

## Victorian Scripts, Nostalgic Traces and Romance in Michèle Roberts' Fiction

Aylin Atilla  
Ege Üniversitesi

*"Each of us walks with a crowd of the dead at our backs"*  
(*The Mistressclass*)

Recently, there has been a notably creative interest in the Victorian culture and literature, generating a wave of neo-Victorian novels within this cultural milieu or historical awareness. Through the term "neo-Victorian novel" we should refer to fiction which is "self-consciously engaged with the act of reinterpretation, rediscovery and revision concerning the Victorians."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, neo-Victorian fiction should be more than the fiction which turns its face to the nineteenth century. As Ann Heilmann asserts, "all fiction post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character do not have to be neo-Victorian."<sup>2</sup> As an intellectual and cultural mode, neo-Victorian represents a wide range of experimentation in genre formations and narratological traditions. Though the neo-Victorian novelist seeks to reshape Victorian novel practice, some critics like Heilmann states that "in many cases, it seems that the neo-Victorian novelist cannot offer any other alternatives and thus the neo-Victorian marks a return to the classic form of the nineteenth-century novel in a way that, structurally at least, seems often to negate the experiments of the modernist movement".<sup>3</sup> This opens up the discussion of whether or not the postmodern reader wants more from the neo-Victorian writer and expects "narrative innovation, fragmentation, and the invention of the new forms" instead of traditional modes of the Victorian novel and its strategies.<sup>4</sup>

1. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.4.
2. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2000*, p.6.
3. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2000*, p.16.
4. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2000*, p.16.

According to Robin Gilmour, as he stated in his essay on the use of the Victorian age in fiction written between 1970 and 2000, there are at least six types of novels which use Victorian history and fiction in the contemporary novel: one of them is the “historical novel written from a modern perspective and in a modern idiom, without much narratorial inference but implying a modern interpretation of the past... Among many examples one might choose Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* or Byatt’s *Angels and Insects*,” another one is the “pastiche and parody”, with poems, diaries and letters inserted in the novel like “*Possession*, the notebook in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*,” a third one deals with the “inversion of Victorian ideology,” a fourth kind may subvert “Victorian fictional norms. The classic case here would be *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*”; the fifth is the “modern reworking or completing of a classic Victorian novel, as Jean Rhys does *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or Emma Tennant *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in *Tess*; or its incorporation in a digested form, as is *Great Expectations* in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*” and a last kind might be like the “research novel” which takes the academic life and its study of Victorian literature and culture as its subject matter, for example David Lodge’s *Nice Work*.<sup>5</sup> What Gilmour personally underlines during his debate for the need of the return to the Victorian period in contemporary fiction is that “the modern version may set out to expose the inadequacies and silences of the Victorian novel, but its effect is often to give the unsophisticated reader a density and a satisfying solidity which contemporary fiction may seem to lack.”<sup>6</sup>

Fiction as a literary genre was culturally central especially to the middle phase of the Victorian age. The fact that the rise of the novel genre was due to the political and economic rise of the middle class has firmly been established by Ian Watt in his book *Rise of the Novel* (1957). While the rise of the middle class was a social matter, the rise of the novel was very much bound up with economic and educational developments. The novel was a perfect reflective of the change that the middle class was having. Accordingly, the material of the Victorian novels was bound up with Victorian values and discipline and a democratic society of equality. Moreover, the stereotypical ideas about the Victorians as duty-bound, repressed and humorless were usually the target material for the writers of the time. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John have clarified the issue about realist novel tradition in the Victorian period in their introduction to *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, where they propose their aim of writing such a book as to emphasize

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5. Robin Gilmour, “Using the Victorians: The Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction,” in A. Jenkins and J. John (eds.), *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.190.

