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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***James McCreet's Neo-Victorian novels and the critique of Victorian culture**

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This study explores how contemporary novelist James McCreet revisits Victorian society to challenge dominant historical narratives and give voice to marginalized figures. In his novels, McCreet exposes the marginalization of the physically deformed, the transportees, and the poor. By examining how neo-Victorian fiction reimagines the past, the paper highlights the importance of questioning inherited cultural hierarchies and binary oppositions that continue to shape modern thinking. This paper examines the way James McCreet (b. 1971) writes back to the Victorian center. As a neo-Victorianist, McCreet views the Victorian society as a site for conflicting voices. As such, he brings the marginalized individuals from the Victorian society to the center.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Victorian fiction, Victorian culture, James McCreet, cultural critique, historical fiction, postmodernism, intertextuality, marginalized groups, deformity, freak show performers, penal deportation, crime fiction

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Introduction

The Victorian era has long occupied a privileged position in British cultural memory, often represented as a period of moral certainty, social order, and imperial confidence. Yet beneath this seemingly stable façade lay deep social inequalities, rigid hierarchies, and systematic forms of exclusion that silenced large segments of the population. In recent decades, contemporary writers have increasingly returned to the nineteenth century not out of nostalgia, but out of a desire to interrogate its dominant narratives and expose the lives and voices that Victorian culture marginalized or erased. This impulse has given rise to neo-Victorian fiction, a body of writing that revisits the Victorian past in order to critique its ideological foundations and reassess its cultural legacy from a modern perspective.

Scholarly discussions of neo-Victorian literature consistently emphasize its revisionary nature. Lin Pettersson identifies one of the genre's defining characteristics as its "revisionary impulse to reinvent the nineteenth century in order to approach the Victorians from a different viewpoint," noting that this is most often achieved by foregrounding "previously marginalised characters" and recovering "eclipsed narratives" that were excluded from dominant historical discourse (98). Similarly, Heather Worthington argues that postmodernism enables marginalized groups to "construct their own narratives and to speak back to the center," challenging the authority of canonical historical representations (159). Neo-Victorian fiction thus aligns closely with postmodern critical practices, particularly those concerned with deconstruction, intertextuality, and the destabilization of fixed meanings.

Within this critical framework, Victorian culture is no longer viewed as a unified or coherent entity but rather as a contested site of competing voices and conflicting ideologies. Postmodern theory, as articulated by critics such as Patricia Waugh, has been especially influential in shaping this reassessment. Waugh explains that deconstruction exposes and subverts the unarticulated assumptions that sustain metaphysical binaries—such as normal/abnormal, center/margin, moral/deviant—which have historically maintained dominance within Western culture (*Practising Postmodernism* 71). By reversing or destabilizing these binaries, postmodern texts reveal how cultural hierarchies are constructed and sustained, and how they can be challenged through narrative strategies that foreground difference and marginality.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on neo-Victorian fiction and cultural revisionism, the work of contemporary British novelist James McCreet remains largely underexplored. Born in 1971, McCreet revisits Victorian society in his novels to critique the cultural, social, and moral hierarchies that defined the period. His fiction consistently brings marginalized figures—such as the physically deformed, convicts, transportees, and the urban poor—from the periphery of Victorian society to its narrative center. While critics have extensively examined how neo-Victorian authors rewrite gender, sexuality, and imperial histories, relatively little attention has been paid to McCreet's sustained engagement with social marginalization, bodily difference, and institutional exclusion within the Victorian context.

This gap in scholarship is significant, as McCreet's novels offer a compelling example of how neo-Victorian fiction can function as a powerful critique of inherited cultural hierarchies. By writing back to the Victorian "center," McCreet exposes the violence implicit in binary oppositions that privileged respectability, normality, and authority while relegating deformity, poverty, and criminality to the margins. His novels depict Victorian society as a space of conflicting voices rather than a monolithic moral order, revealing how marginalized individuals were not merely passive victims but active subjects whose experiences challenge dominant historical narratives.

