Female Protagonists Across the Centuries: Moll Flanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sarah Miles

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Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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1. Introduction

It can be argued that female sexuality has always been a controversial topic, and that has been widely reflected in literature. The purpose of this paper is to give insight into representations of female sexuality in British fiction, considering the different historical, political, and social circumstances in which they were written. A chronological analysis of novels written in different historical periods reveals the way female sexuality was portrayed, and how it was perceived by writers, critics, and readers. The selected novels, *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe (18th century), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (19th century) by Thomas Hardy, and *The End of the Affair* (20th century) by Graham Greene, feature female protagonists considered as 'sinners' in the eyes of the society they live in. In each novel, the heroine deals with moral norms and restrictions linked to female sexuality. Their choices and their way of life, as we will see in my analysis, are not seen as 'appropriate' due to the perception of female sexuality at the time each of the novels was written. As Virginia Woolf accurately observes in her important essay "A Room of One's Own", masculine values tend to pervade literature, regardless of the gender that is being portrayed (62). This paradox gives rise to a pivotal issue: Women were always socially marginalized and under-represented, but in literary works, they are very often the main protagonists, much like our three heroines.

Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* reflects the stormy tension between rising individualism and prevailing societal conventions as the British novel began to take shape in the 18th century. At the time, women were expected to conform to strict social norms, and their roles were primarily limited to the domestic sphere. Born within the confines of Newgate Prison to a mother who was herself incarcerated, Moll Flanders is thrust into a life where she must rely on her intelligence and attractiveness to navigate the socioeconomic terrain. She shows the harsh realities of a woman's restricted options as well as the nexus of sex and survival. The novel

provides a glimpse into the complexities of female sexuality and the challenges that women face in a society shaped by traditional norms and expectations.

The Victorian era, which was generally linked with stringent moral norms and prudence, was the time when many novels explored the intricacies of sexual urges. Despite some advancements, Victorian society demanded women to be virtuous, modest, and docile, chiefly as wives and mothers. Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* challenged Victorian norms by addressing the catastrophic effects of Tess's sexual misdeeds in a hypocritical society. The novel tells the story of Tess who suffers sexual abuse and then gives birth to a child who dies. From there, her life takes a turn for the worse, and we continue to see her face one hardship after another until she breathes her last breath.

Throughout the 20th century, literary explorations of sex and sexuality and changing gender roles took centre stage. With its vivid representations of an adulterous romance, Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* explores the emotional consequences and complexities of relationships. The novel, published in 1951, is set in London during and after World War II. The main protagonists, Sarah and Maurice, are involved in an illicit love affair. The impact of the war is visible not only in the city's physical destruction but also in the characters' fractured lives, mirroring the disillusionment and disorientation experienced by many in the post-war era. Sarah's relationship with sexuality and faith is more intricate. She finds pleasure in sex without guilt, but this eventually leads to religious devotion. This religious devotion is what keeps her from indulging in further intimacy with her lover, Bendrix.

In this paper, I will try to demonstrate how literature both reflects and shapes societal perceptions of women and their sexual identities. My paper will be divided into 6 sections in which I will examine various aspects of female sexuality portrayed in the novels under discussion here.

2. Women: A mirror for men no more

For centuries, women in literature have often been portrayed as reflections of men's desires, motivations, and narratives. In *A Mirror for Men*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff uses some of Freud's theories to explain how women functioned as a reflection of men in literature. Freud established two types of women. "There are 'good' women – for whom he feels fondness and respect; and there are 'bad' women who arouse him sexually" (208). This title alludes to the transformation of women characters from passive mirrors that merely echo male perspectives to dynamic individuals with agency, complexities, and stories to tell. It encapsulates the literary journey of women breaking free from the confines of antiquated roles, stepping into the spotlight to reshape narratives and challenge traditional expectations, including those related to female sexuality. Griffin Wolff says that in literature, these projections manifest as archetypal representations of the chaste woman that mirrors a man's self-control (his Superego), and the alluring woman that reflects his desires and fantasies related to female sexuality (his Id) (208).

