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Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Value of Literacy: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression Through Writing in *The Colour of Milk*

Author

Marina Irene Zarranz Allueva

Supervisor

María Dolores Herrero Granado

Faculty of Arts

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Abstract

This undergraduate dissertation will explore how Mary, the female narrator and protagonist of the novel *The Colour of Milk* (2012) by Nell Leyshon, turns to writing in order to escape the wretched circumstances of being an abused illiterate fifteen-year-old, working-class rural girl. The socioeconomic context in which the story unfolds –the first half of the nineteenth century in England– will be provided for a better understanding of the analysis, in which the social constraints that working-class women had to endure, especially female agricultural and domestic workers like Mary, will be emphasised. The first part of the analysis will deal with Mary's identity and the oppressive atmosphere in which she has grown up. Secondly, the two settings in the story will be examined: in one way, Mary's precious farm and her intimate relationship with nature, and in another, the unfamiliar vicarage where she finds both comfort and misery. Lastly, Mary's traumatic past will be explored in relation to the recurrent use of certain literary techniques that reflect her emotional pain throughout the story. This dissertation will therefore argue that Mary strives to achieve her freedom through the writing of her life story no matter the high price she must pay.

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado tiene como objetivo explorar el personaje de Mary, la narradora y protagonista de la novela *The Colour of Milk* (2012) de Nell Leyshon, que se refugia en la escritura con el fin de dejar atrás las pésimas condiciones sociales, de maltrato y analfabetismo a las que está expuesta. Para un mejor entendimiento del análisis, se expone el contexto socioeconómico en el que transcurre la historia –la primera mitad del siglo diecinueve en Inglaterra– donde se resaltan las limitaciones sociales que sufrían las mujeres de clase trabajadora, especialmente las pertenecientes al trabajo en el campo y al ámbito doméstico como Mary. La primera parte del análisis trata la identidad de Mary y el ambiente opresivo en el que ha crecido. La segunda parte se centra en los dos escenarios: por una parte, la preciada granja de Mary y su relación tan cercana con la naturaleza, y por otro, la desconocida casa parroquial donde la protagonista encuentra tanto consuelo como desgracias. Finalmente, se analiza el pasado traumático de Mary en relación al uso recurrente de ciertas técnicas literarias que reflejan su dolor emocional a lo largo de la narración. Este trabajo pretende exponer la lucha de Mary por alcanzar su libertad a través de la escritura, estando dispuesta a pagar el precio que sea conveniente.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

"this is my book and i am writing it by my own hand" (Leyshon, *CM*, 3). This simple yet inspiring line encapsulates Nell Leyshon's *The Colour of Milk*, a 2012 novel which cunningly portrays the appalling conditions that surround Mary, an illiterate nineteenth-century English farmgirl who narrates her own story in order to break the code of silence of her times. Through the voice of Mary, Leyshon invites readers to perceive that individual experiences of injustice can be analysed in the light of structural violence and oppression. Mary's precious –albeit inaccurate and often misspelt– writing is conceived as a coping mechanism that enables her to gradually self-disclose her traumatic experience at the vicarage where she is sent to serve. In this unfamiliar setting, Mary discovers the power of reading and writing, the valuable tools that she willingly uses to share her predicament, and which will eventually set her free. My main aim in this dissertation is to explore how the female narrator of *The Colour of Milk* (2012) turns to writing as a cathartic tool to face her destiny in solitude and escape the wretched circumstances of being an abused fifteen-year-old, working-class rural girl. For a better understanding of this analysis, in what follows I will provide the socioeconomic context in which the story unfolds, namely, the first half of the nineteenth century in England, and will connect it with the social constraints that working-class women, and especially female agricultural and domestic workers like Mary, had to endure.

