

## Challenging the Victorian Nuclear Family Myth: The Incest Trope in Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*

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(Neo-)Victorian literature offers contradictory conceptualisations of the nuclear family. While it usually revolves around traditional heteroparental households, at the same time it portrays them as fragmented and deeply flawed. Guillermo del Toro's film *Crimson Peak* (2015) builds on domestic traumas, the dysfunctional family and the supernatural, three recurrent tropes in (neo-)Victorian Gothic fiction. My main aim is to explore how Del Toro exploits the incest plotline in order to subvert preconceived views on the idealised Victorian family. I first analyse the ancestral family house and the mother figure as the loci of family traumas. I then move on to examine the Sharpe siblings' incestuous relationship from a threefold perspective involving ethics, aesthetics and psychoanalysis, thereby showing that Del Toro exposes nineteenth-century family traumas that are still present in contemporary societies, so that audiences may become aware of these social issues and even take an active stance against them.

Keywords: neo-Victorianism; family traumas; dysfunctional family; incest motif; haunted house; mother figure

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### Desafiando el mito de la familia nuclear victoriana: El motivo del incesto en *Crimson Peak* (2015) de Guillermo del Toro

La literatura (neo)victoriana ofrece conceptualizaciones contradictorias de la familia nuclear, ya que generalmente gira en torno a hogares tradicionales heteroparentales pero los presenta como fragmentados y profundamente disfuncionales. La película *Crimson Peak* (2015) del

director Guillermo del Toro se basa en tres motivos recurrentes en la ficción gótica (neo) victoriana, los traumas domésticos, la familia disfuncional y lo sobrenatural. Mi objetivo principal es explorar cómo Del Toro utiliza la trama del incesto para subvertir las visiones preconcebidas e idealizadas sobre la familia victoriana. En primer lugar, analizo la casa ancestral y la figura materna como origen de los traumas familiares, para a continuación examinar la relación incestuosa entre los hermanos Sharpe desde un enfoque triple: ético, estético y psicoanalítico. Sobre esta base, argumento que Del Toro representa traumas familiares del siglo XIX que continúan siendo relevantes en la sociedad actual, con el objetivo de que los espectadores puedan tomar conciencia de estos problemas sociales e incluso adoptar una postura activa contra los mismos.

Palabras clave: neo-victorianismo; traumas familiares; familia disfuncional; incesto; casa embrujada; figura materna

## I. INTRODUCTION

Guillermo del Toro's neo-Victorian film, *Crimson Peak* (2015b), portrays an incestuous relationship in late Victorian England in order to challenge idealised views of the Victorian nuclear family. Set in rural England in 1901, this Gothic romance revolves around Edith Cushing, an aspiring American writer who falls in love with Sir Thomas Sharpe, a British aristocrat. After her father is brutally murdered, Edith marries Sir Thomas and moves with him to his family estate in England, Allerdale Hall, leaving her former suitor, Dr. Alan McMichael, behind. The film portrays the incestuous relationship between the Sharpe siblings, Thomas and Lucille, who suffered child abuse at the hands of their mother. The family mansion is now inhabited by the ghosts of the siblings' victims—namely, their mother and Sir Thomas's three deceased wives. *Crimson Peak* appropriates several nineteenth-century plotlines and character archetypes—such as the detective figure and the ghost story—and is inspired by Victorian classics, mainly Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (2013, 1-28), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* ([1847] 1987) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* ([1847] 2003).<sup>1</sup>

In *Crimson Peak*, the bond between Lucille and Thomas Sharpe replicates the siblings' incestuous relationship hinted at in Poe's tale. The protagonists in both works of fiction are trapped in a crumbling ancestral mansion, desperately trying to bring it back to its former glory. At the end, the Sharpe siblings meet the same fate as their counterparts in Poe's story: they die in their family home. In addition, the dysfunctional family ties and child abuse portrayed in the film echo the Brontë sisters' most celebrated novels. Thus, Thomas and Lucille were often locked up in the attic and regularly beaten by their mother as punishment, just as Jane Eyre was at her aunt's house and later at Lowood school. Moreover, they witnessed the gender violence that their father—who was absent for long periods, presumably dilapidating the family money—inflicted on their mother. Furthermore, the location of the central part of the film in a rural area in the North of England, with its inclement weather and dreary, Gothic scenery, seems to be inspired by the descriptions of the setting of *Wuthering Heights*. In fact, the incest plotline in the film appears to be triggered by the domestic violence that the siblings endured, as well as by the oppressive atmosphere they were surrounded by as they grew up.