This paper argues that James McCreet's neo-Victorian novels employ postmodern and deconstructive strategies to critique Victorian culture by destabilizing its binary oppositions and re-centering marginalized figures. Through his representation of the physically deformed, the convict and transportee, and the poor, McCreet exposes the ideological mechanisms that sustained Victorian social hierarchies and questions their lingering influence on contemporary cultural thinking. His fiction demonstrates how neo-Victorian writing can serve as a form of cultural intervention, rewriting history to foreground exclusion, inequality, and resistance.

To develop this argument, the paper first outlines the theoretical framework of neo-Victorianism and postmodern cultural critique, with particular attention to deconstruction and the reversal of binary oppositions. It then situates McCreet's work within this tradition, examining how his novels represent Victorian society as a site of contestation rather than consensus. Finally, the study analyzes key examples of marginalized figures in

McCreet's fiction, showing how their narrative centrality challenges Victorian cultural assumptions and invites readers to reconsider the ethical and ideological legacies of the nineteenth century.

The Marginalization of the Physically Deformed

The first metaphysical binary that McCreet exposes is the one about body shape. Traditionally, the usual body/unusual body binary placed a higher value on the term usual body. As such, the people with deformity were held in low esteem. McCreet deconstructs this binary opposition by freeing it from the hierarchy that controls it. Accordingly, he gives voice to the people with deformity in the Victorian freak shows.

Traditionally, the circus, which was a home for various curiosities, was an important means of entertainment for the upper class. However, the interests of the upper class were frequently imitated by the middle class. As such, the performers of the circus serve the upper and the middle classes as interesting means of amusement, but they are not allowed to be part of any. In this respect, they are accepted by these two classes only if their status remains secondary.

Like the circus, the freak show employs people with deformity. For both systems, the value of the performer with deformity is appraised according to the money that they can make. In *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, Helen Davies affirms Victorian distorted curiosity through stating that "the Victorian era saw intensification in exhibitions of and discourses about extraordinary bodies" (11).

Though the freak show performers were marginalized in the Victorian Age, they have acquired a central role in the neo-Victorian text, such as McCreet's *The Incendiary's Trail*. In a sense, McCreet exposes the social bias against the deformed. In the novel, the show performers of "Dr Zwiggoff's Anatomical Wonders" include the deformed Edgar, a giant who is over seven feet tall, an unnamed man with a terribly disfigured face, Eugenia, a giantess, Missy, the dog-child, Hardy, a dwarf, and Eliza-Beth, a pair of conjoined twins that has two heads and "one body with two arms and two legs" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 7).

In *The Incendiary's Trail*, when Williamson first meets the members of the freak show following the murder of Eliza-Beth, he is stunned and appalled by the physical appearances of the performers because it "was a world he [Williamson] had never ventured into" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 8). At first, the description of the physical oddity of each performer invokes a host of stereotypical associations that suggest their monstrosity (*Ibid.* 6). Conversely, McCreet focuses on their humanity because the narrator says: "But for his immensity, he [Edgar] could have been a child, admonished and sent to stand in the corner" (*Ibid.* 6).

Though Williamson is shocked at the beginning, he gradually becomes able to perceive their humanity when he becomes acquainted with them. Unlike Williamson, Dyson's understanding is immediate. The following passage is a case in point. "Unafraid, Noah walked slowly towards the child [Missy] and held out a hand, whereupon she sniffed the fingers and began to lap at them. The performers could not help but be amused" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 200-201). It is Dyson's unconventional, yet, eventful life as a street boy and a young transportee that makes him better understand the "other." For Dyson, difference can be celebrated.

Based on her understanding of Rachel Adams' work on the freaks and the Victorian freak shows, Davies explains that "to appropriate the subject with an extraordinary body as a site of identification, personal or universal, runs the risk of negating the personhood of the subject on the display" (7). However, McCreet does not negate the selfhood of the freak. Instead, McCreet displaces his performers from the place that the reader usually identifies them with. In doing so, McCreet tries to focus on the importance of their inner selves. Therefore, unlike some neo-Victorian novelists, who focus on the degradation of the performer, McCreet does not present a full freak show. Rather, he presents the first part of the freak show briefly only to serve as part of Dyson's and Williamson's plan of entrapping Boyle. More importantly, McCreet deconstructs the freak shows through subverting the way the freak shows work. Davies states that "some re-memberings of performers are more self-conscious of the politics of constructing freakery than others" (200).

