

# The Aesthetics of the Serpent: Identity, Stigma, and Renewal in Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*

## Yılan Estetiği: Sarah Perry'nin *The Essex Serpent* Romanında Kimlik, Damgalanma ve Yenilenme

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### Abstract

This article explores the image of the serpent and the reinterpretation of its association with women in Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*. The serpent, formerly a symbol of renewal and intuitive wisdom, turns into a representation of evil along with the rise of Judeo-Christian theology. It thus appears in the form of a discursive apparatus that serves the demonization of women through the culturally produced links to femininity. Challenging the patriarchal transmission of serpentine imagery, the author subverts this cultural lineage and restores it as a symbol of renewal and aesthetic transformation through the novel's female protagonist, Cora Seaborne. While Cora rebuilds her identity through science and reason against the social constraints of the Victorian era, the novel's understanding of contemporary feminist aesthetics reconsiders the serpent-woman image not as a mark of stigma but rather as a narrative of liberation and transformation.

**Keywords:** Serpent, Stigma, Feminism, Woman, Sarah Perry

### Öz

Bu makale, Sarah Perry'nin *The Essex Serpent* adlı romanında yılan imgesinin ve bu imgenin kadın ile özdeşleştirilmesinin yeniden yorumlanışını ele alır. Bir zamanlar yenilenmenin ve sezgisel bilgeliğin sembolü olan yılan kavramı, Yahudi-Hristiyan geleneğin ortaya çıkmasıyla birlikte kötücül ve şeytani olanın simgesi olarak kullanılmış, kültürel olarak kadınlıkla kurulmuş bağlantılar üzerinden kadının şeytanlaştırılmasında söylemsel bir araç olarak kullanılmıştır. Yılan imgesinin eril aktarımına meydan okuyan yazar, bu kültürel mirası ters yüz ederek onu romanın kadın kahramanı Cora Seaborne ile yeniden doğuş ve estetik dönüşümün sembolü haline getirir. Cora, Viktorya dönemi toplumsal kısıtlamalarına karşı bilim ve akıl aracılığıyla kendi kimliğini yeniden

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Geliş/Arrival: 01.01.2026  
Kabul/Accepted: 04.02.2026  
Yayın/Published: 26.03.2026



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**Alıntılama/Cite as:** Erdal, Baturay (2026). "The Aesthetics of the Serpent: Identity, Stigma, and Renewal in Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*". *Söylem* 11(1): 174-186  
Doi: 10.29110/soylemdergi.1853301

inşa ederken, romanın çağdaş feminist estetik anlayışı, yılan-kadın imgesini bir damgalanma biçiminden çıkarıp, özgürleşmenin ve deri değiştirmenin bir anlatısı olarak yeniden ele alır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yılan, Damga, Feminizm, Kadın, Sarah Perry

## INTRODUCTION

The image of the serpent has become a subject of scholarly interest, as it is richly symbolic in Western mythological narratives and Renaissance iconography, as well as in theological teachings and modern literary discourse. Specifically, the historical identification of the serpent with women evokes a sense of threat projected onto the female body and identity by the dominant patriarchal ideology. On the one hand, the complex character of the serpent is perceived as a femme fatale that is an embodiment of seduction and punishment, turning into a harbinger of chaos; on the other hand, it signifies a wise woman who opens the door to knowledge in some ancient communities. This dichotomy depicts the fact that the identification of the woman with the serpent is symbolic and ideological.

The exclusion of women from the public space through confining them to the figure of “angel in the house” is notably prevalent in Victorian England, where nonconforming, inquisitive, and autonomous woman are regarded as pathological and demonic. Sarah Perry’s 2016 novel *The Essex Serpent* revives this historical context through an unconventional lens, reinterpreting it within a contemporary deconstructive framework. Handling the prescriptive social norms of Victorian England throughout the novel, Perry, on the other hand, reimagines the Victorian woman, Cora Seaborne, through the aesthetic power of the serpent. The novel explores the serpent as a functional and purposeful symbol in the process of the woman’s stigmatization, transformation, and then subjectification, rather than simply seeing it as a mythical fear-inducing figure.

