterising the relationship between the Victorian age and the modern-day world. While the conclusions that were drawn in the third chapter of this thesis are certainly based on specific segments of Dickens' and Corelli's texts, they nonetheless originate in a modern-day consciousness. To do justice to these works, however, it is necessary to realize that the reviewer's recognition of Hood's portrayal of the beautiful female corpse as a form of respect can point to the "ritual dramatization of death" that prevailed during the Victorian era (Holubetz 14). Nineteenth-century culture often sentimentalized death, leading to, for example, a plethora of death-bed scenes in Victorian fiction which often seem intolerably sensational to modern-day readers. These readers tend to forget, however, that the "ritual celebration of death – so different from our customs – was the ideal" to which most Victorians aspired (16). They believed that, in mourning and at funerals, "outward show conveyed inward respect" (Flanders 324), and as such a certain amount of leeway should be given in the interpretation of the relationship between Dickens' and Corelli's depictions of female suicide and conventional ideology. In extension, these two authors are famous for their highly commercial attitude towards their work and their readership, and they both obviously knew that, in those days, suicide sells.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this thesis was to determine to what extent their *depictions* of female suicide either endorsed or condemned conventional Victorian ideology regarding femininity, maternity, and suicide itself. My analysis of these works as independent cultural artefacts has shown that the novels of both authors endorse conventional ideology insofar as they posit these female characters' failure to be ideal, self-sacrificing mothers as an irreparable transgression which can only lead to death. They condemned Victorian ideology insofar as these novels do show a definite awareness of the constricting and destructive qualities of these social codes on the lives of women. The suicides to which such social structures inevitably lead these female characters is represented as ugly, undesirable, and hardly as romantic as the majority of Victorian artists had presented it. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, however, Lady Sibyl's transgression of conventional ideology makes her end up as a devilish fury that haunts her husband and is entangled in the serpentine coils of Hell itself, while in *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* Lady Dedlock and Miss Havisham are mourned and presented as the waste-products of the dreadful and destructive structures of society which consumed them.

Ultimately, however, I am inclined to conclude that these works – not just their authors – can only properly be interpreted when regarded as product of their own time and place. While Corelli's novel has since its publication generally been criticized by critics as endorsing conventional social codes regarding femininity, *The Sorrows of Satan* nevertheless reflects the heavy debate and the

uncertainty about gender roles and the future of the nation. Many of the issues that today are seen as conducive to women's repression are directly addressed in this novel, and readers need to take into account that feminist thought in the nineteenth century was very different from modern-day feminism. Motherhood still was the New Woman's main goal, even if she advocated that women be granted the right to select the best partner for such an endeavour, and many of these early-feminists were, although relatively transgressive, thus "in many respects complicit with residual elements of the dominant Victorian ideologies" concerning gender roles and sexuality (Ledger 41). Many Victorian women, although fundamentally very much in favour of women's emancipation and professional development, at the turn of the century felt threatened by the New Woman's blatant disregard for every rule of proper femininity they had structured their entire lives around, and it is in a sense no more than natural that these uncertainties should be reflected by a novel like *The Sorrows of Satan*, which directly capitalized on these contemporary ambiguities. While the tenor of the ideological critique in *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* by comparison is, like most of Dickens' works, very much ahead of its time, both Dickens' and Corelli's works could not of course entirely escape from the bounds of conventional social structures. Even fiction, while allowing greater room for unconventionality, cannot set itself completely free from these structures, which are after all so fundamentally constitutive of human thought.

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