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# RUIN AS RESURRECTION: AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST READING OF THE FALLEN WOMAN IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract**

In so-called civilized societies, women who defy traditional norms or engage in "immoral" behavior are harshly judged and excluded. This dynamic is evident in Thomas Hardy's *The Ruined Maid*, Augusta Webster's *A Castaway*, and Émile Zola's *Nana*, where female characters are portrayed as morally transgressive and socially irredeemable, reinforcing rigid binaries between virtue and vice. Applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989), this paper explores how class, gender, societal expectations, and sexual politics converge to shape these women's identities and societal reception. Findings reveal that the "fallen" women in the Victorian literary works resist confinement through economic agency, self-awareness, and even spectacle. Rather than passive victims, they emerge as complex figures whose lives defy singular interpretation. This study critiques the moralistic frameworks of Victorian literature while foregrounding intersectionality as a critical method for dismantling dominant narratives that persist in shaping modern gender norms. Ultimately, it calls for more liberating readings of women's transgressions across time.

**Keywords**: fallen woman trope, female agency, gender and class politics, intersectionality, Victorian literature

## Introduction

In "civilized" societies, women who deviate from traditional norms, particularly in engaging in behaviors that are deemed "immoral" or "unconventional" - referred to as "Magdalenism" - are often judged and ostracized harshly. The concept of "Magdalenism" historically refers to a framework of moral judgment and social intervention, particularly applied to women deemed to have transgressed norms of sexual chastity and propriety (Güneş and Hakkıoğlu, 2023). Drawing its name from Mary Magdalene, who was traditionally, though often inaccurately, associated with repentance from a life of sin, Magdalenism became a prevalent term to symbolize perceived moral transgression. This concept was instrumental in the establishment of "Magdalen asylums" or "Magdalen laundries" from the 18th to the 20th centuries (Kaiser, 2023). These institutions, often run by charitable or reformist movements, aimed to "rehabilitate" "fallen women" -



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prostitutes, unmarried mothers, or simply those considered morally deviant - through forced labor, religious instruction, and strict discipline, under the guise of redemption (Ortuño, 2021). Thus, "Magdalenism" not only signifies a state of perceived moral fall but also encompasses the societal mechanisms designed to control, punish, and "reform" such women. These women, by asserting independence or rejecting social expectations, are labelled as “ruined” or “outcast,” effectively branding them as socially unacceptable. This condemnation arises because their actions challenge deeply ingrained values such as grace and prudence - qualities that are historically idealized in women.

***The fallen woman trope in Victorian and modern society***

The concept of “the fallen woman” became a prominent and deeply entrenched trope during the Victorian period, a time when societal norms dictated a woman’s identity and worth. Operationally, the “fallen woman trope” refers to the literary and cultural archetype of a woman who, through sexual transgression or deviation from rigid patriarchal expectations of purity, domesticity, and marital status, is depicted in literature and art as having lost her social standing, moral virtue, and respectability. (Norouzi, 2024). Women’s roles were tightly intertwined with their familial responsibilities, marital status, and sexuality (Conary, 2024). In this framework, women were expected to embody idealized virtues, with their primary identity revolving around being wives or mothers, safely confining their sexuality within the domestic sphere. For those who did not conform to the prescribed roles, societal labels stigmatize and marginalize them. Women who remained unmarried or childless were often referred to as “spinsters,” a term laden with connotations of social and sexual failure, implying atrophy and a lack of desirability. Conversely, women who engaged in relationships outside marriage, or were perceived to do so, were branded as “whores,” a label that denoted promiscuity and moral degradation. These dual labels exemplified the rigid dichotomy of Victorian gender expectations, where women were either idealized as virtuous or vilified as deviant.

This perspective left a little room for complexity or individuality in women’s identities. It reinforced the patriarchal narrative that a woman’s worth was intrinsically tied to her ability to conform to society’s demands, particularly when it comes to her sexuality. The concept of “the fallen woman” became a prominent and deeply entrenched trope during the Victorian period, a time when societal norms dictated a woman’s identity and worth.