Following the death of Michael Seaborne, her husband, Cora begins to question the norms of patriarchal society, developing scientific interests in an attempt to transcend traditional social roles. Throughout the novel, Cora disavows the position of subordination to male supremacy in the patriarchal society; however, this disavowal causes her to become the subject of stigmatization in a physical and discursive sense. Indeed, the process of stigmatization, more precisely, her association with the serpent by the townspeople, is also a form of violence against her bodily autonomy and intellectual capacity. Nevertheless, Perry attempts to challenge the gender-based violence and stigmatization, incorporating the social oppression into her transformative process. In other words, the symbolic identification of Cora with the serpent in the novel evolves into an aesthetic rebirth through the shedding of her skin. The pejorative connotations of the serpent are subverted and reconceptualised in an attempt to reinforce the woman’s process of self-construction. Thus, *The Essex Serpent* subverts the patriarchal narrative based on the concept of the serpent and offers a transformative insight into the alternative aesthetic constructions of female identity.

## 1. THE SERPENT IN THE HOUSE: THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SERPENT-WOMAN

The demonization of the female body and identity by associating it with the figure of the serpent has served to shape the perception of femininity, constructing women as a socio-cultural

threat through their gender. The signs of this identification can be found in Greek mythology and Judeo-Christian scriptures, in which women are reflected as dangerous entities. According to Gillian Alban, such a patriarchal view has castigated women “as a dreadful Medusa monster under misogyny” (2017, p. 1). This misogynistic approach, considering female sexuality is subversive, tempting, and dangerous, takes its roots in the Adam and Eve narrative. As a devil extending the apple to Eve, the serpent in the story, along with the woman, becomes a negative symbol through which the patriarchal discourse projects fear, temptation and moral transgression onto the feminine. Portraying the woman as the source of original sin due to the expulsion from Eden reinforces her demonization and marginalization through the theological justifications. Unravelling this narrative in terms of its ideological structure, Merlin Stone asserts that “[w]andering further into the Garden of Eden, where the oracular cobra curled about the sycamore fig, we soon discover that the various events of the Paradise myth betray the political intentions of those who first invented the myth” (1976, p. 218). For Stone, the story of the creation is a political narrative that justifies the patriarchal dominance over women.

The figure of the monstrous woman dominated medieval Christian thought as well. The art and literature of the period depicted the serpent with a woman’s face in various forms (Gussenhoven, 2001, p. 208). A woman’s fertility, corporeality, and sexuality were perceived as the devil’s “gateway.” In this context, the figure of the serpent was reinterpreted as the means through which the devil penetrated the woman. Women were portrayed as beings closer to the devil, will-less and depraved; thus, the serpent functioned as a metaphor for the evil inherent both in women’s nature and their flesh (Ewing, pp. 90-91). During the witch hunts, on the other hand, accusations that women engaged in sexual relations with serpents or harboured serpents within themselves were widespread (Gasser, p. 271). Situated within the broader context of Renaissance art and Enlightenment treatises, the nexus of the serpent, women, and Satan persisted as a powerful trope that constructed female identity through gender-biased norms and misogynist stances. The tradition of the male scholarship in this Early Modern period marginalized women in many cultural productions and, as Selma R. Williams and Pamela W. Adelman argue, “toppled woman from Earth Mother to witch” in what they call “a totally uncoordinated, though murderous, war on women” (1992, pp. 3-8). The process of stigmatization created barriers that restricted women’s engagement in business, society and intellectual pursuits amidst the industrial and economic changes in England.