Del Toro has been critically acclaimed for other Gothic films, such as the internationally lauded *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which is considered a companion to *The Devil's Backbone* (2001). More recently, he received two Academy Awards for the Gothic romance *The Shape of Water* (2017), set in Baltimore in 1962, where a mute cleaner falls in love with a humanoid creature. What all these Gothic films have in common is that they look back into the past in order to expose traumatic experiences that were concealed from public view. In fact, Keith McDonald and Roger Clark claim that "del Toro's filmic alchemy portrays the blending together of real-world historic trauma with

<sup>1</sup> Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) is quoted in this article from the 2013 collection of stories by Poe *Stories for Halloween*.

supernatural phenomena” (2014, 5). The historical setting of *Crimson Peak* allows Del Toro to deconstruct the Victorian nuclear family—usually depicted as dysfunctional in (neo-)Victorian fiction—and to exploit the incest motif in order to bring Victorian family traumas to the fore. Del Toro clearly has a vast knowledge of both high and popular culture, as proved by the fact that his “films are all inspired by Gothic literature [...] and some are very specifically engaged with the Victorian Gothic tradition” as well as with “fairy tales and magic realism” (McDonald and Clark 2014, 12).

Critics define Del Toro as a transnational director, whose production ranges from low-budget films—e.g., *Cronos* (1993)—to Hollywood blockbusters—e.g., *Hellboy* (2004) and *Hellboy II* (2008)—and whose “individual vision [falls] somewhere in between geographical spaces, genres and production models” (Tierney et al. 2014, 1). Furthermore, he usually places the heroine at the centre of a “bildungsroman narrative” (McDonald and Clark 2014, 15), which specifically applies to *Pan’s Labyrinth*, *The Shape of Water* and *Crimson Peak* itself. The protagonists of these films are young women whose tragic experiences allow them to face their inner and outer demons. Given their “macabre, twisted and often violent content” and the way they defy “conventions of gender and sexuality” (McDonald and Clark 2014, 8), most of Del Toro’s films target a mature audience. *Crimson Peak* indeed incorporates violent content and challenges heteronormative sexuality in its portrayal of the incestuous relationship between the two homicidal siblings. His films also deal with humans that interact with monsters that are “misunderstood and alienated by the human population” (McDonald and Clark 2014, 3), as in the case of Edith, who interacts with the female ghosts in *Crimson Peak* and comes to realise that they are her guardians and helpers rather than evil creatures.

In the following pages, I provide, first, an overview of the cultural context of neo-Victorianism. Next, I synthesise the main principles of trauma theory and its application within the field of neo-Victorian studies. Taking all this into account and through a close reading of *Crimson Peak*, I then examine how, by exploring the incest trope, among other family traumas such as gender violence and child abuse, Del Toro destabilises preestablished conceptions of the Victorian nuclear family. Ultimately, I argue, the film bears witness to these traumatic experiences in order to foster the audience’s empathetic engagement with the traumatised characters. This may eventually lead spectators to take a stance against the various kinds of domestic violence portrayed in the film.

## 2. NEO-VICTORIANISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In scholarly discourse the label *neo-Victorian*, coined by Dana Shiller (1997), has become the preferred denomination for postmodern rewritings of Victorian fiction. Generally considered to be a subgenre of so-called historiographic metafiction, a term introduced by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal work *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, neo-Victorian fiction includes “well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and

personages” ([1988] 2010, 5). Consequently, neo-Victorianism appears to contribute to a “postmodern engagement with history” (Arias and Pulham [2009] 2010a, xii).

The emergence of neo-Victorian fiction dates back to the 1960s, when the two novels that inaugurated the genre were published, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* ([1966] 1982) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* ([1969] 1998). However, it was not until the 1990s that neo-Victorianism achieved both popular and critical acclaim, thanks to the publication of A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990). From the 1950s onwards (Griggs 2018, 17), there has been a persistent flow of nineteenth-century heritage films and TV costume dramas, with recent examples including *Ripper Street* (Warlow 2012-2016), *Penny Dreadful* (Logan 2014-2016) and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (Ross and Langford 2015-2017), as well as filmic adaptations and appropriations, such as Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011) and Del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* (2015b) itself, among many others. It is also worth mentioning that neo-Victorianism on screen is now beginning to leave behind the marginal scholarly status it has had in previous years (Primorac 2018, 2). Mark Llewellyn defines neo-Victorian fiction as “those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period [...] to re-write the historical narrative of the period by representing marginalised voices, new stories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian,” and stresses its capacity to establish links between nineteenth-century and present-day societies by developing “creative dialogues with the past” (2008, 165). *Crimson Peak* serves this purpose clearly, as it places two female characters, the madwoman in the attic—the antagonist, Lucille Sharpe—and the Gothic heroine—the protagonist, Edith Cushing—at the centre of the story and gives them a voice in the text. Neo-Victorian narratives aim to critically engage with the nineteenth century rather than simply imitate or nostalgically look back to the past (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4), and *Crimson Peak* is also a prime example of that.