Understanding the origins and roles of these stereotypes brings their key characteristics into focus. In Griffin Wolff's opinion, although literature often seems to be centred on women, it is frequently the man's reaction to the woman that is the focus. For instance, in Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere*, he wrote sonnets to Laura and the emphasis was on her impact on him. She is also an external conscience according to which he judges himself and his life. This attributes a significant power to women, as evidenced by the man's response to them, highlighting the connection between female agency and sexuality in literature. The chaste woman is associated with positive elements in a man's life, inspiring virtuous actions, while the sensuous woman is linked not only to sexuality but also to less virtuous behaviours. The language used to describe these women mirrors moral judgments and their physical traits, like hair and skin colour, are often intertwined with their sexual identities (e.g., Chaste women are blond and have fair skin while sensuous women have dark hair and eyes). Griffin Wolff remarks that the sensuous

woman's characterization stems from her impact on men, arousing them and influencing them towards "sinful" behaviour, disrupting domestic arrangements (209). In literature, female characters who do not fit in, often meet predictable fates like death, leaving, or entering a convent:

> How many girls have made their lives miserable by trying to shape themselves into one or another of these caricatures of human nature? How many have thought that they might be virtuous or sexual but not both? How many have been counselled into emotionalism (and scorned for their lack of intellect)? How many have feigned stupidity lest they frighten suitors by their unfeminine intelligence? (Griffin Wolff 2018)

Griffin Wolff asks a series of questions, not to show her disagreement with the facts but rather the effect it had on real girls and women. This perception of women as virtuous or sensuous might not offer deep insights into women's psyche, but it reveals much about men and their attitudes toward female sexuality. The same applies to all these stereotypes. These portrayals often expose men's dilemmas and propose imagined solutions: "These are women – not as they are, but as men wished they were" (Griffin Wolff 218).

The heroines that I am going to analyse in this paper, Moll Flanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sarah Miles, challenge literary portrayals of women described by Griffin Wolff above. They show diversity and challenge black-and-white characterizations. This paper seeks to move beyond the traditional dichotomies that have often confined women to mere reflections of masculine desires or societal norms.

3. Desire Beyond Decorum: Female Sexuality in Neoclassical Novels

Moll Flanders finds its place within the Neoclassical era, a period characterized by a revival of classical antiquity styles and values, when "the ideal of womanhood was inevitably low" (Hill 89). This era was marked by a growing emphasis on reason, order, and the pursuit

of knowledge—attributes often associated with the Age of Enlightenment. It was a time when society was grappling with the transition from older forms of prose fiction to the emergence of the novel as a distinctive literary genre. Social expectations and norms placed significant constraints on the behaviour of women.

Women were expected to conform to a strict code of conduct that revolved around notions of virtue, modesty, and submission ("Status of Women in 17th Century Neo Classical Age"). According to Hill, it was held that women were made for pleasure and domestic use (89). Proper behaviour for women meant adhering to these ideals, which were deeply rooted in the prevailing patriarchal society. Marriage was often seen as the final goal, and women were expected to seek husbands who could provide financial security and social status. According to Hill, women were typically expected to focus on roles and activities that did not involve intellectual pursuits, and their education was limited to acquiring the knowledge necessary to better support and entertain men in their needs and leisure activities (89). Deviating from these norms was considered improper and could have led to social ostracism and moral condemnation ("Status of Women in 17th Century Neo Classical Age").

Public reaction was often characterised by a blend of intrigue, moral consideration, and conformity to traditional norms. Due to the inherent character of human nature, even when these subjects were covered in a more subdued manner, readers were still naturally drawn to themes of love, relationships, and sexuality, particularly those involving female characters. In neoclassical literature, female characters were often represented as either virtuous and pure or as seductive and dangerous temptresses ("Status of Women in 17th Century Neo Classical Age"). The portrayal of female sexuality was often framed within the dichotomy of Freud's "Madonna/Whore" complex, where women were either seen as "pure" and "nurturing" or as "tainted" sexual objects to be feared and avoided (Burk). The period was distinguished by a heavy focus on moral principles and virtue. As a result, both readers and the public frequently

assessed novels according to how closely they adhered to these values ("Status of Women in 17th Century Neo Classical Age"). Novels that defended established moral principles and encouraged good behaviour were typically highly accepted, but those that were seen as questioning these principles could have encountered criticism or controversy ("Status of Women in 17th Century Neo Classical Age"). Even subtly addressing sexual themes in neoclassical literature could have led to discussions and arguments among readers and literary groups. These debates were frequently focused on the moral consequences of the heroine's choices and deeds.

It is important to note that the portrayal of female sexuality in neoclassical literature was heavily influenced by the perspectives and biases of the male authors of the time. According to Hill, female writers faced significant limitations and barriers to publication, which further limited their ability to depict a nuanced and diverse range of female sexual experiences (155). To uphold moral and social norms, authorities in the neoclassical era censored and controlled the publication and dissemination of literature. As a result, if some books were thought to be improper or insulting, they might have been changed, censored, or even prohibited.