At the outset of the Victorian era, the androcentric and misogynistic ideological patterns, established in the Early Modern era, culturally codified domesticity and female submission as ideals. Women’s intellectual interests were considered a threat to the Victorian society, which expected them to have remained silent and obedient. In contrast, any practice of displaying ambition and assertiveness was often labelled as dangerous. When women attempted to question the traditional gender roles in the society, they encountered the predicament of mediating between being characterized as either an angel or devil in the symbolic sense. On one hand, the society embraced those who conformed to the idealized image of the angelic woman; on the other hand, it demonized those who sought personal autonomy and freedom. The mermaid, for instance, like all demonic symbols that have long been associated with women, “carries the broader spiritual resonance of her ancestor the serpent-woman” in Victorian iconography, since, Nina Auerbach asserts, these

creatures “typify the mysterious, broadly and evocatively demonic powers of womanhood in general” (1982, p. 94). Following a similar line of reasoning, this relationship noted by Auerbach also manifests itself in Victorian art and literature. In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which they argue that the female characters are predominantly depicted at two polar extremes, as the “angel” (submissive, virtuous and silent) or the “monster” (defiant and dangerous) within the male-dominated Victorian literary tradition, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar further observe male writers “invariably castigate the cunning of the serpent—at least when that cunning is exercised in her own behalf” (2000, p. 28). Thus, characteristics such as assertiveness and aggressiveness, which are praised in men for their decisive actions, are often seen as inappropriate or unnatural for women who are expected to live quietly and peacefully (p. 28). Women must conform to submissive roles by setting aside their intellectual and scientific endeavours; otherwise, as Gilbert and Gubar assert, “women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity” are stigmatized as “terrible objects — Gorgons, Sirens, Scyllas, serpent-Lamias, Mothers of Death or Goddesses of Night” (p. 79). Thus, the cultural construction of the serpent-woman underpins a process of stigmatization that constitutes a major obstacle to women’s individual freedoms and intellectual development.

## 2. THE FIGURE OF THE SERPENT AND THE DEMONIZATION OF WOMEN IN FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS WITH MYTH

Feminist theorists who critically engage with myth and symbolism assert the idea that the figure of the serpent functions as a mythic archetype and symbolic device, revealing the ways in which women are culturally constructed as the Other and stigmatized as threatening and feared beings. Adrienne Rich explains this attitude with men’s fear for women’s creative potential: “[t]he ancient, continuing envy, awe and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other female aspect of creativity” (1995, p. 40). This patriarchal hatred, as Linda Alcoff claims, can be seen within a wide range of societal contexts: “every source of knowledge about women has been contaminated by misogyny and sexism” (1988, p. 405). However, the feminist theorists assume responsibility for critically interrogating this contamination and seek to articulate women’s experiences on their own terms.

In her *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett discloses the ideological perspective in the Edenic fable, demonstrating how the serpent functions as a transparent phallic signifier. Millett observes that Eve is seduced by the serpent and held responsible for seducing Adam. This patriarchal logic transfers the burden of sexual guilt entirely onto the female, simultaneously demonizing feminine sexuality and justifying male authority. Moreover, In Millett’s reading, the myth functions to inscribe sin, desire, and transgression upon the female body (2000, p. 53). Millett’s discussion, which deciphers the demonization of women within patriarchal narratives, paves the way for the subsequent feminist reclamations of the serpent.

Luce Irigaray rescues the narrative of serpent-woman in the Edenic fable from what Millett interprets as a phallogocentric discourse, reimagining a scene where all participants coexist within a peaceful equation. “The myth of the earthly paradise, in her version might it not be interpreted as a memorial to existence ‘in god’?”, asks Irigaray, envisioning a pre-Edenic egalitarian union:

Once they were 'in god', with man and woman sharing heaven and earth. In the midst of nature. Feeling no need for any shelter but a garden where they lived naked [...] Then God did not exist in front of or above human beings. He was in them as they were in him [...] A man and a woman, an 'original' couple. Before what is called the fall, or sin, or banishment. The 'outside of'- god, the earthly paradise, the relation between him and her, her and him (1991, p. 173).

Andrew Prevot elucidates Irigaray's reinterpretation as a vision of a new beginning, "a renewal of origins that affirms bodies without shame, that envelops all the elements and creatures of the natural world, and that finds the divine in all of this" (2023, pp. 154-155). Reversing this patriarchal narrative that constitutes fundamental source of the cursed image of the demonised woman, Irigaray reconsiders it as a potential for an egalitarian existence.