Literature in the Victorian period often explored this trope, portraying fallen women as tragic figures whose unconventional decisions led to inevitable ruin or redemption through suffering or sacrifice. Works like Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* delve into the plight of such women. While the specific societal contexts have evolved, the underlying judgment embedded in the "fallen woman" trope has remarkably persisted, demonstrating a continuous thread of stigma that stretches from the Victorian era into modern times. The enduring nature of the fallen woman, despite its Victorian origins, remains strikingly relevant in contemporary films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002), *Young and Beautiful* (2013), and *Poor Things* (2023). A recent example is also the film *Anora* (2024), where the protagonist, a sex worker, achieves economic agency and a status through her profession and sudden marriage

to a wealthy boy. However, her journey is undermined by the classist and moralistic judgments of the boy's family, who perceived her as "unsuitable" and inherently "fallen" due to her past and present work. This also mirrors the experiences of judgment by real-life sex workers - a recent study by Henriksen and Jarvinen (2025) included a narrative of a previous female sex worker that mirrors the hypocrisy of the "fallen woman trope" during the Victorian period. The unnamed woman from Denmark, a previous prostitute, said that a woman who ends up getting pregnant outside of marriage is more looked down upon in society than the man. In this condition, a woman postpones her dreams, endures pain both physically and emotionally, and often bears the brunt of judgment alone, while the man involved may face little to no consequences at all - and may continue to live as if nothing happened.

The fallen woman trope serves as a powerful perspective to examine societal attitudes toward gender, morality, and autonomy in both historical and contemporary contexts. Victorian literature often depicted these women as tragic figures, reflecting strict moral codes, while modern society continues to echo this through subtle yet pervasive ways. Perhaps the only thing that has truly "fallen" over time is society's pretense of progress, as the same judgments that once condemned women in corsets now disguise themselves in modern attire, subtly woven into our media, outdated traditions, institutions, and everyday interactions. The question is, will women ever be good enough, whatever they do? To disrupt the conventional understanding of female roles and identities, this paper conducts an intersectional feminist reading of Thomas Hardy's *The Ruined Maid* (1901), Augusta Webster's *A Castaway* (1870), and Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880), demonstrating how these literary works subvert the conventional "fallen woman" trope by portraying female characters who achieve forms of economic agency and self-awareness, strategically resisting societal condemnation and exposing the enduring hypocrisy of patriarchal systems that continue to define and constrain women across historical periods.

## Method

This is a qualitative study employing textual analysis and close reading, guided by Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989). Intersectionality emphasizes how overlapping identities and situations, such as gender, class, and societal roles, contribute to the experiences of oppression and privilege. This concept provides the critical framework for examining how the "fallen woman" is presented and subsequently subverted in three selected Victorian pieces: Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Ruined Maid*, Augusta Webster's *A Castaway*, and Emile Zola's novel, *Nana*.

The analysis of these pieces focuses on identifying specific feminist indicators within the texts. These indicators include (1) economic agency and constraints to examine the female character's financial situation and access to resources or lack thereof; (2) societal judgment and stigma to analyze the language and narrative strategies used to portray societal condemnation of the characters; (3) self-awareness and subjectivity to look for moments where the female character expresses their own perspectives, challenges imposed labels, or exhibits an understanding of her circumstance; and (4) subversion of the fallen woman trope to identify instances where the narratives challenge conventional "fallen woman"

archetypes by presenting the women characters as individuals making strategic choices within restrictive environments.