Acknowledging Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's contribution in discerning the kinds of narrative that construct the identity of the freak, Davies explains that "Garland-Thomson has identified four 'narrative forms' which produced freakish identity" (14). Davies mentions that Garland-Thomson's first form is "the 'oral spiel' or 'lecture' which would introduce the performer, often delivered by their manager" (14). However, McCreet does not use this narrative form. Nonetheless, Davies continues to explain Garland-Thomson's other three

forms which include the following. The first form is “textual promotional materials – the pamphlets of ‘true life stories’ furnishing a (largely fictional) history for the performer, but also newspaper advertisements and features” (Davies 14). The second form is “the ‘staging’ of the performance (costume, choreography)” (Davies 14). Finally, the last narrative form is “visual merchandise – illustrations or photographs” (Davies 14). The reader can easily find the above mentioned three forms in McCreet’s novel.

To illustrate how McCreet deconstructs the representation of the freak, we trace the forms of narratives that played a role in forming the identity of the freak in three of the four of Garland-Thomson’s narrative forms, then, we analyze how McCreet subverts them in *The Incendiary’s Trail*. One of the ways of forming the identity is through the use of an illustration. While some writers engage with a realistic production of the posters that promote freak shows, McCreet’s authorial voice undermines, right from the beginning, the depiction of the performers in an illustration concerning their show. “Wooden boards depicted lurid representations of the performers themselves” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 320). As such, McCreet helps the reader see how visual representation of the people of deformity in the nineteenth century distorted the way they had looked in real life.

Next, he provides examples of the distorted representations and at the same time, his authorial voice highlights the fact that exaggeration is employed for the purpose of attracting the people to see the members of the freak show. In a sense, every performer’s physical deformity is exaggerated for a material purpose. One such example is about the representation of Hardy. “Mr Hardy dwarfed by a conventionally proportioned dog, who on closer inspection proved to be Missy herself with a bone between her teeth” (*Ibid.* 320). However, the only performer whose deformity is excluded from the picture is the unnamed man with a disfigured face, that is, “the man with the destroyed face was not pictured at all (perhaps because no exaggeration could do justice to his woe)” (*Ibid.* 320).

In addition to the visual representation, the promotional material played a damaging role in the way the identity of the people with deformity was shaped in the nineteenth century. McCreet uses this technique only to subvert it and undermine it. As such, McCreet employs a promotional material in the form of a hawker’s speech. In his degrading discourse, the hawker exaggerates the appearance of the unusual body of each of Edgar, Eugenia, and Missy. He even tries to attract the crowds to attend the show by crying out, “Come inside! Cast your eyes upon Eugenia the bearded behemoth – as heavy as an elephant and as hirsute as an ape” (*Ibid.* 320-1). Earlier in the novel, Hardy explains the instance of faking an additional deformity to detective Williamson. He says: “Mr Coggins [the manager] likes her [Eugenia] to wear a theatrical beard, her natural bulk being judged as insufficient ‘wonder’ on its own account” (*Ibid.* 20).

Hardy continues to explain that “the audience is more prone to believe the beard when they behold her size, or so Mr Coggins holds” (*Ibid.* 20). Moreover, the hawker keeps fabricating the facts, as when he says: “But not, ladies and gentlemen, as hairy as her child . . . or should I say *dog* [the emphasis is in the original], for the creature is both simultaneously” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 321). For the reader, this statement is incorrect because he/she is aware that Eugenia is not Missy’s mother; she is a surrogate mother to Missy, as all the members of the show have been abandoned by their parents because of their unusual bodies. More importantly, the hawker keeps emphasizing that his account of the freak show members is truthful. “No tricks here – you may touch and converse with them [the performers] if you don’t believe. Just a shilling!” he says (*Ibid.* 321). Nonetheless, McCreet deconstructs the aforementioned distortion through the response of his detective. “Mr. Williamson’s mouth turned at the artless patter and at the vulgarity of the thing” (*Ibid.* 321). As such, Williamson subverts the practice through exposing its vulgar and exploitative nature. Like Williamson, the reader disapproves of such an act.