Due to its relative historical proximity, the nineteenth century is regarded as the point of departure of some of our current sociopolitical and economic concerns. Neo-Victorian authors revisit the Victorian period in order to address these contemporary anxieties, which include “questions of identity; of environmental and genetic conditioning; repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality; criminality and violence; the urban phenomenon; the operations of law and authority; science and religion; [and] the postcolonial legacies of the empire” (Sanders 2006, 129). *Crimson Peak* touches upon some of these present concerns, such as the construction of (fe)male identity through the subversion of traditional gender roles, the environmental conditioning of the Sharpe siblings in terms of the way the family mansion affects their behaviour and shapes them as violent criminals, and the disruption of repressed modes of sexuality in its portrayal of the siblings’ deviant relationship in a rather explicit manner.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Contrastingly, neo-Victorianism may also have a conservative bent, contributing to the construction of a strong sense of national identity at a time of immigration, globalisation and economic crisis and in the wake of the dissolution of the Empire (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010). Owing to the current state of political turmoil in the UK generated by Brexit, this component might attain a more prominent role in neo-Victorian fiction in the coming years.

Against this backdrop, I will analyse how Del Toro explores the dysfunctional family theme, in particular the incest trope, in order to challenge preconceived views on the Victorian nuclear household by giving voice to marginalised characters within the family, mainly the absent mother figure, the madwoman in the attic and abused children. Moreover, I will explore how his film subverts Victorian sexual repression by explicitly portraying deviant sexuality in the form of an incestuous relationship. In doing so, I contend that Del Toro creates a critical dialogue with the nineteenth-century past as he brings to the forefront social anxieties that were concealed from public view in the Victorian era and that still resonate in our contemporary societies. In the next section, I introduce the methodological framework employed for the analysis of the film—trauma studies—and I also discuss how this approach can shed some light on both family and sexual traumas in *Crimson Peak*.

### 3. TRAUMA STUDIES

Trauma theory started to gain prominence in the 1980s as a reaction against postmodern scepticism and relativism (Ganteau and Onega 2011). The practical application of trauma studies to contemporary fiction dates back to the groundbreaking work of a group of scholars associated with the Yale School of Deconstruction, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey H. Hartman and Dominick LaCapra, who applied the founding texts of trauma studies—by authors such as Josef Breuer, Sandor Ferenczi, Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet—to the analysis of Holocaust narratives and survivors' testimonies. The rise of the use of trauma theory in the study of contemporary fiction might derive from a need to verbalise, and so overcome, both collective and historical traumas (Ganteau and Onega 2013a, 1) and personal ones caused by violence exerted on sexually, racially and other marginalised groups. Ann Heilmann and Llewellyn assert that by verbalising their stories of trauma or by bearing testimony to others' traumatic experiences, survivors or witnesses might heal their emotional wounds and ultimately, in the case of survivors, come to terms with their traumatic pasts (2010, 37). Along the same lines, neo-Victorian fiction attempts to recollect and reshape the nineteenth-century past by *narrativising* the hidden personal experiences of Victorian characters.

The nineteenth century, a period ripe with profound historical transformations, has increasingly become a focal point for investigations on collective trauma and the possibility of cathartic *working through* in fiction. Indeed, E. Anne Kaplan claims that the temporal duplicity of neo-Victorian fiction lends itself well to “function as a belated reaction or ‘working-through’ of nineteenth-century traumas, as well as those of our own times, albeit more obliquely” (2005, 24). On the other hand, traumas that have a more personal and insidious component—such as family traumas—are also extensively explored in the neo-Victorian project. Motherhood and the domestic space of the home are key themes in neo-Victorian narratives of trauma, since they serve as “an important link to the generational past of the protagonists” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 28).

Llewellyn also points to the prominence of the incest trope and domestic violence—including child abuse and gender violence—in neo-Victorianism (2010). Furthermore, trauma theory foregrounds the tropes of haunting and spectrality, since phantasmagoric haunting occurs when a shameful, unspeakable event needs to be repressed or kept secret (Gruss 2014, 126). Spectral haunting has a pivotal role in neo-Victorian fiction and has been broadly studied (Arias and Pulham 2010b; Mitchell 2010; Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014). As has been made clear above, both family traumas and spectral haunting lie at the heart of *Crimson Peak*.