Crenshaw's intersectional framework is particularly suited for this analysis as it directly attacks monolithic interpretations of women's experiences, a common pitfall when analyzing Victorian literary pieces. Intersectionality coheres with the historical milieu by enabling a critique of the rigid binary perceptions, allowing scholars to move beyond simply labeling female characters as "fallen" and explore the intricate ways that class, gender expectations, and sexual politics converged to shape their identities, restrict their choices, and finally inform their subtle acts of resistance. This theoretical lens thus provides the methodological scaffolding to deconstruct dominant narratives and foreground the nuanced realities of women's transgressions in the Victorian era.

Recent studies, such as Das (2024), have explored the ways Victorian literature reflects and critiques societal stigmatization of non-conformity. Furthermore, Bernstein (2024) emphasizes that feminist critiques of Victorian literature benefit from incorporating intersectional perspectives, as they reveal how class and morality shape the narratives of female characters. These modern feminist perspectives also support this paper's framework, particularly in examining how the fallen woman trope is constructed and subverted in literature. Through close reading and textual analysis, the lack of intersectional feminist analyses of the fallen woman trope in Victorian literature is addressed in this paper, with an exploration of how class, gender, and societal expectations intersect in *The Ruined Maid*, *A Castaway*, and *Nana*, in order to challenge and subvert simplistic moral judgments imposed on women.

## Findings and Discussion

In Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, Kimberlé Crenshaw expands on the limitations of traditional feminist frameworks by emphasizing that the experiences of women cannot be fully understood through a singular lens of gender alone (Das, 2024). She critiques the tendency within mainstream feminist discourse to focus on a monolithic experience of womanhood, which often fails to account for the diverse ways in which women's roles and identities are shaped by intersecting social structures, including class, race, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity. Crenshaw argues that these intersecting factors complicate women's social positioning, highlighting that women's experiences of oppression, marginalization, and empowerment are not homogenous but deeply influenced by the interplay of these multiple forces.

### *The Ruined Maid*

Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Ruined Maid*, was written in 1866 but published 35 years later in 1901. This underlines the sensitiveness of the written work during that time when women were expected to maintain a virtuous and respectable façade inside and out. In the poem, the fallen woman trope is explored with a satirical lens that critiques the Victorian societal norms surrounding class, gender, and moral expectations.

The poem contrasts two women: Melia, who is "ruined" and now lives in the city, and her former friend, who still resides in the rural town "in tatters, without

shoes or socks, / Tired of digging potatoes" (Hardy, 1901, lines 5-6) without any sign of progress in her situation. Hardy's depiction of Melia challenges the simplistic moral judgments of the time by illustrating how societal standards of virtue are often shaped by class and gender. The speaker's bewildered questioning - "And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?" - is met with Melia's ironic retort: "O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" (3-4). It uses irony and humor to expose the contradictions in the way women's sexual autonomy was treated based on their social class, suggesting that women like Melia, though labeled as "fallen," often gain material benefits from their perceived fall (Roberts, 2017).

In this context, the poem critiques the class structures of Victorian society, where a woman's worth and respectability were often measured by her adherence to conventional norms of chastity and domesticity. Evans (2019) emphasized that Hardy's poem subverts these expectations by presenting Melia's "ruin" not as a mark of moral failure but as a consequence of economic necessity and survival within a restrictive social order. As Melia states, "Some polish is gained with one's ruin" (Hardy, 1901, line 12), and "We never do work when we're ruined" (16). By shifting the focus from moral judgment to the economic realities faced by women in the Victorian era, Hardy calls attention to how gender and class intersect in shaping women's experiences, particularly their sexual agency (Palita, 2023).

Is being a dutiful wife (repressed from one's sexuality and desire to act without worrying about the prying eyes of society) truly provide women the freedom they deserve? Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (1949), mentions in chapter 8 (*Prostitutes and Hetaeras*) that the mere presence of "lost women" makes it agreeable to treat "honorable women" with gallant respect (Beauvoir, 1949). Antai et. al. (2014) also said that submissive married women are more prone to depression and suicidal thoughts than unmarried ones. In Melia's case, she is unmarried and free to do whatever she wishes since society already calls her "ruined." Her friend's wistful desire, "I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown, / And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!" (Hardy, 1901, lines 21-22), stands in stark contrast to Melia's liberated existence and highlights the perceived benefits of her "ruined" status.