In her seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous liberates the serpentine figure of Medusa from the frightening and demonising image, transforming the male-constructed myth of fear and monstrosity into a symbol of female power and creativity. Rather than perceiving her as a snake-haired, terrifying figure, Cixous asserts: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (1986, p. 885). Cixous develops the concept of women's writing, arguing that women must transcend the boundaries of patriarchal language, and that this process can be redefined through symbols, particularly mythological figures such as Medusa. In this sense, she warns women: "Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers [and] that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species. Break out of the circles ..." (p. 892). Within feminist theory, Cixous's approach aims to increase the visibility of women in both cultural and literary spheres by providing a renewed understanding of the representation of women.

Julia Kristeva acknowledges that the "other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (1982, p. 70). Women and sexuality, according to Kristeva, are often described through the concept of monstrous feminine and thus identified with abjection, which reflects "religious, moral and ideological codes" (p. 209) of marginalisation and stigmatisation. Confronting the frightening or repulsive aspects that are seen as abjection can provide an opportunity to manifest creative and transformative powers. Thus, when women encounter socially imposed negative representations, they may redirect fear and discomfort into sources of psychological resilience and creative expression by challenging and subverting these images. Consequently, from being originally "a source of evil and mingled with sin," abjection now "becomes the requisite for a reconciliation" and "a source of health" (1982, pp. 127-128). This transformative potential of confronting abjection thus underscores the capacity of women to reclaim agency, redefine cultural narratives, and convert socially imposed negativity into sources of empowerment and creative expression.

Grace Jantzen, while examining Kristeva's concept of semiotics in her *Becoming Divine*, argues that feminist thought should not only criticize the hegemony of the phallus but also develop a new imaginary horizon. She asserts that "the phallus can only be dislodged from its self-appointed missionary position as women find spaces for a feminist imaginary" (1999, pp. 193-194). Jantzen's

idea of dislodging the phallus through the expansion of the feminist imaginary provides a suitable intellectual ground for transforming these images in ways that both challenge patriarchal signification and open pathways to alternative symbolic orders. Extending the project of subverting patriarchal symbolism, Mary Daly transforms historically demonised female images into empowering mythic heroines. She conceptualizes this transformation through the metaphor of “alchemy,” arguing that the “base metals” of patriarchal myths can be transmuted through women’s solidarity and creative agency. Employing neologisms, wordplay, and esoteric language, she encourages women to discover their own labyrinths, reclaim past powers, and reactivate their capacities, fostering a collective feminist experience ignited by what she terms the divine spark and the fire of sisterhood (1990, pp. 32-34). On the other hand, ecofeminist Starhawk confirms that the serpent has been employed in patriarchal narratives to portray women as dangerous and evil. Once standing for life’s renewal and restoration, Starhawk observes, “the ancient snake, earth-dragon, serpent of the regenerating waters, now becomes the poison-dripping monster. The symbols of life-renewing female power are twisted to make female power seem dangerous and destructive” (1987, p. 62). Barbara Walker also develops a feminist mythographic counter-discourse, defining the serpent as “ageless” and “immortal” due to its ability to shed its skin (1983, p. 903). Emphasizing “the link between ‘woman’ and ‘devil’ in the patriarchal mind,” Walker argues that this association has been systematically exploited for “suppressing women legally, politically, economically, and psychologically” (p. x). However, in recent times, women who have become aware of this situation have started to gain a deeper understanding of their own inner feminine nature, long overshadowed by dominant masculine imagery (p. x). Considering these types of imagery as “essences” because “they do not represent characteristics necessary or essential to being female or male,” Carolyn Merchant asserts that “they are historically constructed and can be changed by exposing their presence and rethinking history” (2013, p. 21). In line with this understanding, she claims that Eve’s interaction with the serpent and with nature is a sign of curiosity and independence, which makes her as the first scientist and an original biologist (p. 21). Collectively, these feminist approaches subvert the historical stigmatisation and demonization of women through the serpent imagery and transform it into a site of aesthetic renewal, where women are celebrated for their creative and empowering potential.

