

Neo-Victorian Wasted Lives and Detection in Lee Jackson's *A Metropolitan Murder* (2004)

In one of his seminal works, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004), Zygmunt Bauman defines the idea of “wasted lives” as a ripple of modernity creating the figure of “the outcast”. According to him, the production of “human waste” - or more precisely, wasted lives, the “superfluous” populations of migrants, refugees and other outcasts - is an inevitable outcome of modernisation. This notion of wasted lives unravels the impact of this transformation on our contemporary culture and politics and shows that the problem of coping with “human waste” provides a key for understanding some otherwise baffling features of our shared life, from the strategies of global domination to the most intimate aspects of human relationships. However, we have many of these consequences in common with the Victorians. They believed themselves to be the paragon of civilisation and progress, whereas, at the same time, a growing population of “undesirable people” was invading their public life and culture, representing a threat to their class values.

On the other hand, stigma has become an outstanding marker of contemporary and past populations that have suffered discrimination for various social and political reasons. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, stigma can be defined as “a mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a person or thing; a ‘brand’”. In the light of this concept, Imogan Tyler in his work *Stigma, The Machinery of Inequality* (2020) reflects on how stigma changes the ways in which people think about themselves and others, and on how this concept represents an assault on human dignity through its technologies of division and dehumanisation. Victorians believed that people living in poverty had chosen their fates, so their disenfranchisement and distress was the result of their poor behaviour, indiscipline and shamelessness.

Neo-Victorianism has come to re-write the Victorian past, focusing on recovering the gaps in the traces and the archives and hearing the voices of those people whose lives were considered wasted and whose bodies had stigma inscribed as a scar of their lack of humanity. Poverty and prostitution were some of the most important concerns for the Victorian mind. At the same time, violence against women was another issue that provoked social uproar, especially when murder in strange circumstances happened. Many of the victims of this gender and sexual violence were fallen women marked by the stigma of their lack of respectability. Their bodies were disposable bodies, and their lives were considered wasted lives not deserving the human condition.

A Metropolitan Murder (2004) is part of Lee Jackson's neo-Victorian trilogy whose protagonist Inspector Decimus Webb has as his aim to solve mysteries associated with the dark side of Victorian London. Also, he tries to restore order in the metropolis and clean it of the contamination and pollution that poverty and depravity convey. These characteristics find their echo in our current societies in the wasted lives of individuals who belong to the category of the “outcasts”. The aim of this paper is to analyse the lives of women in the Victorian past who carried the stigma of poverty and prostitution and were victims of all kinds of violence and discrimination, to conclude that they find reflection in our current societies which have a similar avidity for crime news and detection.

References

- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Polity Press, 2004)
Tyler, Imogan. *Stigma, The Machinery of Inequality* (Zed Books, 2020)