Critics and supporters even agree that women who practice sex work voluntarily should not be treated like criminals and should be provided with the same benefits as other workers, like healthcare. Joven (2020) wrote an article for CNN talking about how prostitution empowers women. She stated that women's rights advocates began a debate on the acceptance of sex work as proper labor for women, since this helps them have control over their bodies as long as everything is done with consent. Aaron Bonette, who also writes for *Outrage Magazine*, also published an article in 2021 asking "Why it's Time to Reconsider Sex Work." He emphasized that even though sex work is tolerated by people, society still seems to deny it. He interviewed Eda Catabas, a member of a pro-sex work organization, who said that when it comes to morality and religion, it is hypocritical to call sex work "a moral outrage." Gregorio (2023) also found that women and transwomen who engage in online sex work not just improved their lives economically, but it also made them feel more confident, seen, and heard.

Hardy's treatment of Melia presents the duality of the fallen woman trope: while Melia's "ruin" is condemned by society, it is simultaneously presented as a form of empowerment, allowing her to escape the limitations imposed by her rural

background. In her new life, Melia enjoys financial independence and social mobility, which would have been unavailable to her had she adhered to traditional gender roles. This is powerfully summarized by her final, poignant statement to her friend: "My dear - a raw country girl, such as you be, / Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined" (Hardy, 1901, lines 23-24), definitively linking her "ruin" to her newfound advantages.

*The Ruined Maid* subverts the fallen woman trope by illustrating how women's choices are constrained not only by their gender but also by the socio-economic conditions of their time. It talks about traditional moralism, urging readers to reconsider the moral judgments placed on women, especially those whose actions are dictated by economic survival and social necessity, even up to this day.

***A Castaway***

Augusta Webster's poem *A Castaway* (1870) presents the fallen woman trope through a dramatic monologue that challenges Victorian society's moral hypocrisy. Unlike traditional portrayals that frame fallen women as tragic or in need of redemption, the poem gives voice to a former courtesan who critically reflects on her life with intelligence and pragmatism, stating directly, "I am a castaway" (Webster, 1870, line 26).

Webster's *A Castaway* challenges the reductive moral judgments imposed on women by highlighting how economic necessity, rather than moral weakness, dictates the choices of the poem's speaker. Bernstein (2022) said that, unlike conventional fallen women in Victorian literature who are either punished or redeemed, Webster's narrator refuses to frame her life as a tragedy. Instead, she asserts her autonomy and criticizes the hypocrisy of a society that leaves women with limited options yet condemns those who do not conform. The speaker defiantly asks, "And whom do I hurt more than they? as much?" (Webster, 1870, line 98), directly questioning the moral superiority of her accusers. The poem's dramatic monologue form allows the speaker to articulate a perspective rarely heard in literature - a woman's candid acknowledgment of the constraints imposed by class and gender, as well as her resistance to being viewed as merely a victim of circumstance.

The poem underlines how gender and class intersect in shaping women's experiences, specifically in a society where a woman's economic security is often tied to male dependence. As Crenshaw (1991) argues, oppression is rarely experienced through a single axis of identity; instead, "fallen women", such as Webster's protagonist, must navigate the overlapping structures of patriarchy and classism. The woman in the poem directly challenges the notion of "choice" when she reflects on her past attempts at reform: "Who says I had my choice? / Could I stay there to die of some mad death?… Choice! what choice / of living well or ill? could I have that?" (Webster, 1870, lines 249-255). The poem's critique of the dichotomy between respectable and fallen women exposes how social expectations force women into impossible positions where survival often comes at the cost of social condemnation (Sarıkaya, 2024).