2. Rural England in the First Half of the 19th Century

The Colour of Milk contextualises the story of Mary in the rural England of the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly the years 1830 and 1831. At the turn of this century, the spread of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain led to escalating tensions within

the English working class. According to Thompson, "in the decades after 1795 there was a profound alienation between classes in Britain, and working people were thrust into a state of *apartheid* […]" (195). The growing agitation for the protection of their rights, interests and human dignity entailed the creation of a revolutionary collective identity. As Hopkins states: "[…] the working classes gradually acquired a sense of their own separate identity as a class –that is to say, they became more and more class-conscious" (14). Industrialisation brought about the exploitation of the working classes by capitalism and its agents, "[…], so political and social rights receded" (Thompson 195). As a result, these groups of working people fought to preserve their status among the dominant classes that exerted absolute control and tremendous pressure on them.

Before industrialisation, labourers earned low incomes and, as people had low or no savings at all, the lack of investment and insufficient demand could not stimulate the country's economic growth. However, the rise of manufacturing machinery in prominent industries profoundly transformed productivity and expanded output. As a consequence, the modernisation of the economy led to income inequality between the rich and the poor. Those who controlled the means of production made and accumulated huge profits. In contrast, working people were victims of economic exploitation. Processes were mechanised through technological innovations, which resulted in a drastic reduction in production time. The main focus was, therefore, on time-oriented work and mass production. For this reason, large-scale employment was created in urban areas for both men and women, and even children started to be recruited. Mass migration and intensive labour meant overcrowded and wretched conditions for workers: "[…] the discipline, monotony, hours and conditions of work; loss of leisure and amenities; the reduction of the man to the status of an 'instrument'" (Thompson 221-222).

The working-class purchasing power affected every aspect of their everyday life. As regards working people's standards of living, it must be noted that they were exposed to health risks due to poor sanitation, as well as to occupational hazards due to the lack of safety rules in their workplaces. Poor nutrition and sickness, together with physical and mental exhaustion, were the basis of a vicious circle in which weak children were to become unhealthy adults. Work turned out to be the only way to stay alive, which meant that there was no room for social entertainment, nor time to build up satisfying personal relationships. Furthermore, in the absence of information about birth control, along with their below-average level of education, the working classes were not able to keep fertility under control, and therefore had to face more expenses regarding family size. Even so, some considered a large family as a self-help tool against old-age poverty and loneliness. To quote Benson's words: "A large family, it seemed to many of the poor, could be both economically rational and emotionally satisfying" (107).

The unfair treatment given to working people at the hands of property owners and the government sparked a wave of public protest in which economic and social grievances began to be voiced. According to Thompson, social revolution took place through militant organisation and political action: "By 1832 there were strongly based and self-conscious working-class institutions […], and a working-class structure of feeling" (212-213). Therefore, a common sentiment in favour of political reform reinforced working-class loyalty and class-consciousness. The government soon realised that something had to be done to redress the working classes' grievances, and that their rights needed to be placed high on the agenda in this state of political turmoil. In keeping with this, the Great Reform Act of 1832 consisted in the reorganisation of the electoral system so as to extend voting rights and, in this way, include part of the working class in the electorate. Nonetheless, apart from being a man, one had to own land, which means that only a section of the

urban male working class could actually have access to parliamentary representation. Once again, the interests of the majority during this period of radical change were being ignored, and the rights of women were not even considered.

Concurrently, even though the Industrial Revolution implied moving to the cities, agriculture also contributed to the process of modernisation and increasing outputs. The adoption of modern methods and the enclosure of open fields led to the restructuring of land and property rights. As commons were divided and large-scale farming was implemented, individual ownership was further consolidated. However, rather than declining, agricultural employment expanded. In addition to the demand for child workers in factories, child labour was recurrent among the agricultural labour force. Younger children were given simple tasks, and as they grew older and physically stronger, they were entrusted with more difficult duties that entailed professional skills. Whereas unpaid work carried out by children was commonly seen, low wages were typically maintained for the rest of workers. As far as women were concerned, although they were not excluded from productive activities on account of the country's progressive economic development, their role in agriculture was limited. There was a demand for female workers because they were regarded as a cheap source of labour. Still, the census ignored most of women's occupations, as their social status was dependent on their relationships to men. Female workers were regarded as less productive beings whose aptitudes were not suitable for agricultural labour. In this way, they were pushed out of some occupations which had demanding strength requirements and, at the same time, their jobs were not categorised as skilled. It can be claimed that, rather than physical strength, it was social conventions and gender roles that defined the occupational barriers that prevented women from holding certain positions in agriculture.