#### 4. DOMESTIC TRAUMAS IN *CRIMSON PEAK*: THE VAMPIRE MOTIF AND THE INCEST PLOTLINE

Neo-Victorian fiction tends to show interconnections between acts of historical violence and their long-term sociopolitical effects, yet it also presents more insidious kinds of trauma linked to individual experiences, such as family crises. This is the case in *Crimson Peak*, where Thomas and Lucille's personal traumas are rooted in their childhood. The Sharpe siblings come from an aristocratic family that has lost its social status and wealth, so that they find themselves in a precarious financial position and feel compelled to lead a parasitical life in order to survive. For centuries, the Sharpe family has owned clay mines that have now collapsed due to excessive mining over the previous few decades. Sir Thomas Sharpe has designed a machine that might revitalise them, but he needs funds in order to build it. He and his sister come up with a plan to raise that capital: they select wealthy, vulnerable heiresses with no living relatives for Thomas to seduce and, eventually, marry. Once the wives have legally transferred all their money to the siblings, Lucille poisons them and hides their bodies in the cellar. I argue that this parasitical lifestyle, where the Thomas and Lucille take advantage of well-off women and later murder them, may be considered a form of economic vampirism, which they practise in an attempt to regain their family's glorious past. The vampire trope has been extensively explored in Gothic literature, and there has been "a recent explosion of vampires in the media [...] within both the Gothic framework and the wider consumer context" (Piatti-Farnel 2013, 1), a trend that owes its popularity to the legacy of Gothic Victorian texts such as Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* ([1872] 2013) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* ([1897] 2000) (Piatti-Farnel 2013, 3). Del Toro had previously exploited the vampire motif in his opera prima *Cronos*—albeit in a more literal sense, given that the protagonist turns into an immortal creature that needs to feed on human blood in order to survive—as a metaphor to examine the socioeconomic relations between South America and the US (Davies 2008, 395).

As previously mentioned, *Crimson Peak* is set in 1901, a period marked by the transition from the Victorian to the Edwardian era. The first part of the film is set in Buffalo, New York, while the second half takes place in rural England. There is a sharp contrast in the way these two worlds are portrayed, especially regarding the

lighting and colours associated with the different settings and characters. As Antonija Primorac states, *Crimson Peak* could be considered “Guillermo del Toro’s flamboyant, colour-coded take on Gothic Victoriana” (2018, 133). In fact, when interviewed for the international film magazine *Sight and Sound*, Del Toro claimed that “the movie is divided into two—a golden passage which is modernity, and then a cyan blue passage which is Allerdale Hall. In the middle you have the colour red linking Lucille to the ghosts, to the ground” (2015a, 25). This aesthetic peculiarity seems to be common in both his Spanish-language films and his more commercial ones—such as *Hellboy I* and *II*—where there is “a notable use of colour, including contrasts of reds and golds with colder blues and greys” (Tierney et al. 2014, 2). *Crimson Peak* starts with a tracking shot whereby the camera follows Edith, the female protagonist, as she walks around the city of Buffalo (00:03:53). The elements in this mise-en-scène emphasise the characteristics that are normally associated with the New World, including its industrial and scientific progress, the hustle and bustle of a big city and its commercial activities. Del Toro makes use of daylight and there is a predominance of bright colours—oranges, light browns and pale pinks—with no shadows whatsoever. In contrast to this positive depiction of modern, urban America, rural England is portrayed as an economy based on natural resources and profoundly anchored in the past. Allerdale Hall is a run-down estate; its dilapidated house, submerged in a dark atmosphere, is surrounded by a gloomy, desolate landscape that contrasts sharply with the lively, jovial environs in Buffalo. When asked why he chose to establish this sharp distinction between turn-of-the-century America and England, Del Toro stated that

in 1901 Buffalo, New York, and America in general were practically futuristic. In 1901 Buffalo was the most electrified city in the world. Edith is using a typewriter, we see cars on the streets, we can hear the constant trains in the distance, there’s a telegraph, we hear phones ringing everywhere [...]. Then she travels to a world that is frozen in time. In fact, we made that point in the design of Thomas and Lucille’s clothes—they are 10 or 15 years older than anybody else’s because they are their parents’ clothes. So the idea was: can I pose Edith as the future, trying to break with the past and the guilt and the horror of that family? (2015a, 24)

As the director states, the idea that the siblings have remained frozen in their family past is reflected in their old, outworn clothes. When describing Thomas’s suit to her father, Edith suggests that it is smart and of very good quality, but quite old fashioned: “Did you see his suit? It was beautifully tailored, but at least a decade old [...]. And his shoes were handmade but worn” (00:11:58). The fact that the Sharpe siblings are so adamant about reactivating the family mines appears to be a vain attempt at returning to their family’s glorious past, which cannot be achieved in the new capitalist world. Throughout the film, however, Edith desperately tries to bring Thomas back to the

present, forcing him to break with his family past. At one point, she tells him: “The past, Thomas. You’re always looking to the past. You won’t find me there” (01:10:29).