3.1 Moll Flanders: "I exchang'd the Place of Friend for that unmusical harsh-sounding Title of Whore."

Danie Defoe primarily wrote to cater to the growing mass market of his time, that is 18th-century Britain, producing various works without distinction. For him, writing was a commodity, and his narratives reflected a world commodified from top to bottom. According to Eagleton, Defoe was not a literary figure as such; his writing was hurried, simple, and direct – almost factual reportage, devoid of awareness of its construction. Defoe's language represents "the idiom of the people", focusing on things themselves rather than ornate wording As stated

by Eagleton, Defoe's stories are rich in incidents and adventures, compensating for the lack of elaborate description (22). We can see that his creativity is remarkable, concentrating on the practical utility and value of objects, not their sensory qualities. While sensuality is present, especially in *Moll Flanders*, true sensuousness is absent.

A significant portion of Daniel Defoe's narrative in *Moll Flanders* centres on the intersection of sexuality and wealth. The novel employs the character of Moll to underscore the complex interconnection between money and sex, ultimately asserting that women like Moll often struggle to disentangle these two elements, which we will see later is not the case with the other two heroines. This narrative also presents the unrealistic nature of societal expectations for women's financial independence and sexual purity.

The author exhibited compassion towards the prostitute (Novak 202), much like Hardy did with Tess d'Urberville. He argues that her life is tough, challenging the idea that she finds pleasure in her profession. When writing about women's transition into prostitution, he blames the man who initiated it as the main culprit. While Moll is not strongly against it, the man who tempts her holds more responsibility according to Defoe. This does not apply to Tess, who was seen as the culprit and not the victim, or Sarah, who put her decision in the hands of religion. Needless to say, we need to take into consideration the time and circumstances in which the heroines lived. In Victorian England, women were expected to be pious and obedient. Tess was tempted by men and consequently seen as a sinner for not following the norms of Victorian society. As for the 20th century, adultery was not perceived as sinful as it was in earlier times.

Defoe observes that, unlike other passions that can be controlled, sexual instinct remains beyond the reach of reason, resulting in a universal human comedy. In *Moll Flanders*, a significant portion of the narrative explores the comedic aspects of sex, love, and marriage, revealing Defoe's mixed sympathies. He recognized the disadvantaged position of women, who could not secure a husband without money and often became subservient after marriage.

Defoe's suggested remedy was for women to acquire skills akin to men, adapting to a male-centric world. Moll embodies a somewhat masculine disposition, although primarily embracing traditional feminine roles.

Defoe's concept of an ideal marriage remains understandable—a union based on love, with a supportive and understanding wife and a husband who serves as both a companion and a provider. Ideally, they should share the same religion and hold religious values. However, the author rarely articulates this ideal explicitly. Instead, he seems to accept pragmatic compromises. Polygamy and desertion are not depicted as the gravest of sins but rather as following the natural order, whereas incest is viewed as contrary to natural law. Moll's strong aversion to her incestuous marriage with her brother arises from this natural repulsion, even overshadowing her desire for security. "I committed adultery and incest with him every day in my desires, which, without doubt, was as effectually criminal in the nature of the guilt as if I had actually done it" (Defoe 61). Here Moll makes a crucial distinction between criminal intent and criminal behaviour. The results of contemplating theft and the results of theft themselves are completely different. But is adultery subject to the same limitations? Here is what she thinks: "There was something horrid and absurd in their [men's] way of sinning, for it was all a force even upon themselves; they did not only act against conscience, but against nature" (Defoe 66).

According to Van Ghent, *Moll Flanders* is either a compilation of tabloid-like anecdotes haphazardly combined with the moral beliefs of a financially struggling individual, but an earnest yet muddled soul. *Moll Flanders* could be a remarkable novel, structured coherently, unified, and given shape and significance through a sophisticated network of ironies. Van Ghent ultimately leans toward the latter, labelling it a great novel because of the pleasure we derive from rereading it. The analysis easily comes across as an ironic structure, and the enjoyment it brings, provides strong justification for this stance. Therefore, pondering Defoe's intent and

authenticity may neither enhance nor diminish the novel's core. Its fundamental nature remains the same. (42)

Female characters like Moll live on the edge, often barely getting by and adapting to the unpredictable world around them, while Tess as a Victorian woman, as we will see later in my analysis, is poor but never even thinks of resorting to prostitution. For Moll, sex turns into a form of currency, serving both within her marriages and her professional life, allowing her to establish her position within society. If we were to ask Moll for her opinion, she would say that "if a young woman have beauty, birth, breeding, wit, sense, manners, modesty, and all these to an extreme; yet if she have not money, she's nobody" (Defoe 23). It is obvious that all the virtues that one possesses hold little value if they are not accompanied by wealth. In the case of Moll, an impoverished orphan lacking financial resources, she must seek alternative paths to ensure her security. Furthermore, her perception is that a woman's societal value hinges upon her purity and virginity. This notion becomes challenging for her as she accumulates five marriages over time. When faced with financial hardship and the absence of a husband, Moll's desperation drives her to adopt criminal means to survive, leading her into twelve years of prostitution.