6. Robin Gilmour, “Using the Victorians: The Victorian Age in Contemporary Fiction,” p.191.

the aesthetic, ideological, intellectual and moral diversity of both the Victorian novel and its critical reception. They claim that “the obsession with definitions and representations of the real” in both fiction and its criticism is “a response to the enormity of social and political changes which had empowered the middle class; it reflects a deep cultural need to make sense of change to impose order on potential chaos. The classic realist novel is shaped by the anxiety of the middle class as much as by its complacency.”<sup>7</sup>

In contemporary fiction, evoking the Victorians and their world is a means of getting a fresh perspective on the present which exists in dynamic relation to the past. In their introductory essay, titled “Rethinking the Victorians”, Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliams provide an extended list of issues, topics, and ideas that have emerged as a result of the neo-Victorian studies:

“The term Victorian gathered strength after 1901, as it was called upon to evoke an historical period, a series of styles in fashion and architecture, a moment when the novel flourished and a lavish empire continued to grow, but perhaps, hypocrisy, overtly ornate and elaborate design, bold entrepreneurialism, double standards, snobbery, sentimentality, utilitarianism, imperialism, narrow mindedness, cosy but stifling family life, rote-learning, extreme religiosity, racism, respectability, corporal punishment, hard work and drudgery. It meant town halls built in the gothic style and Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s bridges. It meant St. Pancras Station, the Great Exhibition and the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites. It meant the age of Gladstone and Disraeli but also the exploitation of workers, particularly children. It meant the London of Charles Dickens but also the city of Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes. It came to describe a sepia-tinted age that trumpeted high ideals and Christian virtues but presided over an underworld of poverty and prostitution.”<sup>8</sup>

In the last decades of the twentieth century, it is noteworthy that many women novelists have an increasing and strong interest in the Victorian period. Especially, the interest of Victorian constructions of gender and sexuality play an important role for the modern feminist writers. They have made female experience central to their narratives, so that novels gave women back their place in the society and history; this time not just as victims but as agents. This is also the characteristic that relates the new historical fiction to postmodern tendency in historiography. Postmodernist historiography has a particular interest in adopting new perspectives on events, by decentering recorded history. This overlaps with the concerns of feminist historians and novelists similarly. Historical fiction by women is mainly pioneered by second wave feminism. It is achieved by rewriting

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7. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (eds.), *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.6.

8. Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliams (eds.), *The Victorian Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.1-2.

history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalized by the official historical account.

The attraction of the Victorian period for the twenty-first century writers can be related to the general rebirth of interest in the Victorians, an interest which reached a climax with the centenary of Victoria's death in 2001. Gilmour points to the connected growth in paperback publication of Victorian fiction, which includes little-known titles alongside the popular classics. It has been argued in his essay that such novels contribute to what Jameson calls "postmodernism's nostalgic mode" creating the past through the recreation of its surfaces, without ever allowing the original to declare itself. Cora Kaplan, who points out "the incommensurability of the Victorian past and its late capitalist legacy," writes that "today 'Victoriana' might usefully embrace the whole phenomenon, the astonishing range of representations and reproductions for which the Victorian... is the common referent."<sup>9</sup> And she continues by asking whether the interest in the Victorian past is "more than nostalgia—a longing for the past that never was—and more too than a symptom of the now familiar, if much debated, view that the passage from modernity to postmodernity has been marked by the profound loss of a sense of history."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Kaplan thinks that the meaning of the term 'Victoriana' that "includes the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself" and its transformation is still problematic.<sup>11</sup>

Neo-Victorian fiction reinvents the Victorian, rather than effacing it, through its reconstruction of Victorian past. For instance, destabilization of patriarchal gender discourse during the Victorian period is one of the issues which women novelists have revisited in a number of ways. Therefore, the Victorian period is a very productive field for the feminist revisioning of Victorian women's lives, and it provides an opportunity to challenge the issues which nineteenth-century society produced in response to the women's situation. While some women writers display the playful intertextuality of post-modernist fiction, others challenge the images of women constructed by literature of the past, the values inscribed in those images, and their lasting power.

Michèle Roberts, writer of eleven novels and four short story books, is an Anglo French writer and poet who attended Oxford University, where she gained a degree in

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9. Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: university of Columbia Press, 2007), p.3.

10. Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, p.3.

11. Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, p.3.