### 3. REIMAGINING THE FEMININE: THE AESTHETIC RENEWAL IN *THE ESSEX SERPENT*

Inspired by the true legend recounted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century pamphlet *The Flying Serpent or Strange News out of Essex*, Perry’s *The Essex Serpent* adopts an aesthetic reconstruction of the serpent-woman image that coincides with the above-mentioned feminist critiques, subverting the mythic representations of women as monstrous or sinful. In this sense, Perry’s novel reinterprets the pejorative association between the serpent and women not as a frightening mythological relic that reflects stigmatized femininity, but as a symbol of rebirth, knowledge, and aesthetic renewal.

In the novel, Cora’s conflict with the Victorian gender roles is constructed as a counter-narrative that undermines the patriarchal association of femininity with passivity. Perry shapes Cora’s process of liberation and self-realisation around her symbolic identification with the snake,

and this identification, although it may seem stigmatising at first glance, acquires a transformative aesthetic form as the novel progresses. In her interviews, she portrays Cora as “a bit of a snake in the grass” (Perry, 2017a) and as a character for whom the serpent symbolizes “her desire to find rational explanations in a world which is confusing and full of change” (Perry, 2017b). However, while both Cora's strange appearance with muddy clothing and intellectual desires are stigmatised as abnormal by the conservative norms of Victorian society, Perry reconceptualises this stigmatisation as a transformative force for Cora's rebirth after her husband's death. Thus, the snake operates not merely as a malevolent symbol historically associated with women, but also as a generative force embodying the rebirth of the repressed woman.

Cora's transition from London to the rural landscapes of Essex is less a spatial shift than an epistemological breakout. The marshes and foggy shores of Essex create a liminal space outside the patriarchal control mechanisms. When Will Ransome asks her the reason for this breakout, Cora responds: “Liberty, I suppose. I lived so long under constraints. You wonder why I grub about in the mud - it's what I remember from childhood” (Perry, 2016, p. 167). This liminal space of freedom is related to what Kristeva calls ‘abject’ which lies outside the boundaries of culture, as the marsh represents the flooded, formless, and unbridled aspects of nature. Cora's orientation towards this space reveals both her endeavour to erode the cultural codes attached to her female identity and her desire to re-establish her repressed womanhood. Perry's portrayal of nature functions not simply as a decorative background; instead, nature emerges as a spatial dimension that makes Cora's self-discovery possible. The sense of peace Cora finds in these spaces and her experience of them as places of liberation, namely, her engagement with the abject, brings out her creative potential as a woman.

While Victorian culture regards women's production of scientific knowledge as improper and unnatural, Cora is described as “an unusual woman” who has “enthusiasm for the new sciences” (pp. 56-58). Her engagement with fossil collecting and geological research emerges as an act of resistance against the suppression of women's intellectual curiosity. This situation reproduces Gilbert and Gubar's angel/devil dichotomy, since Cora's desire for scientific knowledge, which transcends the traditional roles attributed to women, is sometimes found threatening in the novel. For instance, Cora's journey is thought of as “trouble” for “any diligent minister of the church” (p. 58) and, moreover, the hardware store owner in Colchester thinks her “mad as a hatter” (p. 70). Instead of repressing the fear of the unknown and chaos traditionally projected onto women, the author aims to aestheticize it, discarding the imposed identities of the ‘obedient woman’ and the ‘angel in the house’ prescribed by Victorian society. Marked by her explicit rejection of domestic confinement in her refusal to “sit at home planning supper and waiting for a new pair of shoes to arrive” (p. 50) and her resistance to “the obligation to try and be beautiful” (p. 106), this progressive transformation becomes the central aspect of her personality. In the course of her transformation, Cora no longer merely resists the normative roles but embodies a redefined femininity, one that captivates and commands the admiration of the male figures like Will and Luke.