Sex and money are linked from the moment Moll experiences her first true love, suggesting that the two are inseparable. She recalls how the older brother, the son of the affluent woman who takes Moll in, throws her down and kisses her extremely brutally the first time he makes a move on her. "He put[s] five guineas into my hand and went away" (Defoe 27). The older brother and Moll develop a sexual relationship, and he vows to marry her someday, but Moll has her concerns. He offers her one hundred guineas to persuade her and pledges to give her that sum of money every year till they get married. Once again, his promise of marriage implies a direct link between money and sex. By giving her even more money "for the Freedoms I have taken with you" (Defoe 57), he leads her on to cover up the fact that he has no plans to

marry her. By engaging in a sexual relationship with her, he appropriates her virtue. Sex becomes currency in a more literal sense later, once Moll turns to prostitution, which emphasises the link between sex and money even more.

Moll's disregard for the years spent in domestic life with partners like Robin or a bank clerk creates a disturbance for sentimental bourgeois critics. However, the novel's values rooted in economic productivity align with Moll's inaction during these periods. "One incident symbolically suggests: a mattress emblem of sex and procreation – falls on Moll during a fire, pinning her down for a frighteningly long period – as if dead and neglected" (Chaber 218). The issue is that, beyond marriage, a woman was essentially an economic nonentity. In the novel's early sections, Moll focuses on her capital, but her unmarried status prevents her from utilizing it productively; she needs to invest it in a husband who can do so. By doing so, she proves that women knew better than to associate sexuality with pleasure. They associated sexuality with personal gain, which was possible only if linked to a man.

After her first husband Robin dies, she relocates and changes her name to Mrs. Flanders. This suggests that Moll is open to using prostitution to gain wealth and status. Her nickname "Moll" is slang for a woman with a bad reputation, given by her partners in crime and likely other prostitutes. Upon meeting the Gentleman, Moll recognizes that he can help her escape poverty. She decides to sleep with him to secure his assistance, as she knows no other way to do so. Moll acknowledges that without money, her only assets are her body and sex, leaving her no alternative for stability. After the death of her fifth husband, the banker, she is once again alone. She decides to continue surviving by exploiting her sexuality and turning to theft, which leads to her eventual arrest and imprisonment. Defoe's portrayal of Moll illustrates that she faces an impossible dilemma: she must have money while also preserving her sexual purity. This creates a conflict between these seemingly virtuous ideals.

The attributes that characterize Moll as a rogue and a sex worker imply that she is not bound to any one man's possession. In the fictional world of the novel enduring relationships are a rarity. Moll adeptly manages her sexuality, effectively functioning as an entrepreneur in this realm, using her own body as a means of trade. Moll is willing to exploit her attractiveness and quick intelligence in ways that may involve treating sexual relationships or encounters as transactions or commodities. Eagleton remarks that female sexuality within a patriarchal society becomes synonymous with dominance, gratification, ownership, and utilization (23).

4. "No sex, please, we are Victorians"

The Victorian era is primarily known as the age of the novel. This middle-class form of literary art was bound to flourish as the middle class rose in power and importance. This was due to the steady increase of the reading public as well as the growth of lending libraries, the development of publishing in the modern sense, etc. The novel was the best way to present an image of life lived according to societal moral values, like those that the readers experienced, and this was the kind of life that middle-class readers desired to read about. It is very difficult for modern-day readers to imagine the level of sensitivity and censorship when it comes to any kind of sexual matter in the Victorian era. Jackson highlights this as ironic, given the fact that Victorian women remained clueless about sex up until their first marital night and yet few Victorian men were known for not having sex before marriage (85). On the other hand, a woman who had indulged in sexual activities before marriage was considered "a fallen woman". This meant that she was considered an outcast and had no chance of getting married. In the introduction to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Mallet writes that an English law from 1857 states that a woman could be divorced for adultery, but a man could not (ix). Such double standards can be seen in literature as well.

The readership was mostly female, which meant if women were to stay ignorant and virgins, men would have needed to be those who had a say in what could be published. After all, what could be expected from men who let women read a censored version of Shakespeare yet had "the [explicit] works of Sophocles, Homer, and Ovid" ready for English schoolboys to read from?" (Jackson 85). To say that the British society of the time was hypocritical is an understatement.