English. She is currently a professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia in England. Roberts believes that “women have been so repressed into the unconscious of the culture that it is where we’ve belonged but it is where we can begin to invent ourselves ... it was very liberating for a writer to dive down, and see what she can find, and bring it back up to the surface.”<sup>12</sup> Her last novels make a rewriting of the Victorian novels to free the repressed unconsciousness of the culture about the women over time. Roberts who often practices re-workings of Victorian issues and the Victorian novel tradition has always blurred the boundaries of the genre, either by adding short stories, autobiographical material, letters and diary entries within the same text or by undermining controversial aspects of the Victorian society especially concerning women. Her novels, specifically these four, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) [recently republished as *Delusion* (2008)], *The Looking Glass* (2000), *The Mistressclass* (2003), *Reader, I Married Him* (2004), point to both the Victorian past and the contemporary present with dual plots: one in the nineteenth and one in the twentieth centuries with the need to reread Victorian within both its contemporary and present context.

While subverting certain literary genres and texts special for Victorian fiction, Michèle Roberts tries to redefine social roles and expectations, and particularly female sexuality. Additionally, she affirms sexual passions and pleasures of women through rewriting the stories of some famous women—both fictional and historical such as, Charlotte Brontë, Emma Bovary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary Wollstonecraft, whose representations in Roberts’ novels challenge patriarchal authority and imagination. While doing this, as Emma Parker points out, “although she questions dominant definitions of female sexuality, Roberts avoids prescribing the ‘truth’ about women’s passions and pleasures,” therefore she never gives prescriptions of readymade scenarios.<sup>13</sup> Ruth Cain finds Roberts’ fiction significant for its “frank and disturbing reflections on maternal anger, suffering and trauma, the feelings Western mothers are not supposed to feel, and for its attempts to express and subvert the unrepresentable maternal subject, her emotions and sexuality.”<sup>14</sup> Cain believes that Roberts “consistently gestures toward a new economy of meaning, buried alive under current Symbolic constraints,”<sup>15</sup> and

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12. Cited in Maria Soraya Garcia Sanchez, “Talking About Women, History, and Writing with Michèle Roberts,” *Atlantis*, 27/2 (2005), p.140.

13. Emma Parker, “Sex Changes: The Politics of Pleasure in the Novels of Michèle Roberts,” *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 17 (2006), p.331.

14. Ruth Cain, “The Buried Madonna: Matricide, Maternal Power and the Novels of Michèle Roberts,” in *Women Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 42/4 (2013), p.409.

15. Ruth Cain, “The Buried Madonna: Matricide, Maternal Power and the Novels of Michèle Roberts,” p.409.

“invokes and subverts the forms and traditions of the feminine/feminised categories of genre fiction within which women’s writing has historically been corralled.”<sup>16</sup>

The plot of *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) revolves around five female narrator-writers whose stories intersect at certain points. One of them is Flora Milk who is a Victorian working-class medium based on the historical Victorian medium, Florence Cook. Another narrator is King Hat who is trying to get rid of her gender so that she can be immortal and forever king of Ancient Egypt. When she understands that it is useless to insist on eternity and masculine power, she decides to protect herself by the help of a writer and, therefore be immortalized: “I have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I. ... I shall seek for a scribe who will write down my name and let me live again. I shall dart forwards through hundreds of years, searching for a faithful scribe who will spell me right and let me rise. One whose hand will dance to my spelling.”<sup>17</sup> Hattie, on the other hand, is a contemporary character who lives in Flora’s old house and who sees the ghosts of both Flora and King Hat. The other narrators are Rosina Milk in Victorian period, who is Flora’s assistant and sister, and Minnie Preston, the wife of Sir William who takes Flora to Paris where she is exhibited as a hysteric at a hospital. With its overlapping experiences of these five women, the text is observed by many critics as “feminist” for its wish to “interrogate gender and patriarchal power”<sup>18</sup> and which sets romance “in the more overtly patriarchal periods, Ancient Egypt and Victorian London, ... structured through and against patriarchy.”<sup>19</sup> For Louisa Hadley, *In The Red Kitchen* (1990), explores “the dark side of maternity and the ways in which patriarchy determines women’s relationships to other women.”<sup>20</sup>

*In the Red Kitchen* is also a textual space for imagining what’s absent from historical record. Therefore, it employs the generic conventions of historical romance. The novel gives fictional voices to the women who were marginalized in official records. The house is a metaphor of the maternal body, a place for spiritual renewal. The red kitchen, on the other hand, is an essential source of warmth, both physical and emotional:

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16. Ruth Cain, “The Buried Madonna: Matricide, Maternal Power and the Novels of Michèle Roberts,” p.415.

17. Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Minerva,1991), p.133.

18. Susan Rowland, “Women, Spiritualism and Depth Psychology in Michèle Roberts’s Victorian Novel,” in A. Jenkins, and J. John (eds.), *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.203.

19. Susan Rowland, “Women, Spiritualism and Depth Psychology in Michèle Roberts’s Victorian Novel,” p.203.

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

the kitchen “keeps us alive, warm, fed.”<sup>21</sup> Each woman has different reasons for writing/ speaking, and these motives affect the reader’s interpretation of events, and they are themselves part of the story articulated in the narrative structure. Of course, these voices do not provide the true story of the novel, nevertheless they carry a significant part of a bigger story that has been largely unwritten. Although, *In the Red Kitchen* does not claim to be history, it adds a female perspective which is not represented before:

“To write is to enter the mysterious, powerful world of words, to partake of words’ power, to make it work for me. To write is to deny the power of death, to triumph over it. To inscribe a person’s name on the wall of his tomb, to describe his attitudes thereupon, is to ensure that he will live forever. As the tomb cut into the rock is the doorway to eternal life, so the words painted on the false door of the tomb enable the spirit of the dead man to come and go as he pleases through the stone walls. Words mean life. The absence of words cut into the stone walls of the tomb, signifying real things like bread and beer, are real things themselves, more real than the bread and beer, for they remain forever and make the bread and beer endure forever too. Should the bread and beer not be offered, or should they be stolen, the words become the bread and beer and ensure they last throughout the ages. The tomb is the first book; the house of life; the body that does not decay because written. Stone is cut into, cut out; this absence of stone, this emptiness, yet means a fullness: the words appearing, their presence overcoming the absence of what they denote, filling emptiness with meaning, creating the world over and over again. Writing, I live; I enter that world beyond the false door of the tomb; my existence continues throughout eternity.”<sup>22</sup>

The novel suggests that, by listening to the silenced voices, women can, like Hattie, reshape history and the meaning of gender difference.

In her attempt to recover the lost female voices through history, Roberts uses and abuses the Victorian novel tradition. Additionally she throws light to certain taboo concepts like spiritualism, hysteria and Darwinist theories on gender and sex. Jeanette King points out that *In the Red Kitchen* demonstrates “the evolution of psychiatric theories which can be used to silence women who threaten to speak out of their ordained roles, while affording protection to those who, in the name of science, use/abuse women’s bodies and minds as their subjects.”<sup>23</sup> The female medium who in fact connects the past to the present is one of the figures commonly used by women novelists of historiography. The reason for the interest in spiritualism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century can be traced back to “a response to the Darwinian theory of evolution and the subsequent crisis of faith.”<sup>24</sup> The interest in the material and the spiritual of the Victorian world and their

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21. Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen*, p.44.

22. Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen*, p.24.

23. Jeanette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.121.

24. Diana Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.208.

union in the favorite genre of the gothic remind us of Roberts' combination of the spiritualism and the medium as a female professional in the novel. This theme is the main focus of the novel's concern. In an interview, Roberts claimed that the gothic is "connected to femininity in some weird way" because "the haunted home is a body, a maternal body, a sexual body, a dead body."<sup>25</sup>

In *The Looking Glass* (2000), Roberts not only rewrites the lives of Mallarmé and Flaubert from a female perspective, as Sarah Falcus has shown, but also she rewrites a nineteenth century Western canonical text: *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Flaubert.<sup>26</sup> The fictional poet Gerard Colbert is based on Gustav Flaubert and the novel weaves the fictional stories of five female characters that are connected to Colbert. Isabelle, Colbert's mistress, closely resembles Colet, the model for Emma Bovary. In spite of the parallelisms in the life and character of Isabelle and Emma, Isabelle rejects the tragedy of Emma and declares:

"It was my life and I was determined to do something about it. I wasn't going to waste my youth suffering and whining, watching myself wither while pleasure passed me by. I wasn't going to give up and resign myself like my poor mother did. Divorce might be impossible but I wasn't going to act crazily like one of those heroines in books, either, who ended up ruined, in disgrace, and killed themselves. I had read *Madam Bovary*, that forbidden text, under the desk at school, a copy, veiled in brown paper, smuggled from one pupil to the next, and I had decided on a better fate for myself. I choose a happy ending, not a tragic one."<sup>27</sup>

Tracing the similarities of these women, on the other hand, will reveal that both have a very dull life with uninteresting husbands. Disappointed in domestic life, they seek fulfillment outside their families. Isabelle's affair with Colbert mirrors Emma and Rodolphe's affair. Unlike *Madam Bovary's* romantic dependence on men, Isabelle achieves both sexual and economic independence throughout the novel. Michèle Roberts' Isabelle transforms Emma from a punished woman and a tragic figure into a self-sufficient and happy woman who resists patriarchal Victorian gender roles.

Additionally, the revision of Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" through the orphan girl's story in *The Looking Glass* does not repeat the self-sacrificing romantic heroine since Genevieve resists the tradition of romance, realizing that "I discovered a new version of time. I was not, after all, stuck for ever, revolving in a nightmare game, like the hands

25. Jenny Newman, "Interview with Michèle Roberts," in Monteith, Newman and Wheeler (eds.), *Contemporary British and Irish Fiction* (New York: Arnold, 2004), p.131.

26. Sarah Falcus, *Myths, Mothers and Memories* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

27. Michèle Roberts, *The Looking Glass* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p.190.



of a mad clock; I was not condemned to repeat the mermaid story from now till eternity. I could grow up; I could move; I could get away.”<sup>28</sup> The mermaid is a recurrent symbol in most of Roberts' fiction symbolizing the suppressed, silenced and dependent woman with feminine desires. By intermingling allusions to canonical and non-canonical texts, Michèle Roberts challenges the hierarchy of canonical symbols that govern Victorian fiction.

*The Mistressclass* (2003) offers a revisionist account of Charlotte Brontë and her Professor in Brussels, Monsieur Heger's relationship within a split narrative of the nineteenth century Victorian and the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Charlotte Brontë seems to have become the mistress of Heger, as the title also reveals; however, she can express her love and passion only in the letters which are never posted.<sup>30</sup> The novel suggests that *Jane Eyre* is the product of Charlotte's repressed sexual desires which are directly represented in the character Bertha Rochester whose madness is a projection of Charlotte's socially unacceptable feelings towards a married man. In the novel, Charlotte imagines herself a monster locked in a cellar like Bertha. Catherine, sister of Vinny, who is a character in the twentieth century portion of the novel, thinks that Bertha in *Jane Eyre* is kept in the attic because she is “too sexy, too fond of a drink and a Creole.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, madness for Roberts has a different meaning: “You could see it as a rite of passage. You could see it as a baptism, a journey of discovery, because madness, of course can be all those things.”<sup>32</sup>

The contemporary character Vinny, in *The Mistressclass*, finds herself in the same difficulty of having sexual desires towards her sister's husband. Her sister Catherine, on the other hand, tries to express her sexual desires through writing erotic novels which mostly place pleasure and punishment side by side. Although Vinny and Catherine both identify with Jane and the romantic love the novel offers, it is especially Vinny who rejects to be defined with the black and white world of romances and fairy tales, Rose Red and Snow White: “One good and one bad. One feminine and one not. One kindly, pretty strawberry blonde who saw housework as an act of love, and one difficult gingernut tomboy who preferred to play outside. Was that the right story? No, Vinny shouted to herself: too simplistic, I refuse to be set against Catherine like that.”<sup>33</sup> The novel ends

28. Michèle Roberts, *The Looking Glass*, p.91.

29. Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), p.66.

30. Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, p.6, 41.

31. Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, p.30.

32. Cited in Maria Soraya Garcia Sanchez, “Talking About Women, History, and Writing with Michèle Roberts,” *Atlantis*, 27/2 (2005), p.145.

33. Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, p.138.

with the happy reunion of the sisters to travel to India together, after Adam, the lover and the husband, has disappeared.