As stated before, *Crimson Peak* is a colour-coded film, especially when it comes to the portrayal of the main characters. Thomas and Lucille wear dark outfits and lurk in the shadows, whilst Edith is always surrounded by light, bright colours. This chromatic contrast strengthens the positive portrayal of the female protagonist as innocent, fresh and full of life, whereas the siblings are depicted as corrupt, miserable and insidious. Along the same lines, Rose-Anaïs Weeber describes Edith as a heroine with “a pure heart,” a reflection of “what society or family deems she should be,” and claims that this depiction is conveyed through her visual traits (2018, 118). Contrastingly, the ever-present darkness that surrounds the Sharpe siblings reinforces the idea of the vampire plot, which is hinted at halfway through the film when Lucille and Edith are walking around a park on a sunny day and come across some dead butterflies. Lucille claims that in the natural world animals eat each other in order to survive: “Beautiful things are fragile... At home we have only black moths. Formidable creatures, to be sure, but they lack beauty. They thrive on the dark and cold” (00:24:20). When Edith asks her what the moths feed on, Lucille replies they eat butterflies. This exchange could be interpreted as a metaphor in which the black moths represent the siblings, who feed on innocent, bright creatures in order to survive and thrive in the world, with the butterflies standing for their female victims. In fact, Bernice M. Murphy asserts that “the Sharp [*sic*] siblings are vampires of a sort—‘Honeymoon Killer’-style financial leeches who travel the world targeting vulnerable but wealthy young women” (2016, 161). In addition, Del Toro argues that the chromatic contrast between the characters points not only to the siblings’ vampiric nature, but also to Edith’s transformation after she marries Thomas. Though Edith appears to be “golden” at first, “little by little her colours leach out until she is in white; they are literally sucking the blood out of her. I wanted the past to be represented by the colour red, which is the clay of the house and at the same time is the blood of the earth. It is about these aristocrats effectively sucking the blood out of the earth until it dries and even then, refusing to let it go” (2015a, 25).

The central locus of family trauma and ghost stories in (neo-)Victorian Gothic fiction is often the family home, since it is usually a space haunted by past tragedy and a female presence (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 35). Once Edith leaves modern America behind and sets foot in Allerdale Hall, she soon realises that the siblings come from a profoundly dysfunctional family and that their relationship is not as fraternal as it might seem. According to Emilia Musap, “ever since Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the mansion has been the very structure upon which the Gothic narrative is built” and “the site of family horror” where there is “a prosecuted heroine, literally or symbolically imprisoned within the confines of the four walls” (2017, 3). Del Toro has explored the haunted building trope in other films, most notably in *The Devil’s Backbone*, set in an old orphanage haunted by the ghost of a murdered child named

Santi. In *Crimson Peak*, the ancestral home is haunted by several female ghosts, namely Thomas and Lucille's mother and the former's murdered wives. At the end of these narratives, the Victorian house is usually abandoned or it collapses, the embodiment of "womb and tomb in one: a maternal legacy for both male and female heirs, an heirloom [...] which, passed from one generation to the next, threatens to repeat itself" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 36). Along the same lines, Musap considers Allerdale Hall a tomb, a place of death that is bound to fall apart, but also a womb, given that it is the place of origin of the siblings, "who eventually become unborn and fuse permanently with the very structure of the mansion" (2017, 11). Thomas and Lucille are bound to this family legacy, attached to a house they cannot leave behind, since it is the last remnant of their family's past glory, as Thomas himself confesses to Edith: "it's a privilege we were born into and one we can never relinquish" (00:41:31).

As Weeber (2018, 120) states, the ancestral home evokes Poe's in "The Fall of the House of Usher," since they are both located in dreary, desolate areas and are shrouded in gloomy, oppressive atmospheres. The elements of the *mise-en-scène* in these two works of fiction create a Gothic scenery, where the ancestral houses are run-down and crumbling. Moreover, the furniture is, in Poe's words, "profuse, comfortless, antique and tattered" and both houses could be described as "haunted palaces" (2013, 13). Just as the house of Usher has a fissure in its façade that eventually makes it fall apart, Weeber argues that in *Crimson Peak* "the crack is coming from below ground, from where the secrets are hidden from sight" (2018, 120). As Thomas explains to Edith, "we try to maintain the house as best we can, but with the cold and the rain it's impossible to stop the damp and erosion. And with the mines right below, well, the wood is rotting, and the house is sinking" (00:41:11).

Furthermore, the family house in (neo-)Victorian narratives can sometimes be an outer reflection of the characters' inner tribulations, with "isomorphic correspondences between the house and its inhabitants replacing the metonymic chain of association of the realist novel. Verisimilitude is sacrificed for the benefit of odd and uncanny effects" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 45). Thus, the ruinous state of the family house in *Crimson Peak* reflects the siblings' inner corruption and, as Weeber claims, acts as a mirror of its inhabitants' sins (2018, 120). Throughout the years, the house has absorbed the siblings' sexual transgressions and horrendous crimes, but also the violence they were subjected to as children. It therefore becomes a character in itself and is "anthropomorphised by being on several occasions identified as the active subject holding the characters as puppets or mannequins in its grip" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 45). In fact, Thomas points to these anthropomorphised characteristics of the mansion when he tells Edith that "the house breathes" (00:48:35).