The last type of a narrative form that McCreet employs and then subverts is the staging of the freak show. At the background of the novel, the performers have been performing at Vauxhall Gardens. As such, the reader forms an idea about the nature of their show and their lives only from the scattered fragments that fill the pages of the novel. For instance, prior to the opening of the novel, Dyson, like many Victorian gentlemen, has seen the performers. Therefore, when he first visits them, he is able to see a profound contrast between the way their identity is constructed on the stage and the way their identity appears in real life. The narrator explains this issue by saying: “He [Dyson] had seen them at Vauxhall Gardens, of course, transmogrified by make-up and theatrical illumination into greater monsters than they were. In this be-curtained room, however, they seemed

fragile specimens, cowering away from the world (*Ibid.* 200-201). Thus, through this excerpt McCreet lays bare the way the identity of the Victorian freak was shaped through the theatrical conventions in the nineteenth century.

To understand the plight of the freak show performers, one has to grasp how the audience watching the performers at the stage places them under its “gaze.” As such, it is a gaze of Otherness, constituting a binary opposition between a First Self and an Other, to which Davies refers as “unequal power relationships and objectification” (14). A good example of this occurs when Hardy tells Williamson: “We are objects of derision, curiosity and abhorrence” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 20). Earlier in the novel, when Williamson first sees the performers, he perceives their fear from the mob that has gathered outside their residence to learn about the crime. Therefore, he says to them assuredly: “I will conceal you from the crowds and protect you from their gaze” (*Ibid.* 8). Moreover, when they lose their manager, whom they view as their protector, they feel lost and so they feel the intensity of the harmful gaze. Hardy says: “And there are those among our number who experience great distress when exposed to the possibility of being surrounded by a braying mob. Our isolation is our solace ... we are shepherdless without Mr Coggins—” (*Ibid.* 202).

As for the politics of exploitation within the world of the freak show, McCreet employs irony as a strategic trope for exposing the commodification of the freak show members inherent in the Victorian cultural life. While the performers blindly accept their manager’s role as their guardian, as indicated in the previous concern revealed by Hardy, Williamson is able to discern the exploitative nature of the late Coggins, who styles himself as Dr Zwigoff. As such, Williamson helps the reader to perceive instances of irony in the exploitative discourse. For Williamson, Coggins/Zwigoff commodifies his performers. This is evident in Coggins/Zwigoff’s response when he learns that Eliza-Beth has been murdered. “‘Loss’, you [Williamson] say? You understand it right! Of all my ‘anatomical curiosities’, she [Eliza-Beth] was the biggest draw among the crowds, not to mention private showings. I shall be ruined!” Coggins/Zwigoff says (*Ibid.* 27).

Coggins/Zwigoff’s exploitative discourse appears also when he does not feel guilty for his manipulation of his performers. He even feels surprised that Williamson asks him if he feels guilty because of his work. “Guilt? Why? I am the protector of these poor people. I give them a home and a retreat from the prying eyes of the public. Without me they would surely be dead” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 31). Coggins continues to say: “I feed them and clothe them. I provide their accommodation and transport” (*Ibid.* 31). But the twenty-first century reader can easily understand the irony involved in the statements of the freak show manager.

As opposed to presenting a full show, McCreet dramatizes just the opening part of a freak show for the purpose of subverting the conventions of the freak show. Moreover, McCreet’s techniques of subverting appear when he assigns the management of the affairs of the freak show to Hardy, the dwarf, following the murder of Coggins/Zwigoff. In this way, McCreet allows the members of the freak show to take control of their lives. In the show, Hardy is the one who opens the show and who introduces Edgar to the audience. However, as the show takes place during a carnival where people wear costumes, it becomes part of Williamson and Dyson’s pursuit and entrapment of Boyle. Therefore, McCreet puts more emphasis on the chase than on the staging of the freak show. Since the reader of a text on a freak show is similar to the audience of the freak show whose gaze sometimes harms the performer, McCreet does not offer an opportunity for a prolonged gaze.

