

VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

INTERNATIONAL ONLINE CONFERENCE

Co-organised by Raffaella Antinucci, Università Parthenope, Naples, and Adrian Grafe, Université d'Artois (Research Lab "Textes et Cultures").

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Art in general, and literature in particular, have long been used as means to represent and give visibility to dynamics of violence, hurting and endurance. Vulnerability and resilience are two strongly related and almost antonymic concepts whose first meanings originate in the physical world. If *vulnerability* indicates the quality of being easily physically hurt or attacked, the word *resilience* was first used in physics to describe the ability of a substance or body to recover its shape and size after being bent, stretched, or pressed. When transferred into the social sciences, vulnerability denotes the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a traumatic situation, whereas resilience points to a human intrinsic quality or "inner strength" that varies according to each individual's capacity to react in a positive way to the same dramatic event or conditions. Considering the dramatic social and epistemic changes, including several tragic events, that characterized nineteenth-century Britain, the conference wishes to explore the literary forms in which individual and collective responses to traumas and marginalisation were addressed.

Taking into account the Darwinian paradigm but intending to broaden and go beyond it, the conference seeks to address the representation of modes of exposure and (apparent) powerlessness, and how these are overcome. The conference will examine literary responses in the nineteenth century to crisis, trial and torment, topoi that loom large, for example, in Joseph Campbell's idea of the monomyth, or hero's and heroine's journey, although here we are also specifically concerned with the non-heroic and anti-heroic. The neuroscientist Boris Cyrulnik has, in *Un merveilleux malheur*, described resilience as related to the idea that a crisis that deals the human subject a serious psychological blow may divide him or her into two, with one part of the self suffering the blow while the other ensures the subject's survival by focusing on possibilities for happiness, what Hardy in a much-quoted phrase called 'the appetite for joy'. How does the 'acceptance of the fallible self' (Collins 144) lead to a superabundance of love and goodwill? In George MacDonald's novel *Adela Cathcart* (1864), the heroine suffers from a mysterious illness to which storytelling is perceived as 'a potential cure', and the means "to another kind of life" (cf Dubois 2015).

The conference seeks to go beyond purely individual vulnerability. It will therefore take into account how nineteenth-century literature, in the shape, for instance, of the invasion scare novel, dramatised what Stephen Serata has called "the nation's vulnerability" (110). Sir George Chesney's 1871 cautionary novel *The Battle of Dorking* (mentioned by Serata) is but one example. It also means to explore ways in which different literary genres can be perceived in the nineteenth century as more or less vulnerable: poetry, for example, due to the rise in novel-reading. Also in this respect, we will be glad to receive proposals exploring the conference topic in journals, apologies, confessions, and autobiographies. What is the relationship between the artist Benjamin Haydon's writing his Journal, which ends on June 22 1846, and his suicide committed a few hours after the entry for the latter date.

We are interested in literary depictions of the family as a site of vulnerability and resilience: the treatment and mistreatment of Pip and Joe in *Great Expectations*. Are children

such as Pip or Jane Eyre depicted as mistreated as a manipulation of the reader on the author's part, in order to arouse the former's sympathy for the hero or heroine (cf Coveney).

Among examples of prison literature, we would be pleased to welcome readings of Wilde's *De Profundis* (written while he was in prison) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (written after his time in prison and he had left England for France).

Apart from the above examples, and among other possible topics, presentations may focus on:

- Literature, storytelling, humour and altruism as mechanisms of resilience and survival;
- Impact, positive or negative, of local communities on the individual;
- Damage done to, and the survival of, children;
- Resilience and social Darwinism; competition or adaptation?
- The depiction of illness and care, the responsiveness or otherwise of patients to treatment, the nature and quality of medicine and the medical professions;
- Post-feminist readings of care ethics in the literature of the period;
- 'broken and failing groups of organic beings' (Darwin, *Origin*, as quoted by Beer, 42);
- Gratitude, kindness and bravery as factors in the promotion of resilience and survival— or not?
- Poetry as mourning (Tennyson) or
- As response to, if not enactment of, spiritual disturbance and recovery (Hopkins);
- Why do some characters overcome adversity and others do not?
- The perception and depiction of gender in relation to vulnerability and resilience: does "the man"—rather than "the woman"—ever "pay"?
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- Collins, Deborah L. (1990). *Thomas Hardy and His God: A Liturgy of Unbelief*. Macmillan.
- Coveney, Peter (1967). *The Image of Childhood*. Penguin.
- Cyrulnik, Boris (1999). *Un merveilleux malheur*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Dubois, Martin (2015), 'Sermon and Story in George MacDonald', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 43, 577–587.
- Serata, Stephen (1996). *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Identity and Empire*. CUP.
- Troisi, Alfonso (2001). "Gender differences in vulnerability to social stress : a Darwinian perspective". <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11438373>

There are no fees to take part in, or attend, this online conference.

Please send Adrian Grafe adrian.grafe@univ-artois.fr and Raffaella Antinucci raffaella.antinucci@uniparthenope.it 150-word proposals for 20' presentations, along with a

brief bio-biblio, by July 3rd 2021. We expect to publish a set of essays arising from the conference.