Perry also criticizes the androcentric and exploitative structures of science in the Victorian period, enabling Cora to re-establish in a way that aligns with both nature and women's experiences. Thus, while scientific discourse is organised as a means of domination by the patriarchal ideology,

Cora constructs her own subjectivity by transforming this discourse. For Cora, “nothing is more important than to use your mind to its last degree!” (p. 166), and for this reason, she seeks to find a rational explanation for the legendary myth in Essex through observable data and empirical investigation. In doing so, despite being labelled as having a “masculine intelligence” (p. 56) through a gendered rhetoric, she is inspired by Mary Anning, whose fossil discoveries already challenged the boundaries of the established scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century (p. 180). In this way, science ceases to be a male-dominated sphere of power in the novel and is reconceived in alignment with women’s experience and intellectual engagement in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Underlining the difficulties behind the encounter of science with women's experience, the author invites the reader to face the fact that knowledge in the Victorian era was not independent of social and gendered contexts. Throughout history, science has often been produced through a predominantly Western male gaze, framed as universal norms and, particularly in the Victorian era, as a concern with natural order. In contrast, Cora reverses this perspective, reimagining it as an ethical and creative tool for her transformation at a time when science was employed as an instrument of power and patriarchal domination, which aligns with one of the central aims of feminist epistemology, namely the liberation of knowledge from patriarchal constraints.

Will is initially sceptical about Cora's scientific curiosity during the course of her transformation and considers rejecting any involvement in her researches: “he would not indulge a wealthy woman’s dabbling in the natural sciences, probably to the detriment of her spiritual health” (p. 114). However, Will’s growing attraction to Cora because of her intelligence results in a disruption in his belief system throughout the novel. This internal conflict manifests itself as he chisels the serpent figures on the church pews (p. 252). Unlike the Edenic narrative in the Bible, Perry presents Will’s attraction not as a temptation but as a form of redemption, since Cora, along with her own process of skin-shedding, guides Will in resolving his internal conflicts: “Without Cora, he finds his thoughts lack direction. What, after all, is the point of observing this, of encountering that, if he cannot tell her, and watch her laugh or frown in response?” (p. 308). As Merchant considers Eve as a “prototypic scientist” and “biologist” who “could hold the key to recovering Eden through a new science” (2013, p. 21), Perry presents Cora not as a serpent-associated sinful figure but as an agent of feminine wisdom, who reshapes both Essex and Will. In the novel, feminine intellectuality becomes an aesthetic object of pleasure for Will. Cora confesses to functioning as a mind disentangled from gender: “It’s why he prefers to write to me than see me — I’m only a mind, not a body: I’m safe as a child — don’t you see how I might prefer it?” (2016, p. 292). At this point, Perry turns to unravelling Victorian morality by associating Cora's intellectual desire not with erotic guilt but with creative pleasure.

The novel never confirms the physical existence of the serpent, presenting it instead as a construct of rumour and collective fear that circulates throughout the village of Aldwinter, where strange natural phenomena and unexplained deaths intensify the prevailing fear. The rumours, whose psychological impact on the townspeople deepens over time, not only enhanced the mythic presence of the Essex Serpent but also facilitated a process of projection whereby Cora became increasingly associated with the serpent itself. Naomi, the daughter of a fisherman, believes that Cora is connected to the Essex Serpent and everything was in order before Cora’s arrival:

They'd all been all right before she came, Jo and her with their spells and fires. *Probably she was a witch*, she thought: *wouldn't put it past her with a coat like that; probably the Essex Serpent was a familiar she'd brought with her [...]* *Probably sleeps with it tethered to the end of the bed*, she thought: *probably rides it [...]* *Probably gives it her breast at night!* [...] *It's probably here — on the step — outside the door*, she thought: *I bet she whistled for it like the farmer does with his dogs* (pp. 192-193; italics not mine).