In addition to the members of the freak show, there are other characters who suffer from physical deformities in varying degrees. Ben, for example, is mute and has one eye because of the racial discrimination in the nineteenth-century America. Boyle is another character with a certain degree of deformity. He has a birth mark that has left his lower jaw disfigured. Williamson’s face, on the other hand, bears the marks of smallpox. While Eldritch Batchem has six fingers in each hand. Like Boyle, Batchem has been abandoned by his family. Unlike Boyle, Batchem’s mother is a lower-class woman. Thus, even though they all suffer from a certain mark of deformity, they choose different paths. Boyle, for example, works against the Metropolitan Police, while Ben lends it his services.

Given the situation of the freak shows, McCreet details the cruelty of such a practice that reduces people to the status of animals. As such, it deprives them of their humanity. In addressing the difficulties that people with deformity face, McCreet invites the reader to think of a society that values diversity and equality. Thus, the reader is engaged in a constant review of the civil rights.

The Marginalization of the Transportee

Next to highlighting the harsh world of the performers of the freak show in the Victorian London, McCreet equally examines the world of the transportee and the penal law that deported many convicts to the colonies and the injustices inflicted on them. In McCreet's revisiting of the penal transportation, McCreet foregrounds a resisting discourse to the Victorian practice of penal transportation. To achieve his objective, McCreet gives voice to the previously marginalized transportees in the Victorian society and literature, as well. In this respect, he deconstructs the dominant version of the Victorian society concerning the necessity of such a penal system. In the nineteenth century, the world of the deported was harsh, and more people were subjected to it. By "1853 there were over 6,000 convicts in Australia, and 2,650 in Bermuda and Gibraltar" (Picard 338). Furthermore, Liza Picard writes that "in rare cases the records show the chilling entry 'death recorded and transported for life' – the convict had legally ceased to exist in England" (338). As harsh as it looks to us today, for the dominant groups in the Victorian society, such a punishment was acceptable. Unsurprisingly, officers working for the Metropolitan Police supported it. Inspector Newsome, for example, asks Williamson "Where is the young policeman I knew who would send a boy to Botany Bay for taking a loaf of bread?" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 334). However, Williamson's earlier attitudes regarding crime and punishment, as shown in Newsome's statement, change with time.

More importantly, such a system created a hierarchy between the imperial center and its peripheries, as the imperial center chose not to permit a certain group of undesirable individuals to remain within the confines of its domain. In this sense, the periphery became the home of the second-class citizens of the imperial center in the nineteenth century.

For the convicts, the alien environment presented both physical and psychological challenges. It was not an uncommon fate for some not to survive such harsh circumstances. More importantly, the system itself played a crucial role in severing the ties between the convict and his/her homeland. For this reason, in *Key Concepts in Victorian Literature*, Sean Purchase states that "the historical records and archives do not, however, account for all of the violence meted out by Victorian society itself" (139). "The apparatus of violence," Purchase adds, "was manifest in Victorian systems of surveillance, discipline and punishment" (*Ibid.*, 139). Of course, one such punishment is the penal transportation.

In revisiting the Victorian penal deportations, McCreet reveals the downside of such a practice. Informed by contemporary works on Victorian London, McCreet forms intertextuality with Liza Picard's book *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*. In describing the penal system, Picard writes that "as usual, there was a shortage of prison accommodation here, so some prisoners were sent to the hulks at Woolwich, half an hour by rail" (339). Purchase defines hulks as "decommissioned warships effectively acting as prisons" (32). According to Picard, the hulks were in use since "1779, when labor was needed to dredge Thames" (339).

McCreet illustrates the dilemma of the deported convicts in *The Incendiary's Trail* through the character of Noah Dyson. Being a printer's grandson, Dyson obtains a unique education, as his household is "never short of reading matter" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 189). Unfortunately, this blissful life soon comes to an end when his parents cease to exist, as he is forced to live on the streets. Following their death, he meets Boyle and they become leaders to the other street boys. One day they raid a brewery; however, a fire unexpectedly breaks. Both Boyle and Dyson try to escape. While Boyle manages to find his way out of the flames, Dyson is entrapped among them. To add more misery to his unfortunate state, a constable discovers him, and accuses him of setting the fire and stealing beer. Like many poor nineteenth-century children, Dyson faces deportation to New South Wales in Australia. Unfortunately, "his [Dyson's] articulacy could not save him now. Boys of a similar age [aged thirteen] were routinely being transported for as slight a crime as taking a loaf of bread" (*Ibid.* 192).