4.1 Tess of the d'Urbervilles: "She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself"

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a prime example of the aforementioned attempt to censor books portraying female sexuality so as to keep female readers in the dark. Jackson claims that Hardy made a deal with a newspaper syndicate to publish the novel in instalments, however, the syndicate soon gave up on the idea when they found out Tess gave birth to an illegitimate baby (86). Other publishers refused Hardy for the same reason and in the end, Hardy had to censor parts of the novel and struck a publishing deal with *The Graphic* magazine. As Hardy himself anticipated, his portrayal of a sexualized young girl in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* caused controversy for its "improper explicitness" (F.E. Hardy 290). The excessive sensuality of both the main character and her rural surroundings was criticized. Illustrations in *The Graphic* capitalized on Tess's sexuality and her desire for Angel Clare. In an illustration drawn by Professor Hubert Herkomer and his pupils, Tess is illustrated as torn

between confessing her relationship with Alec and accepting Angel's marriage proposal.

Fig. 1. Herkomer et al., Tess Flung Herself down upon the Undergrowth of Rustling Spear-grass as upon a Bed

The novel was eventually published in a book form, in Hardy's original version. Readers and reviewers were horrified beyond meaning, criticizing Tess and praising Angel. In the "Explanatory Note to the First Edition", Hardy openly states that the only ones to read the book should be the ones who can handle the truth:

> I would ask any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St Jerome's: If an offence come out the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed. (Hardy 7)

As already mentioned, both Defoe and Hardy were fond of their heroines. In Hardy's case, he does not only try to defend his novel as worthy of reading, but he also tries to defend

his heroine. Mallett says that Hardy grew fond of Tess over time and was glad his companions were won over by the affections of "Tess the Woman" (v). Also, for the original edition of the book (1891), Hardy added a subtitle in defence of Tess: "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented". In a letter Hardy wrote to R. Noel, he says that "the heroine was essentially pure – purer than many a so-called unsullied virgin: therefore, I called her so" (Hardy et al. 267). *Tess of the d'Urbervilles'* sexual morality was very contentious in its day. It was unusual to read such a sympathetic life story of a 19th-century "fallen woman".

When we are introduced to Hardy's Tess, she is wearing white with a red ribbon in her hair, taking part in an ancient fertility ritual called "club walking". In her essay "Sexuality and Desire in Tess of the D'Urbervilles" Higonnet explains that in this ritual, maidens of all ages carry willow wands to a green area for dancing. This connects Tess to both the land and classical myths, representing both purity and being taken to the underworld. Tess's complex qualities, both alluring and modest, mirror the nature of the Vale of Blackmoor, which is fertile and sheltered. Tess's circumstances at the beginning are full of contradictions – she is virginal but about to be put on the marriage market by her mother to save the family. Eagleton mentions the interesting way that we are introduced to Tess Durbeyfield. By highlighting the two opposing parts of herself – we see her at a dance, where her body expresses itself fully, and her face is described as a clear book that reveals the different stages of her life (135).

Tess is torn between how she perceives herself and how she appears in the gaze of others who objectify and sexualize her. This gives her character an ironic and tragic note. While she is fully aware of her presence and vitality, she feels others do not recognize it, causing her true self to remain hidden. This differs from Moll who does not appear to be troubled by being objectified. Eagleton suggests that the body represents both the physical and spiritual realms (134). When applied to Tess, it raises the question of whether her physicality reflects her inner spirit, or if there is a contrast between the two.

The novel switches between seeing Tess as an object of desire and showing real sympathy for her. She is both a woman with her own identity and something for readers to consume. Tess is not seen as a complete person; she is either admired for her spirit alone (by Angel, for example) or used for sex and/or money. The emphasis is here on the concept of "being used" because Moll Flanders, for example, consciously uses her body. Viewing others as objects is an essential part of being human. For humans to have any kind of connection, they need to exist in some physical way for each other. However, as Eagleton says, "it is just that the very conditions which make for such relationship also make for its potential undoing" (137). This means that our ability to communicate and form relationships depends on having bodies, but since we are physical beings, we can also mistreat each other. Nonetheless, Tess tries hard to avoid being seen only as an object:

> Everything else was blackness alike. D'Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears. Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? (Hardy 112)

When Alec kisses her, she pretends to be unresponsive, making herself an object to fight against his efforts to treat her that way. When he seduces her, her inner self separates from her body, leaving her body without energy, almost like an inanimate object. Here we see Tess resorting to passiveness which cannot be said for Sarah, as we will see later in my analysis, who strongly stands behind her every decision regarding her sexuality. The reader should know by this point that Alec abused Tess, the sleeping "pure woman." The Chase scene communicates innocence and wrongdoing more effectively than the complicated question of the guardian

angel. Even so, it remains unclear whether Tess was sexually abused or if she was compliant because we can argue that Hardy's descriptions are rather ambiguous. Alexander says that Hardy preferred using visual and symbolic storytelling, rather than analysing everything (319). Eagleton, on the other hand, points out that there are numerous times when Tess is barely conscious if found in a stressful and vulnerable moment (137).