Since her first arrival in Essex, Cora has become aware of the gendered mechanisms of demonization that shape people's worldview. Although Will refuses to acknowledge it, Cora feels that Essex remains suspended in the Early Middle Ages, a time in which the witch trials punished women for defying normative expectations (p. 123). Cora also feels that she might be held responsible for the chaos resulting from the Essex Serpent: "To think when I first came there was rarely anyone on the common, and I thought I'd see people look at me mistrustfully - as if it were all my fault! As if it had anything to do with me!" (p. 351). It seems that she grows anxiety about being made the scapegoat, echoing the long history of how women have been marginalized through negative associations. Cora gradually becomes, in the eyes of the villagers, both a reflection of nature's untamed power and a reminder of the supposed danger of unrestrained womanhood. She turns into a kind of symbolic other, someone standing just outside the social boundary, to be watched, restrained, or blamed. In the novel, the patriarchal ideology dominating Essex reflects the attitudes of the time, seeking to maintain order in an attempt to control Cora; however, Perry quietly reverses this pattern. Along with the uncovering of the truth behind the mythical creature, which also validates Cora's scientific reasoning, the stigmatization that she experiences after her arrival in Essex turns into power that transforms her. After it becomes clear that the Essex Serpent is not a demonic creature threatening sinful townspeople but rather a sunken ship and a body of a large sea creature washed ashore, Will addresses this truth in his Sunday sermon:

Only once has he mentioned the serpent- the double illusion of it, the falsity of their fear-concealing it in a kindly homily regarding Eden's garden. They leave in no doubt of having been foolish, but understandably so, and resolve to mind their tongues" (p. 414).

The collapse of this myth exposes the fragility of superstition and, at the same time, affirms Cora's faith in reason despite social hostility. As the villagers abandon their fear, Cora is no longer linked with the demonic or the destructive. She emerges as a woman who reclaims her agency through reason and resilience.

In reclaiming her agency, however, the collapse of the superstition is not the initial moment of liberation. Michael is projected as the embodiment of the patriarchal system, shaping Cora's identity through violence and domination: "[H]e'd formed her, at least in part -and what good ever came of self-loathing? 'Oh, he made me-yes,' she said, and memory unfurled like smoke from a blown candle" (p. 17). In order to convey how Cora finds herself trapped within oppressive frameworks after her marriage when she was seventeen, the author portrays Michael's tyrannical and authoritative nature in different ways. The nurses who are hired to care for him can only endure for one week and the last of them declares him to be a malevolent man: "*Il est comme un diable!*" (p. 14). Michael, on the other hand, sadistically inflicts a scar on her neck as a mark of his authority, turning it into an emblem of possession. For Michael, Cora is an object over which he has the right to give

harm and then compensate for the damage: "One day he said: In Japan they'll mend a broken pot with drops of molten gold. What a thing it would be: to have me break you, and mend your wounds with gold" (p. 18). The novel presents this recklessly insensitive attitude as the exact reasons behind the suffering Cora endures under patriarchal authority and the limitations imposed on her liberation. However, Dr. Luke Garrett, who observes the relationship between Cora and Michael during his visits to their home to treat Michael's disease, becomes "aware of a kind of energy in her, stored up and waiting release" and imagines that "her feet might strike blue sparks on the pavements" when Michael dies (p. 15). The narrative confirms the validity of Luke's view. As soon as Michael dies, which signals her liberation from patriarchal constraints, Cora does not pretend to grieve; on the contrary, considers this situation as an opportunity to leave her identity shaped by Michael. With this state of freedom, though granted not by choice but by fate, she disavows the gender-based roles constructed by society and, furthermore, reinforced through marriage: "The wonderful thing about being a widow is that, really, you're not obliged to be much of a woman anymore" (p. 55). This is the initial motive for Cora's renewal, which triggers her subsequent intellectual pursuits. Simultaneously, Michael not only signifies the initial point of Cora's stigmatization but also represents the skin that bears Cora's former identity. Consequently, while Cora attempts to take a journey to Essex in order to reconstruct her identity, she also takes the first step toward changing her skin.