Further examples illustrate how McCreet forms intertextuality with Picard. Following the incarceration, the narrator says: "I need hardly inform the reader of the conditions he must have experienced there" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 192). About such conditions, Picard says: "The hulks were constantly wet, dark and verminous" (339). In the novel, McCreet writes: "Boyle should have been the one locked in that verminous hull" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 193). McCreet further explains that "the pestilential atmosphere of those rotting hulks, the scuttle of rats, the stink of men, the bilge miasma and ever-present threat of violence make them unbearable for an adult; for a child, they must have seemed hell" (*Ibid.* 192-3).

As for the meals provided for the convicts, Picard notes that "the midday meal was 6 oz of meat, a

pound of potatoes and 9 oz of bread” (339). McCreet also refers to a similar diet for the prisoners. He writes that “the only thing that sustained him [Dyson] – excepting the wormy beef and sprouting potatoes – was the futile hope that his boys would come and rescue him. That, and the burning desire for revenge against his enemy Lucius Boyle” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 193).

Owing to the importance that the question of the gaze plays in the postmodern re-examination of the past, McCreet exposes the different levels at which the gaze operates. Like the gaze that lashes at the individuals with unusual bodies, the prisoners at the hulks are subject to a harmful gaze. Acknowledging the importance that the Metropolitan Police had played since 1829 and considering the impact that its development had had on the Victorian society, Purchase writes: “This development ensured that the question of obedience and punishment became a matter of public, as well as private, concern, and that all Victorians were encouraged to watch over and police everyone else” (Purchase 70).

In *The Incendiary’s Trail*, the convicts who wait for their deportation in the hulks are forced to work and to bear the cruel gaze of the public. The narrator describes such difficulties through the harshness that Dyson is subjected to at the time of his imprisonment. He is a thirteen-year-old prisoner in the hulks. “And, each day, people would come to watch the prisoners [such as the young Dyson] work as if they were animals reduced to inhumane labor. How he felt the burning shame of their eyes upon his humiliation!” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 193). In this context, the work of Michel Foucault is crucial to understanding the issue of the gaze. “Foucault argued that this process of surveillance and visibility [based on Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon] – this constant subjection to the gaze – was ‘generalizable’, that it was in fact central to the development of the disciplinary society throughout the Western world” (Purchase 71).

In addition to Dyson’s journey of life as an escaped transportee, there are scattered references to penal deportation concerning other characters in McCreet’s novels. A good example of this occurs when the murder of William Barton, a tidewaiter, prompts the officers of the Custom House to inspect his work. Following their inquiry, the Inspector General of Customs, Mr Jackson, explains to Sir Richard Mayne that Barton’s irregularities at his work, especially his possession of the stolen “warrants,” would have caused him “transportation” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 44).

Another example concerns a character that manages to get away from penal deportation because of his various guises that render him different identities. The Metropolitan Police officers lament the fact that though Perkin Mullender, who is one of Boyle’s important accomplices, is arrested several times, he is not transported because he has always had a different name for each of his unlawful adventures (*The Masked Adversary* 81). In another instance, while talking to Boyle, Inspector Newsome tries to mislead him by falsely informing him that he has talked to young Tobias Smallest and promised Tobias penal deportation instead of hanging (*Ibid.* 312). While Newsome does not produce a true story to Boyle, he is able to construct a plausible one. However, it is in bringing to the forefront a legal issue that concerns the Victorian England such as the possibility that a minor may face a punishment similar to that of an adult makes the twenty-first-century reader question the way the Victorians constructed their penal system in the Victorian textual remains that he/she has access to.