Feminist scholars have even drawn parallels between *A Castaway* and contemporary debates surrounding sex work and women's autonomy. Döring et.al. (2020) argue that sex work, when engaged in voluntarily, can provide financial

independence and agency, challenging traditional narratives that equate such labor with degradation. Similarly, McGarry and Kondrataitė (2025) contend that societal attitudes toward sex work remain deeply entrenched in moralistic biases, echoing the hypocrisy Webster critiques in her poem. The speaker's unapologetic stance on her life choices aligns with modern feminist perspectives that advocate for decriminalizing and recognizing sex work as legitimate labor (Tremblay, 2021), as she boldly declares, "I say let no one be above her trade; / I own my kindredship with any drab/who sells herself as I" (Webster, 1870, lines 65-68).

Webster's portrayal of the fallen woman in *A Castaway* disrupts Victorian moral binaries by illustrating how economic realities force women into roles deemed socially unacceptable, raising their contesting voices and disturbing the strongly established ideological foundations of the conventional roles of femininity and womanhood. Rather than depicting the protagonist as a figure in need of redemption, the poem positions her as an intelligent, self-aware woman who critiques the very structures that seek to define and confine her. Her powerful statement, "I have looked coolly on my what and why, / and I accept myself" (Webster, 1870, lines 135-136), reveals a profound self-acceptance that defies external judgment. Scarpa (2024) said that this also exposes Webster as an activist who used poetry as a political instrument of attacking the patriarchal oppression of women during her time, which still echoes up to this century.

The fallen woman trope in *A Castaway* is reinterpreted through exposing how women's fates are dictated not by personal failure but by societal structures that limit their choices. Through the protagonist's unflinching reflection, the poem unveils the hypocrisy of a society that condemns women for transgressing moral boundaries while offering them no viable alternatives for survival, unless they marry well or are heiresses. The poem's primary objective in challenging the binary perception of femininity is evident through the radical female narrator, who blurs the distinction between virtuous and fallen women by revealing the human complexity beneath degrading labels. The speaker's final, defiant internal thought, "what is must be. What then? I, where I am, / sinking and sinking; let the wise pass by / and keep their wisdom for an apter use, / let me sink merrily as I best may" (Webster, 1870, lines 476-479), encapsulates her pragmatic acceptance and rejection of moralizing judgment.

***Nana***

*Nana* (1880) by French author Emile Zola presents the fallen woman through a naturalistic lens. Traditional depictions of fallen women often cast them as either pitiable victims or individuals seeking redemption. In contrast, Nana presents both ruin and allure, moving through a society where her triumphs and downfall are shaped by the very men who crave her and the social order that rejected her. Zola himself makes this clear in Nana's stage debut:

> "Her?' the manager exclaimed with a shrug. 'She's got a voice like a corncrake.' … 'Nana? ... She's a lump! She doesn't know what to do with her hands or her feet". (Zola, 1880, p. 45)

Nana's story reveals contradictions in how power, gender, and class work in society. Zola does not romanticize Nana's ascent; rather, he presents how her power

is fleeting, conditional, and tied entirely to how desirable she is (Paraschas, 2021). As Zola writes:

> "Slowly she opened her arms to bring out the full, plump beauty of her Venus-like torso, bending at the waist, examining herself back and front, lingering over the curves of her breasts and her round thighs tapering towards the knees. Finally, she decided to indulge in a peculiar exercise: standing with her knees apart, she swayed to and fro rolling her hips in the continuous circular motion of Egyptian belly-dancers. Muffat watched her. She frightened him". (Zola, 1880, p. 220)

Once her body becomes old, her power will vanish. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helps expose the truth that Nana is not only a femme fatale archetype but a figure shaped by a system that both devours men and enables women who trade on their sexuality in order to survive.