In the novel, recently widowed Cora's chasing her dream in Essex is depicted analogously to the narrative of Eve's desire to obtain knowledge. While Eve is held responsible for the fall due to her curiosity about forbidden knowledge, women's engagement with knowledge in Victorian society is likewise viewed as a threat to social order. In a similar vein, Cora's attempt to become a palaeontologist and her belief that she can explain the Essex serpent through science challenge societal boundaries. The turmoil in the town is often attributed to her arrival and it is believed that it has been nothing but constant trouble ever since her arrival (p. 218). However, as Jeannette King claims, it is one of the fundamental purposes of the contemporary women novelists to "enter into a new dialogue with the Old Testament myths to try and break their hold on our imagination and beliefs by reworking them to construct more powerful and creative roles for women than the myths themselves provide" (2000, p. 33). Perry brings Eve back down to earth as figure of a woman, who, this time, overcomes her stigmatization and changes the skin imposed on her by the society. In her final letter to Will, Cora interprets this process as follows: "[...] then in the margins I draw the Essex Serpent and give it good strong wings to fly by [...] I am torn and I am mended" (2016, pp. 417-418). Her engagement with the forbidden knowledge and challenge to the patriarchal norms based on superstitions and final transformation into a self-realized woman becomes an apparent indication of aesthetic and intellectual renewal. Perry invites the readers to face the fact that Cora, as the shadow of a reimagined modern Eve, introduces knowledge to her world. Thus, as Mishel M. Caspi asserts, her story becomes a "celebration of wisdom, not a parable of moral weakness" (2004, p. 15). While Perry portrays Cora's transformation as a postmodern reaction, she also subverts the biblical chaos in the novel. In so doing, she points to her strict Baptist background: "The Bible is full of cracking stories! It taught me about language [...] My upbringing made me feel that anybody can understand massive ideas: eternity, goodness, darkness, light, the sublime" (Perry, 2018). Her

allusion to Genesis in the beginning of the novel, indicating the “darkness on the face of the deep” (2016, p. 5), Cracknell’s goats named Gog and Magog, the wreck of the ship outside Aldwinter called Leviathan, and the haunting of the Essex serpent illustrate the existence of chaos in the novel. The dissolution of the chaos pervading Essex is achieved through the key role assigned to Cora, who stands in the very middle of this turmoil. The novel, in King’s words, exemplifies a “revisioning of canonical male-authored texts, including the Ancient Classics and the Bible,” which “challenges the images of woman constructed by the literature of the past, the values inscribed in those images, and their enduring power” (2005, pp. 5-6). Consequently, Perry not only reinterprets the patriarchal narratives in terms of a feminist perspective, but also assigns Cora a key role in the reestablishment of order.

## CONCLUSION

The association of women with the serpent has remained a deeply entrenched patriarchal construct that surpasses the limits of a mere religious or mythological narrative in Western culture. Particularly in the story of Adam and Eve, the divine punishment for the desire for knowledge creates a cultural matrix, where the images of the serpent, the woman, and evil are interwoven. All in all, the vilification of Eve paved the way for misogynistic interpretations, turning woman into a scapegoat for the loss of Eden. The image of the serpent, once associated with intuitive wisdom and renewal, undergoes a transformation through Judeo-Christian reinterpretation that alters its meaning, contributing to the demonization of women, particularly of those who seek independence and knowledge. In this process, women are deemed mad and deviant on account of their intellectual pursuits, thereby leading to the theological legitimization of patriarchal power and social ostracism. The visibility of women in social and intellectual arenas is confined due to this social stigma, while obedience, silence, and conformity are valorised, constructing an idealized feminine identity. However, the conventional understanding is subsumed in Perry’s *The Essex Serpent* by a return to contemporary feminist rewriting, which portrays a renewed aesthetics of the serpent. The serpent becomes the projection of both the stigma imposed upon women and the potential for transformation and rebirth. The novel, on the other hand, depicts Cora as a strong character who reclaims her own being by breaking the patriarchal siege; that is, by shedding her skin. Abandoning her former identity along with the death of her husband, Cora follows the course of reason and scientific inquiry inherent within her, in defiance of the charges imbued with society’s superstitious beliefs. The validation of her scientific assertions at the end of the novel reveals the groundlessness of the demonological narratives referring to the serpent-woman image, allowing for a reinterpretation that subverts the Edenic fable. Through the resolution of the tension and conflict arising from fear and uncertainty, the novel intends to present the woman not as their source, but the architect of order based on wisdom. In so doing, Perry does not handle the woman and the serpent through an essentialist perspective; rather, she reconceptualizes them within a network of culturally constructed signs. The process of aestheticization serves to purify concepts of evil connotations, becoming the narrative of renewal, in which women re-establish their connections with nature, reason and self-consciousness.

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