In regard to the characters, Heilmann and Llewellyn claim that the protagonists of neo-Victorian narratives of family trauma tend to be archetypically "abandoned children, whose lives are profoundly affected by dysfunctional parental and sibling ties, and who must negotiate a precarious sense of self against the backdrop of past

and present family trauma played out over their bodies” (2010, 41). As noted earlier, Thomas and Lucille are orphans who suffered child abuse at the hands of their own mother, being locked up in the attic and frequently beaten, while their father was mysteriously absent. I argue that they try to cope with this family trauma by engaging in an incestuous relationship since they are alone in the world and can only find solace in each other. According to Llewellyn, the current fascination with the family taboo of incest in historical fiction set in the nineteenth century seems to reflect an “attempt to interpret a revised understanding of the domestic, and desiring, spaces of the (neo)Victorian family” (2010, 134). The presence of incestuous narratives in neo-Victorian fiction might also be derived from the contradictory conceptualisations of incest during the Victorian era—from both ethical and aesthetic points of view—that we have inherited and perpetuated. Llewellyn points out that “the period between 1835 and 1908, from the Deceased Wife’s Sister Act through to the Punishment of Incest Act, can be divided into four decades where incest was a question of ethics, morality and issues of legal (mis)conduct” (2010, 135).<sup>3</sup> During the following thirty years, Llewellyn adds, incest became “a structural, artistic and creative device or trope [that] played with, reinvented and reinterpreted these earlier ethical concerns” (2010, 134). There are several examples of both American and English novels that exploit the aesthetic potential of incest, such as Herman Melville’s *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* ([1852] 2014) or Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* ([1854] 1998). Finally, the contribution of psychoanalysis to the cultural construction of the incest taboo, particularly in the wake of the publication of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ([1905] 2017), is also worth mentioning. As is well known, Freud introduced the concepts of primary desire, narcissism and the Oedipal struggle, among others (Llewellyn 2010, 135), and claimed that the incest barrier sets in after the latency period, when social demands force the individual to focus their interests outside the family circle.

The conceptual triangulation between ethics, aesthetics and psychoanalysis underpins a tension in the representation and reinterpretation of the incest motif in neo-Victorian narratives such as *Crimson Peak*. From the ethical point of view, incest was constructed during the Victorian period as an immoral practice and a sexual deviation that was not socially acceptable, which is one of the reasons why Lucille and Thomas Sharpe are forced to conceal their forbidden romance. On the other hand, from a psychoanalytical perspective, the incest trope might be understood as a way to make repressed sexual traumas visible in order to overcome them. Historical fiction tends to be concerned with the lack of representation of sexual traumas in Victorian culture and its main aim is to unveil precisely those experiences that were concealed from public view in nineteenth-century texts. Consequently, by narrativising private traumas, neo-

<sup>3</sup> The Deceased Wife’s Sister Act (1907) made it legal for a man to marry the sister of his dead wife, which had been illegal in England since 1835 (Kuper 2009). The Punishment of Incest Act (1908) made it illegal for a man to engage in sexual intercourse with any female he knew he was related to (e.g., his sister, mother, half-sister, etc.) (Bailey and Blackburn 1979).

Victorian works contribute to the healing process, as they turn to the past to expose personal crises and so work through them. In *Crimson Peak*, the incestuous relationship is made fully explicit near the end of the film, when Edith catches the siblings having sexual intercourse. The open portrayal of the incest motif in neo-Victorian retellings of trauma has a potentially cathartic effect, given that “the traumas of the past—so often ignored at the time—must be written in order for us to come to terms with our collective history; we must write the traumas of the past in order to confront and ultimately deal with them” (Cox 2014, 140). Finally, at an aesthetic level, Jessica Cox draws attention to the sensationalist nature of some contemporary works that build on personal traumas and claims that “whereas such narratives may serve to highlight past wrongs, they might also be read as both opportunistic and voyeuristic, indicative of a contemporary fascination with personal narratives of trauma” (2014, 139). With regard to *Crimson Peak*, it could be argued that Del Toro’s use of the incestuous plotline partly capitalises on the morbid, voyeuristic expectations of contemporary audiences, even as it simultaneously asks them to bear witness to hidden past traumas.