The Marginalization of the Poor

McCreet is also concerned with the question of the poor in the Victorian society. Intensely engaged with the inequalities among the classes, McCreet’s novels reveal an appalling contrast within London, between the affluent parts with all their privileges, on the one hand, and the underprivileged areas, on the other. Through the character of Henry Askern, McCreet establishes a similarity with a famous Victorian writer who was concerned with the life of London’s poor. This writer is Henry Mayhew (1812-1887). He is best known for his book *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) in three volumes. For writing the book, he interviewed the poor citizens in London. A decade later, Mayhew collaborated with three other writers for an extra volume, which was published in 1861. The extra volume was retitled by Dover Publications as *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period: Authentic First-person Accounts by Beggars, Thieves and Prostitutes*.

In McCreet’s *The Incendiary’s Trail*, Dyson offers Williamson a description of Henry Askern. He says: “He is often to be found about the rookeries and the low public houses. I understand he is researching a new book on the underworld of London. I have seen him on my peregrinations about the city” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 142). The similarity between the titles of the two books and between the first names cannot pass unnoticed.

It seems that neo-Victorian writers, such as McCreet, are interested in paying homage to Henry Mayhew through employing a Mayhew-figure in their novels. A few years before McCreet, Michel Faber (b- 1960) fashioned his Henry Rackham after Henry Mayhew in his neo-Victorian novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). In the novel, Henry is a religious man, who, along with his friend Emmeline Fox, is interested in reforming the society. He once tells Emmeline that he has been “conducting researches into the poor and the wretched” (Faber 434). Accordingly, like Henry Mayhew, he visits the slums and interviews the poor.

Just like Mayhew’s books, McCreet’s novels reveal an appalling contrast in London between the affluent parts with all their privileges, on the one hand, and the underprivileged areas, on the other. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams states that “London was at one of its peaks as an imperialist city when it created its desperate centre of poverty and misery in the East End” (283). In a sense, this contrast is accurately expressed in McCreet’s notion that there were two countries in one. “The rookeries of London are cities within a city, a country, within a country – but one barely touched by modernity, learning or religion” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 13). As shocking and frustrating as it was, the gap between the two classes continued to widen. “Whatever was happening in the East End, and often in conscious relation to it, the West End was being newly designed and improved” (Williams 228).

More importantly, Williams notes that “by the 1880s everyone, it seemed, could see the East End and the West End, and in the contrast between them see the dramatic shape of the new society that had been quite nationally and generally created” (220). This contrast is even more striking, when it is read within the context of a metropolis that enjoys an engagement with moral and religious debates, as well as, an unprecedented eruption of scientific inventions and practices that are applied at home and abroad in the colonies. However, this does not seem to be the lot of the deprived areas. Askern laments such a fact when he reveals to Williamson that “there is crime and bestiality that is barely human, walking barefoot in the filth as if Christ had never trod the earth and science had never opened our eyes” (*The Incendiary’s Trail* 162). Unfortunately, “not for these people the latest advances in science and the arts” (*Ibid.* 13). In another instance, when Cullen enters a rookery near Westminster, he feels daunted even though he is described as a burly. “One might almost have been walking two centuries into the past” (*The Masked Adversary* 282).

Where the lower-class people face unfair life conditions, the upper-class people enjoy a life of power. In *The Vice Society*, McCreet shows the power of the upper class and the extent to which its effect reaches. A case in point is the murder of Jonathan Sampson that takes place in the ill-famed Holywell Street. In the novel, some powerful upper-class members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice use the privileges of their class in order to interfere with the work of the Metropolitan Police. On the surface, it appears that they want to help the Metropolitan Police, but in reality, the members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice plan to spy on the investigation for the purpose of fabricating the facts about the involvement of some of Society’s members in the murder of Sampson.

Contrary to their wishes, their plans come to an unpleasant conclusion, as Mary, the Park lane courtesan, learns some disturbing information during an encounter with Sampson. Eager to impress Mary, Jonathan Sampson tells her about the Persephone Club, which includes a select group of the members of the Continental Club. Some of them are also members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. He gives her a shocking example of their hedonistic activities. Undaunted by the act and untroubled by its consequences, the members occasionally force a prostitute to drink prussic acid with gin in order to “consummate their desire” while she is between life and death (*The Vice Society* 340). Thus, they want to achieve their hideous objective as she “passed into the next world” (*Ibid.* 340). As such, they choose prostitutes because their deaths pass unnoticed. In this respect, they exploit the marginalized members in their society. However, after the death of a street girl on Holywell Street following the death of Sampson, Mary gets afraid and sends an anonymous letter to the former Detective Williamson, who along with the other detectives, manages to expose the association of the upper-class criminals with the Holywell Street murder and several others.