Despite her superficial power, Nana is ultimately a victim of her circumstances. David (2021) mentioned in her paper that Nana's access to influence and wealth is unstable, dependent on the whims of the men around her and society's tolerance of her beauty. As Nana herself laments the suicide of Georges:

> "That's right, blame Nana, blame that beastly girl ... Oh, I always get the blame, I can just hear them talking: that dirty little tart who goes to bed with everybody, who cleans some of them out and causes the death of others, who brings unhappiness to so many people". (Zola, 1880, p. 407)

She cannot escape the cycle of commodification; her downfall is a result of poverty, disease, and death (David, 2021). Zola's depiction is a bleak commentary on how class and gender intersect to create the illusion of empowerment while reinforcing deeper forms of control. From Crenshaw's intersectional feminist perspective, Nana's choices are not purely autonomous but constrained by a system that equates femininity with performance and value with physical allure.

The narrative in *Nana* disrupts traditional morality tales by refusing to offer a distinct lesson or redemption. Rossi (2022) even notes in their study that Nana's death from smallpox is horrifying and symbolic. Zola describes her final state unflinchingly:

> "Now Nana was left alone, lying face upwards in the light of the candle, a pile of blood and pus dumped on a pillow, a shovelful of rotten flesh ready for the bone-yard, her whole face covered in festering sores, one touching the other, all puckered and subsiding into a shapeless, slushy grey pulp, already looking like a compost heap. Her features were no longer distinguishable, her left eye entirely submerged in discharging ulcers, the other one a sunken, fly-blown black hole. A thick yellowish fluid was still oozing from her nose. Starting from the left cheek, a reddish crust had overrun the mouth, pulling it into a ghastly grin. And on this horrible and grotesque death-mask, her hair, her lovely hair, still

> flamed like a glorious golden stream of sunlight. Venus was decomposing". (Zola, 1880, p. 425)

Her beauty, once her source of influence, has now become grotesque. But even in her final moments in the book, society's obsession with her remains. Newspapers sensationalize her death; her name is remembered, not for any virtue or failure, but for her life's spectacle. This suggests that the "fallen woman" is always a fascination, no matter how she is punished or even if she dies. According to Pulkkinen (2023), Nana's story intersects with those men who orbit her, namely, aristocrats, businessmen, and even politicians – all of whom are ruined by their desire for her. As Zola frames it:

> "Duchesses would point her out … bankers whose money-bags controlled the finances of Europe, ministers whose thick fingers held France in a stranglehold; and Nana was one of this smart Bois de Boulogne set … her orgies and wild escapades added lustre to this brilliant crowd; she was its crowning glory" (Zola, 1880, p. 416).

Zola flips the narrative: while traditionally the fallen woman destroys herself through moral corruption, here it is the men who suffer the consequences of their attempts to control and consume Nana. She becomes a mirror for their weaknesses, ambitions, and decadence. In this way, Nana serves not only as a critique of individual moral hypocrisy but also of broader systematic structures that commodify women under the guise of opportunity and progress. Kaufmann and Derry's study (2024) states that recent scholars of the "business case" for diversity argue that simply including women in economic systems without transforming the power structures within them reinforces the same hierarchies that historically marginalize them. Nana's value, like that of women in corporate or capitalist systems, is determined by how well she performs desirability for male consumption – her inclusion is conditional and disposable. The performer anticipates the failure of superficial empowerment models: her access to wealth and influence never dismantles the patriarchal and classist structures that circumscribe her life (Al-Jaber, 2024). Rather than representing genuine liberation, Nana's economic and social ascent becomes a cautionary portrait of how systems of gendered capitalism absorb and exploit women's visibility without offering real agency or safety. Thus, her downfall is not a personal failure but a structural inevitability – an outcome of a system that rewards the appearance of inclusion while upholding exclusion at its core.