5. From Taboos to Triumphs: Unveiling Female Sexuality in 20th-Century Fiction

Significant shifts in social norms, cultural views, and individual liberties, particularly in the study and expression of human sexuality were seen throughout the 20th century. Post-war literature, being a product of its day, not only reflected but also contributed to the ongoing debate over sexual identity, desire, and relationships. Patricia Waugh points out that in the aftermath of the Second World War, communication sped up, distances felt shorter, and empires broke apart. People moved, wars happened, generations clashed, and Europe's power decreased. New issues like gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity emerged (118).

In her book *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, Dagmar Herzog says that the 20th century, often called "the century of sex", is seen as a "time of increasing liberalization of sexual mores and attitudes" (1). It is obvious that this era has brought about so many far-reaching, epoch-making changes in terms of sexuality. As Herzog states, the term sexuality became used as an everyday expression precisely in the last century. Of course, sex, just like sexual politics and struggles with what is 'natural' or 'normal', good or bad in and around the bed, have been around for centuries, but never before has sex been given such prominence in politics, ideologies, science, religion, and the media. As claimed by Herzog, the still-unfinished emancipation of female sexuality and women's reproductive rights was the central issue in the 20th century, and that is because it had enormous consequences on almost all aspects of sexuality then (9).

The struggle for women's sexual and reproductive rights has revolutionized the female experience of sexuality and freed millions of women from the shackles of patriarchal marriage that serve the reproduction of male economic and social power, male procreation, and male erotic pleasure. As Herzog argues, this struggle also had many other effects: it changed the structure of heterosexual life, it reversed the meaning of traditional marriage, it gave birth to the idea of sexual pleasure and sexual rights for all, it gave a decisive impetus to the liberation of gays and lesbians, and, ultimately, it changed the sexual life of men (1). According to Herzog, there are two related threads - the acceptance of the idea of the existence and legitimacy of female sexual pleasure and that of contraception to free the female sexual experience from the threat of pregnancy - have prompted sexual reformers and reformers to advocate for a new paradigm of marriage in which both partners are equal and have their sexual autonomy, the right to enjoy sex (18). This shift has set in motion a process of changing perceptions of heterosexuality by separating sex from reproduction and marriage and making pleasure, desire, satisfaction, and personal self-actualization in the erotic realm of life important pillars of a new paradigm of the conception of sexuality.

In Europe, exciting and varied partner sex was gaining in value, contributing to the consolidation of the ideal of a romantic egalitarian heterosexual couple for whom 'a good relationship in bed' is an important prerequisite for permanence. Herzog says that as a consequence, premarital, and adolescent sex, unemotional sex, one-night stands, consecutive monogamous relationships, and to some extent extramarital affairs become legitimate (18).

5.1 Sarah Miles: "I've fallen into belief like I fell in love"

Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* represents the love triangle between the three main protagonists: Maurice Bendrix (the narrator), Sarah Miles, his lover and her husband Henry. Featuring Sarah, the novel articulates the way female identity and sexuality are tied to

religion, and on the other hand, it focuses on the theme of adultery very openly. Greene does not shy away from it nor treat it as a taboo subject. Sarah does not shy away from her 'sin' either. She does not feel shame, and she is grateful to God for saving her lover. Greene is known for his Catholic-themed novels which consistently explore the boundaries of conventional beliefs, his so-called "dangerous edge". His approach questions whether divine intervention is essential to enforce moral boundaries. However, every one of Greene's characters is shaped by their physical existence, and his literary world is one where the act of sex appears to be consistently prohibited within the moral framework. Sarah is just like Moll and Tess, a sinner in the eyes of society, and a subversive character. Sarah is, however, a more contemporary version of the other two heroines, as she can hide her subversion more easily. Greene's works frequently involve themes of sex, but as it has been mentioned, the characters are not often permitted to fully embrace or enjoy it. By examining the personal struggles and transformations of Sarah Miles, *The End of the Affair* offers a window into the close relationship between religion and female sexuality in the post-war period.

As the author navigates this interplay between faith, morality, and personal transformation, he also digs into the realm of female sexuality. The novel touches upon desire, intimacy, and the emotional consequences of physical relationships. *The End of the Affair* provocatively suggests that Sarah's erotic experiences have brought her closer to the divine and even into a state of grace. This idea challenges conventional norms, as evidenced by the *Time* magazine cover that playfully declares that "adultery can lead to sainthood," capturing the scandalous nature of the novel's themes at the time the novel was published (Baker).