While McCreet manages to successfully draw attention to the problems of the people with deformity, the deported, and the poor, McCreet overlooks the problem of the Irish in the Victorian London. McCreet’s depiction of the plight of the Irish during the 1840s is underrepresented. Ironically enough, McCreet stereotypes the Irish in conformity with Victorian texts. He restricts his Irish characters to the lower class. In his novels, McCreet associates the Irish/Catholics with fights, drinking, and disorder. Furthermore, McCreet restricts their

abode to the slums. The authorial voice, for example, informs the reader that Williamson and Ben will visit “Clerkenwell, or rather that disgusting, Irish-infested rookery” shortly before dawn. (*The Vice Society* 211). More importantly, when Dyson discovers that Boyle plans to immobilize the police through the Irish mob, he says: “What could be better for agitating the Irish than withholding the promise of a drink – and on an anti-Catholic commemoration [fifth of November] into the bargain?” (*The Masked Adversary* 339). Thus, through this passing incident, McCreet shows the Irish as violent. Worthington believes that “within the British nation itself the Irish were often scapegoated by the English, as were the Welsh” (75).

Another indication of prejudice against the Irish in McCreet’s novels concerns the way he overlooks the Great Famine 1845-1849 in Ireland even though he explores other problems of the same decade. According to Purchase, the crisis evolved as “the result of a potato blight caused by the spread of a fungus [that] eventually led to the starvation and death of around one million Irish people, and the emigration of around a million more” (Purchase 51). “Apart from the fungus itself,” Purchase adds, “the socioeconomic and political problems caused by the famine were frequently attributed to the mismanagement and general indifference displayed by both the British government and the English landowner class in Ireland” (*Ibid.* 51). Besides, when McCreet explores the deportation of convicts to the colonies, he fails to refer to the fact that one fourth of the deported convicts were Irish. Purchase writes that “around 160,000 criminals (25 per cent of whom were Irish) were transported to the Australian colonies between 1788-1868” (*Ibid.* 32). Thus, the story of the Irish is silenced in McCreet’s novels. As for the question of the Empire, while McCreet examines the internal affairs of the metropolis thoroughly, he shows no interest in analyzing the relationship between the Empire and its peripheries. He reduces the presence of the empire to a mere competition over interests. The situation corresponds with Edward Said’s observations that colonial writers view the empire as the place of “travel, wealth, and service.” (Said 75).

In his novels, McCreet shows that the East is the source of Dyson’s wealth. Among his several professions, Dyson is a supplier of oriental goods. For example, when Dyson takes Williamson to Doctor Norwood’s Private Asylum for Gentlemen to meet Aubrey, the authorial voice informs the reader that “Noah [Dyson] knew of the place because he had recently started to deliver small quantities of his fine opium to the surgery” (*The Vice Society*, 254). McCreet’s novels also make references to the facts of the empire. Such references are also evident when the Police Constables search Dyson’s house and find items from the East. In another instance, as Charlotte tries to seduce Mr. Williamson, she asks him to read *Levantine Mysteries* to her. The book itself is a form of an oriental tale in which the Sultan is depicted as a violent womanizer. (*Ibid.*, 118-9) Obviously, McCreet ignores the exploitation of the inhabitants of the periphery, as the empire had its gains from subjugating other nations to the rule of the imperial center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the neo-Victorian novels are an interesting site for engaging the reader with Britain’s cultural past in an active way. McCreet’s revisiting of the Victorian London is not nostalgic. Rather, it is critical, as he addresses the issues relevant to the lives of the marginalized such as the deformed, the deported convicts, and the poor. However, McCreet does give voice to the Irish residents of London. He also does not dwell on the question of the Empire. In this respect, he chooses to leave this aspect of the British Empire unexplored.

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