In Nana, this paper subverts the fallen woman trope by exposing the illusion of empowerment granted to women within patriarchal and capitalist structures. Serdar (2025) mentioned that while Nana appears to gain status and wealth through her desirability, her influence is conditional and temporary, tied entirely to how she is perceived by the men around her. Rather than presenting her as a moral failure in need of redemption, it is the societal forces that commodify and exploit her that need to be addressed. Nana's decline - into poverty, illness, and death - reveals the limits of performative empowerment (Dibra, 2025). Her value, like that of many women in modern institutions, depends on how well she aligns with male-driven ideals of success. Instead of self-destruction, it is the men who unravel, consumed

by their obsession. Nana becomes a mirror that reflects the corruption and hypocrisy of a system that created her, challenging the assumption that women's downfall is a result of individual choices rather than structural oppression.

***Rethinking the fallen woman: Intersectionality and resistance across texts***

In a recent discussion on inequality and intersectionality, Crenshaw reminds us that justice cannot be achieved without recognizing how different forms of disadvantage – gender, sexuality, race, and class – intersect and compound. Intersectionality is not simply about adding identities together; it is a lens that reveals how systems of power operate simultaneously, creating specific conditions of oppression or privilege. Crenshaw emphasizes that inequality is often treated as a "them" problem, when in fact, it stems from deeply embedded structures that position the male experience as default and women's issues as secondary. Rather than viewing the female characters from the three Victorian pieces through a narrow moral frame, intersectionality allows for a richer, more critical reading of how class-based exclusions, gender expectations, and social hypocrisy converged in their stories (Steinmetz, 2020).

In *The Ruined Maid*, *A Castaway*, and *Nana*, findings reveal that the "fallen woman" is not a static symbol of moral failure, but a complex figure navigating intersecting forces of class, gender, and outdated societal beliefs. Each protagonist challenges the rigid binaries that traditionally define women as either virtuous or irredeemable. The analysis shows that these women, though labelled as "fallen," exercise forms of resistance and agency shaped by the limitations of their environments. Melia uses her "ruin" to attain financial stability; Webster's speaker asserts her right to be heard and critiques the hypocrisy of respectability; and Nana, while commodified and ultimately consumed, exposes the exploitative structures that both elevate and "destroy" her through her spectacle.

These texts subvert the trope by shifting the narrative from personal downfall to systematic critique. Instead of reinforcing Victorian morality, they highlight how women's supposed transgressions are often strategies for survival in a world that denies them full autonomy. This paper reveals how these women's experiences are shaped not by single acts of defiance but by the overlapping weight of structural oppression. The fallen woman emerges not as a cautionary tale, but as a symbol of contested power – both exploited and defiant within the systems that seek to silence her.

## Conclusion

*Saint and Prostitute: An Analysis of Melania Sabiani in A Pecora by Natalia Correia* mentioned that "salvation" is only possible for fallen women who adapt to patriarchal religious power. Empowerment and emancipation of these "fallen women" in the face of a male-dominated system is impossible (Dias & Nery, 2020). The women characters in each novel mentioned exist in different settings, but they all share similar experiences of oppression and judgment in the communities they are in. Although these are women written a century ago, they still suffer the same underlying disease our society's been suffering from for hundreds of years – that unless a man experiences a woman's hardship and injustice in her sex, there will never be an established rule or law to save her in the circumstance she is in. As demonstrated through this paper's intersectional feminist textual analysis of

Thomas Hardy's *The Ruined Maid*, Augusta Webster's *A Castaway*, and Émile Zola's *Nana*, these Victorian literary works actively subvert the conventional "fallen woman" trope. By meticulously examining feminist indicators such as economic agency, societal judgment, self-awareness, and acts of subversion, this study has shown how Melia, Webster's courtesan, and Nana, despite their marginalized positions, strategically navigate and resist the patriarchal systems that seek to define them. Their portrayals reveal that "ruin" can paradoxically lead to forms of economic independence and self-possession, offering a nuanced counter-narrative to simplistic moral condemnations. Through Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality in feminism, female characters from early literary periods can be reinterpreted and given voices beyond the constraints of their historical contexts. What was once deemed "fallen" or "outcast" may now be reimagined as empowered or simply, free.

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