Most repressed female desires which immerse the romance narrative are the subject matter of Roberts' fiction. She not only challenges the commonly held view of women's inability to express sexual desires, but also the stereotypical passive and submissive nature attributed to women in romance narratives. Catherine teaches *Jane Eyre* at the university and Vinny knows it almost by heart, both identify closely with Jane. Catherine comments on:

“Vinny didn't see it that way. She saw simply the words. This poem was made in the seventeenth century. The structure of this grammar, twist of metaphors, spelling, cannot be faked up by a later time. It is utterly authentic. It is itself. In its presence I am therefore also in the seventeenth century, witnessing its formation. Reading is a form of time travel. Reading is a form of resurrection, a past time resurrected as the reading of the poem is made. There is no death in this sense. No death of language. Language goes on, despite death, the skein that binds the generations, making itself new between the life and death of every poet. Language is as certain as death but triumphs over it.”<sup>34</sup>

As Ann Heilmann points out, the reconstruction of the past through writing or reading or re-narration “assumes not only part of the life, but becomes the life of the hero/ine, who attains a deeper level of self-knowledge through and in the story s/he records... : a metaphoric re-enactment of the neo-Victorian novel's self-constitution through its Victorian referents.”<sup>35</sup> Although Vinny claims not to believe in romantic love, she can't help being obsessed with Adam. However, as the narrative progresses, both sisters become upset with romance as Charlotte was. Emma Parker draws a parallel between Catherine and Mrs. Dalloway: “both middle-aged women, who wander through London buying flowers in preparation for a party, emphasize that Roberts, like Woolf, opposes the traditional romance plot.”<sup>36</sup> She maintains that “by rewriting romance Roberts brings the subversive potential of the genre to the fore and subverts the social and literary hierarchies that affirm the value of canonical texts like *Jane Eyre* but dismiss the popular romances they inspire, and the women who read them.”<sup>37</sup>

Roberts' last novel, *Reader, I Married Him* (2004), which is a parody of Victorian romance fiction, explores the themes of love, sexuality and marriage with a contemporary

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34. Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, p.108.

35. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1990-2000*, p.36.

36. Emma Parker, “Michèle Roberts and Romance,” *Women: A Cultural Review*. Vol. 19. No. 1 (London: Routledge, 2008), p.30.

37. Emma Parker, “Michèle Roberts and Romance,” p.34.

setting. Aurora, the single, professional, middle-aged woman, despite her three unsatisfactory marriages, indulges herself with romance once more and inevitably identifies with the heroines of romantic novels she is very fond of: "I felt like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*,"<sup>38</sup> "like an echo of Mrs Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*," "like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*,"<sup>39</sup> "Like Mr Darcy watching Elizabeth cry in *Pride and Prejudice*."<sup>40</sup> These are the romance novels whose heroines have to delay their plans and lives in favour of getting married. For a forth try of marriage, she travels to Italy in order to find the ideal, perfect man in her dreams. However, this affair turns out to be very unsatisfying for Aurora. Surprisingly, the novel ends with parting rather than uniting, and it ends with murder rather than marriage: "I fired. Reader, I murdered him"<sup>41</sup>: Aurora shoots Michael. Apart from this unpredicted ending of the novel, Michèle Roberts not only defies the expected plot structure of the romance narrative, but she revises romantic relations through the character Frederico who shows Aurora that sex, love and romance may not come all at once.

To conclude, Michèle Roberts' fiction reveals the parallel lives of Victorian and contemporary women who have resisted certain oppressions in society and defied the ready-made scenarios and scripts of Victorian or any society and its prescriptions. She accomplishes this through a nostalgic lance reflecting both the weak and the powerful aspects of feminist writing and the romance genre which is automatically associated with female writing. It can be said that Roberts makes use of the six types of neo-Victorian fiction that Robin Gilmour has stated. Her fiction usurps Victorian texts to reveal literary and cultural products of the age and she combines them with contemporary world's socio-political and sexual concerns.

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38. Michèle Roberts, *Reader, I Married Him* (London: Little Brown, 2004), p.49.

39. Michèle Roberts, *Reader, I Married Him*, p.169.

42. Michèle Roberts, *Reader, I Married Him* p.184.

41. Michèle Roberts, *Reader, I Married Him*, p.229.

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