The frequent revisitation of the dysfunctional nineteenth-century family in neo-Victorian film and fiction has also been linked to the fact that Victorian literature usually “revolves around flawed, fractured, dissolving, newly emerging (usually no less dysphoric) families: *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, *The Woman in White*, *The Turn of the Screw*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 65)—that is, around contradictory conceptualisations of the nuclear family, which we have inherited. In *Crimson Peak*, Del Toro clearly suggests that the traumatic experience of child abuse might have been what triggered the incest. According to Murphy, the sibling’s incestuous relationship in the film is a “response to the childhood abuse they sustained at the hands of their brutal father and cold-hearted mother” (2016, 161). In other words, Del Toro portrays Thomas and Lucille not as monsters, but as survivors of domestic violence. As Weeber states, del Toro “transforms these villains into victims; victims of the brutality of the past whose only goal is to survive in a world becoming more modern” (2018, 124). This appears to be another common feature in Del Toro’s films, where he portrays his nominal villains as morally ambiguous rather than defining them as unalloyedly evil (McDonald and Clark 2014, 3). The only love the Sharpe siblings ever experienced was from one another, and it is their perpetual solitude and interdependence that made them establish such a morbid bond. Lucille herself explains to Edith the nature of their romance: “but you should have seen him as a child, Thomas. He was perfect. So, from all his small infractions, from my mother’s cane, I protected him. I took so many beatings. And when she found out about us, well... The only love Thomas and I ever knew was from one another. In these rotting walls. Hiding” (01:38:56).

The mother figure is also a central character in trauma narratives, even if she is not physically present. As Heilmann and Llewellyn assert, “the key figure, who once brought the family into being, the mother, is identified by her absence, and is often replaced by a defective surrogate” (2010, 65). In the case of the Sharpe siblings, their

mother was murdered by Lucille, who then assumed her authoritative role. She controls and manipulates Thomas into marrying wealthy heiresses in order to keep the Sharpe mines and the family name going. When these women are no longer useful, she poisons them. It could be argued, therefore, that there is a reversal of gender roles throughout the film, as Lucille adopts traits that have traditionally been associated with men—authority, physical superiority and brutality—whereas Thomas displays attributes typically considered to be feminine—submission, compassion and empathy. Lucille is also the active villain, since she is the one that commits the horrendous crimes, whilst her brother remains a passive observer, merely seducing prospective victims that can provide them with the money they need. Jamil Mustafa explores the gender reversal in the film and describes Thomas as emasculated, since he “cannot provide for either his wife or his sister” (2018, 54)—neither as a lover nor as a provider—whereas Lucille is portrayed as “a penetrative and symbolically castrating, phallic mother surrogate” (2018, 55).<sup>4</sup> Khara Lukancic also points to the fact that gender reversal not only affects the siblings, but other characters in the film as well: “no longer passive and powerless, the female characters—Lucille and Edith—hold the agency. The male characters—Alan and Thomas—exist in the background as submissive or insignificant” (2018).

The siblings were not the only ones to be abused in Allerdale Hall. The film touches upon the social issue of gender violence, which was considered a private affair in Victorian England but has recently been brought to the forefront of public attention through the #MeToo Movement and feminist activism at large, which seek to give voice to survivors of sexual violence and challenge patriarchal “rape culture” (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019a, 1). Lucille tells Edith that her father frequently battered their mother, who was so seriously injured as a result of one of the beatings that Lucille had to nurse her: “I tended Mother in this bed. Father was a brute. He hated Mother. Broke her leg. Snapped it in two under his boot. She never quite healed. She was bedridden for a long time. But I cared for her. Fed her. Bathed her. Combed her hair. Rubbed liniment on her scars” (01:24:06). This confession reinforces the idea that the siblings grew up in a violent, abusive household and could rely only on each other in order to survive. Lucille hints at her and Thomas’s involvement in their mother’s death in her last promise to Edith, which comes across as ironically macabre: “But I made her better. I’ll do the same with you. I’ll make you better” (01:24:41). Nevertheless, their involvement in the murder is only confirmed once Dr. Alan McMichael, Edith’s physician and one-time suitor, arrives at Allerdale Hall in order to save her from the Sharpe sibling’s murderous intentions. He suggests that the perpetrator of Thomas’s mother’s death was actually Lucille, who he speculates was subsequently sent to a

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas’s efforts at saving the family business fail miserably, so he cannot support himself and Lucille and, therefore, depends on his wealthy wives to survive. As a lover, he is at first unable to consummate his marriage with Edith on the grounds of his incestuous relationship with Lucille. However, he eventually falls in love with his wife and manages to have sexual intercourse with her towards the end of the film. This makes his sister so terribly jealous and angry that she starts poisoning Edith’s food in order to get rid of her.

mental institution: “Sir Thomas, you were only twelve at the time. After questioning by the police, you were sent to boarding school. As for Lucille, at fourteen, her story is less clear. A convent education in Switzerland, the news account says, but I think a different kind of institution” (01:33:47).