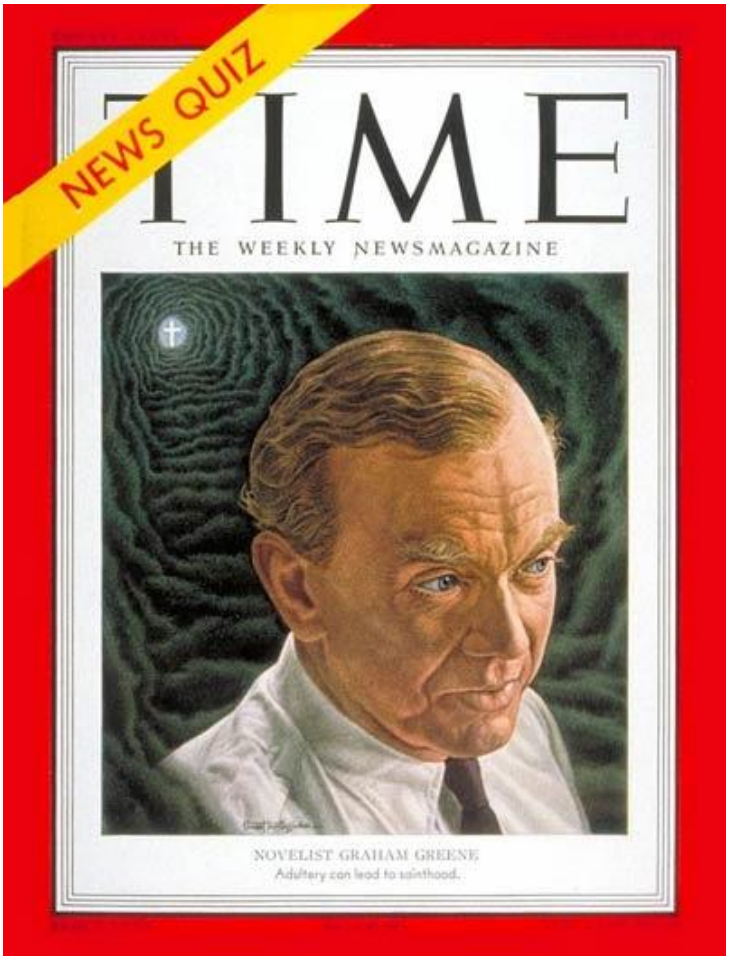

Fig.2 Baker, Ernest H. "Novelist Graham Greene."

Sarah Miles – a whore or a saint? The reader sees her through Bendrix's eyes because he is the narrator of the novel. She is a passionate and mysterious woman capable of discreetly concealing tracks of her affair from her husband. We gain access to her inner world, as it were, to her journal which is part of the narrative structure of the book. The journal itself is not presented in its entirety but is revealed through the narrator himself. Throughout the novel he shares excerpts from Sarah's journal, allowing the reader to see the contents of the journal indirectly. Just like Tess, she struggles with feelings of insignificance, of "nobody admiring me, nobody excited by me" (Greene 78). We also follow her unexpected journey toward sainthood: "I imagine I'm ready for the pain of your nails, and I can't stand twenty-four hours of maps and Michelin guides. Dear God, I'm no use. I'm still the same bitch and fake. Clear me out of the way" (Greene 96, 97). She writes about her husband Henry, and it is clear to us she is unhappily married. This leads her to have an affair with another man (the narrator) and then to eventually turn to God as she has a guilty conscience. As opposed to Moll who keeps finding man after man, Sarah decides to distance herself from her lover.

At the heart of the novel, sexual matters wield a transformative power, significantly impacting Sarah's relationships and the course of the narrative. The affair becomes a central element, shaping her decisions and influencing the trajectory of her life, such as keeping her promise to stay faithful to God after Bendrix nearly gets killed. Their relationship is fuelled by an intense physical attraction, forming the driving force behind their affair. These moments of vulnerability and authenticity expose her innermost thoughts and desires, creating a vivid description of the emotional landscapes that imbue their physical connection. Yet, beneath the surface of their fervent romance lies a complex web of moral and spiritual implications. Sarah's choices bear the weight of her personal beliefs and values, as her affair evokes feelings of guilt, jealousy, and inner conflict. Greene's narrative style plunges readers into Sarah's introspections, allowing an intimate portrayal of this woman. This approach adds layers of depth to the exploration of her relationships, rather than just making her an object of male desire. This is how she explains her sudden turn to faith:

> I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love. I've never loved before as I love you, and I've never believed in anything before as I believe now. I'm sure. I've never been sure before about anything. When you came in at the door with the blood on your face, I became sure. Once and for all. Even though I didn't know it at time. I fought belief for longer than I fought love, but I haven't any fight left. (Greene 121)

Moll and Tess were never given this layered approach and were objectified by the society in which they lived, the society that Defoe and Hardy put them in. Themes of jealousy and possessiveness are present here as well, underscoring the high stakes of Sarah's relationship with her lover. We see that Sarah loves Bendrix and not her husband whom she vowed to love "for better, for worse…in sickness and in health…until death do us part." Her sexuality is not as emphasized when it comes to Henry. However, once she turns to religion, despite her burning

love for Bendrix, she gives up on their affair. Yet, in her journal, we read certain excerpts where she still speaks about her love and desire for Bendrix. We could say that her sexuality is not fully erased but rather it is toned down and she keeps it for herself.

Sarah does not face consequences for the physical act of sex itself. As opposed to Moll or Tess, she seems to be no longer subjected to strict social norms. Her affair with Bendrix does not constitute a betrayal of societal norms or a 'sin' in the eyes of society. She is not haunted by concerns of societal or divine retribution, and yet**,** she does feel that she must let go and turn her back on her adulterous behaviour. We see that the agony of letting Maurice go becomes nearly unbearable for her. This pain seems to inflict a "disease" upon her, causing her to die at the end of the novel. After all, she is also a tormented woman.

Sarah's 'deal with God' mirrors the deal she makes with herself. She is a woman who seemingly has more freedom to do whatever she wants to, and yet we find her submitting to religion and depriving herself of her greatest love.

6. Conclusion

Three remarkable British novels – Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* feature heroines - Moll, Tess, and Sarah – who navigate their lives within the context of female sexuality and different societal norms. Living on the edge of poverty, Moll Flanders views sex as a form of currency and uses it to establish herself in 18th-century society. She believes that a woman's value is linked to her wealth, leading her to adopt criminal means like prostitution when faced with financial hardship. In Moll's life, sex and money are closely intertwined from the beginning, and this connection becomes even more explicit in her experiences with her first love, where money is used to manipulate her virtue. Ultimately, sex becomes a literal form of currency for her as she turns to prostitution.

Hardy's Tess, on the other hand, faces contradictions of the Victorian way of life. She is portrayed as virginal but is pushed onto the marriage market by her mother to save the family. Despite her poverty, Tess never considers prostitution. Her relationships are marked by vulnerability and tragedy due to the pressures of Victorian society. While Tess never exploits her sexuality, her life is marked by societal constraints and tragedies. She struggles with being objectified and in her mind often withdraws from her body during vulnerable moments, emphasizing her battle against objectification.

We can say that Sarah Miles in Greene's *The End of the Affair* is the one most in control. She does not need to exploit her sexuality as a means of survival, but she makes complicated decisions regarding her intimate relationships. As opposed to other protagonists, Sarah's character is portrayed as the most complex in terms of her approach to sexuality. She engages in an adulterous affair but ultimately decides to distance herself from her lover, Bendrix, and turn to faith.

As the British novel changed and evolved, portrayals of women and female sexuality transformed over time as well, echoing the shifting cultural dynamics and the emergence of feminist perspectives. Over the course of three centuries, British society and British literature changed tremendously, and our heroines witness and reflect these changes. None of these protagonists is an ideal (or idealized) woman, but all their flaws make them human and that is exactly why these novels have been so outstanding and loved by readers.

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8. FEMALE PROTAGONISTS ACROSS THE CENTURIES: Moll Flanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sarah Miles: Summary and keywords

The paper sets out to analyse female protagonists and representations of female sexuality in the British novels written in different historical periods: Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (18th century), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (19th century), and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (20th century). The paper explores the status of real women and their sexuality across a three-century span, as well as the reactions of readers and publishers. However, the main focus of the paper is the analysis of the relationships these three heroines have with their sexuality through different hardships, such as Moll with prostitution, Tess with sexual abuse, and Sarah with adultery.

Keywords: female protagonists, female sexuality, Defoe, Hardy, Greene

9. PROTAGONISTKINJE KROZ STOLJEĆA: Moll Flanders, Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Sarah Miles: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Ovaj rad će analizirati glavne protagonistkinje i prikaze ženske seksualnosti u britanskim romanima napisanim u različitim povijesnim razdobljima: *Moll Flanders* Daniela Defoea (18. stoljeće), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Thomasa Hardyja (19. stoljeće) i *The End of the Affair* Grahama Greenea (20. stoljeće). Rad istražuje položaj stvarnih žena i njihove seksualnosti u razdoblju od tri stoljeća, kao i reakcije čitatelja i izdavača. Međutim, glavni fokus rada je analiza odnosa ove tri junakinje sa svojom seksualnošću kroz različite poteškoće, kao što su Moll s prostitucijom, Tess s seksualnim zlostavljanjem i Sarah s preljubom.

Ključne riječi: protagonistkinje, ženska seksualnost, Defoe, Hardy, Greene