In contrast with the prominent role that their mother seems to have played in the siblings’ lives, little is known about their father. Thomas tells Edith that he abandoned them after he lost the family fortune, leaving them in their mother’s care. As Musap (2017, 9) states, Del Toro does not place masculine authority at the centre of the narrative, so the heteropatriarchal dominant figure is absent in the film. As a result, the house becomes a feminised space controlled by the siblings’ mother and, later on, Lucille. This seems to confirm that, in narratives of family trauma, the mother is “the mark of trauma, literarily represented as the Urtext” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 65). In other words, the maternal figure appears to be the origin of the family crises and is, therefore, a key element to overcoming them. In *Crimson Peak* the mother was an authoritative, violent figure that triggered both the siblings’ incest and their murderous nature. Once they verbalise that domestic abuse—when they explain the origins of their incestuous relationship to Edith towards the end of the film—Thomas comes to realise the brutality that surrounds them and becomes able to move past it. On the contrary, Lucille cannot bring herself to forgive their mother and holds on to her unnatural connection with her brother. In the end, she cannot overcome her traumatic past and becomes trapped by it, both literally and metaphorically, as will be seen.

It is also worth touching upon the metafictionally symbolic role that the Victorian family house plays in neo-Victorian fiction. According to Heilmann and Llewellyn, it acts as a site “of both alienation and ultimate reconciliation” and constitutes a “central metaphor of the legacy of Victorianism in neo-Victorian fiction” (2010, 65). Therefore, neo-Victorian characters need to go back to the ancestral home as the central locus of their traumatic experiences. This is also the case in Del Toro’s film, where the family mansion is the place where the siblings experienced their childhood traumas and it keeps the secrets of the Sharpe’s violent past, as Sir Thomas’s wives are buried under the house itself. As a result, the house holds the key for Edith to uncover both the former wives’ deaths and the siblings’ past. Similarly, neo-Victorian authors manifest a need to revisit the Victorian era in order to uncover and come to terms with cultural traumas that have their origins in the nineteenth century.

Finally, concerning the siblings’ possible atonement, Thomas redeems himself at the end of the film thanks to his love for Edith. He tries to prevent his sister from hurting the protagonist, but his attempts at convincing Lucille to leave the family estate behind and start a new life with him and Edith infuriate his sister. Lucille feels betrayed by her brother and lover and stabs him to death. Nonetheless, at the end of the film, Thomas reappears as a ghost and helps Edith murder Lucille. This appears to be his final act of redemption, after which his ghost vanishes from Allerdale Hall to rest in peace. Lucille, on the other hand, is an irreclaimable character,

whose unrequited love and thirst for revenge make it impossible for her soul to be saved in the end. According to Musap, Lucille is “punished for her violent desires and the disruption of the patriarchal system through the incestuous relationship between herself and Thomas and through the internalisation of patriarchal norms by assuming the position of the male villain” (2017, 12). Consequently, she is the only remaining ghost haunting Allerdale Hall, trapped within its rotting walls for all eternity. However, in spite of Edith’s apparent triumph over the siblings’ vampiric evil, there is no sense of closure in *Crimson Peak*. This, according to McDonald and Clark, is a common trait in Del Toro’s films, where “although our protagonists may prevail, this is never a Hollywood happy ending involving a restauration [*sic*] of order” (2014, 3).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In recent decades, the rise of neo-Victorian fiction and cinema has revealed nineteenth-century personal crises that still resonate in present-day societies, thus giving contemporary audiences the opportunity to address traumatic issues from a temporal distance. In *Crimson Peak*, Del Toro recovers nineteenth-century marginalised voices and allows them to verbalise traumatic family experiences that have current relevance—including incest, child abuse and gender violence.

The legacy of personal traumas that originated in the Victorian nuclear family reverberates in neo-Victorian works of fiction. In this article, I have explored the family traumas experienced by the Sharpe siblings in the neo-Victorian film *Crimson Peak*. First, in the wake of the socioeconomic transformations that were taking place at the end of the Victorian period, the Thomas and Lucille are condemned to a parasitical life—or to live as vampires—and take advantage of lonely, wealthy women in order to attempt to recover their family’s glorious past. Two recurrent motifs in neo-Victorian Gothic fiction, the haunted house as the central locus of family traumas and the mother figure as their source, are revisited in *Crimson Peak*. The incestuous relationship the siblings engage in can be read as a way to cope with those traumas.

As mentioned in the article, the incest motif can be conceptualised from a threefold perspective: ethical, aesthetic and psychoanalytic. Neo-Victorian fiction and film draws on these three different approaches in an attempt to challenge idealised constructions of the Victorian family, as well as expose concealed family traumas. By confronting them, contemporary audiences might reflect on such nineteenth-century social concerns from a chronological and ethical distance and extend their empathy towards trauma survivors in fiction. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, such ethical reflection might lead viewers to take an active stance vis-à-vis similar traumatic experiences undergone by survivors in the present world, outside fiction.

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