The farm labourer's routine of work was rather physically demanding: "Although free from the concentrated toil of life in the factories, his work entailed much hard labour and often very long hours" (Hopkins 13). Full-time employment was necessary to keep pace with the demand for food production and the growth in population generated by industrialisation. However, agricultural workers also faced some uncertainty about their jobs. Generally, they had to cope with insecurity of employment in times of depression or draught, which affected workers' earning capacity. Thus, farming was a seasonal occupation and neither technical progress nor transformation of the traditional system of production could change this. Benson points out that "[…] each year after the harvest hours were shortened and wages reduced; in a really severe winter, […], labourers could be out of work for three or even four months" (62). This period saw as a consequence the immobility of the poor with regard to "[…] the emergence of the three-tiered social structure of rich landlord, substantial tenant farmer and poor landless labourer" (Allen 99) and, in addition, poverty-stricken workers were "[…] left to support […] the tithes of the Church" (Thompson 217).

Along with agricultural labourers, one of the sectors which comprised a considerable number of workers was domestic service. According to Benson, "domestic service was another branch of the tertiary sector to remain a major employer of working people, in this case women and teenage girls" (23). The middle-class families who could afford it employed live-in servants to help with domestic chores. Generally, these maids were expected to stay in the household with their master or mistress and, depending on the employing family's status, they devoted their time to both domestic duties and husbandry. With respect to female employees' previous life experiences, Burnette explains that those living in the household "[…] were generally young and single" (58). Field claims that there were also career domestic servants who "[…] tended to be older,

better trained, and more skilled than younger, life-cycle servants" (251). Living conditions in working-class domesticity were favourable as compared to industrial sectors in terms of dwelling, dressing and food. Nevertheless, as a general rule, maidservants had long working days which followed traditional, monotonous and unmechanised work routines. Moreover, they were submitted to strict work discipline and kept under close supervision. Whereas factory workers were able to engage in social activism and establish committees to lodge formal protests, domestic servants were completely shut away from the public sphere, which made this professional occupation undoubtedly lonely. Therefore, even though domestic service brought real benefits, domestic servants were still "[…] sharing cramped quarters, working excessive hours, for a few shillings' reward" (Thompson 231).

As regards working-class women, it is true that the Industrial Revolution redefined the traditional female role by allowing them to enter the workforce. However, more often than not, women had to do with low-wage jobs and other unrewarding occupations. Burnette argues that women were kept in low-paid work because they "[…] were assumed to be weak, unskilled, and dependent on men" (82). Since female workers were expected to be in need of less income, their "[…] wages were only supplementary to the wages of the men on whom they were dependent […]" (Burnette 83). This serious drawback implied that women were bound to support themselves independently or else be subject to their male significant other. Recurrent conflicts and disagreements in the household increased women's sense of insecurity, and consequently turned many of them into victims of domestic violence. In fact, the British common law permitted the so-called 'rule of thumb': "By the old common law rule the husband had the right to inflict moderate personal chastisement on his wife, provided he used, as some of the old authorities stated it, a switch no larger than his thumb" (Stedman 241). This principle was

extracted from a declaration in 1782 by an English judge who, according to Kelly, "[…] was Sir Francis Buller, who had been appointed a puisne judge of the king's bench in 1778" (349). As a result, women had to carry a double burden because, in addition to being female and having to endure unprivileged conditions, they were even punished and mistreated for it.

3. Mary: The Sharp-Tongued Female Writer and Her Family Background

Mary's writing is the portal to her psyche. As regards the construction of this powerful narrative voice, Leyshon states: "She is ambitious and she wants what other people are entitled to, and to be exposed to something larger than her very limited life" (Leyshon, Interview). The opening sentence of the novel –"this is my book and i am writing it by my own hand" (Leyshon 3)– places the main emphasis on Mary and on the great deal of effort that she is putting into writing her own story. As a first-person narrator, she is trying to build up self-confidence in order to define her identity through her words. Mary proudly claims: "my name is mary and i have learned to spell it. m. a. r. y." (Leyshon 3). Her literacy level is reflected in the way her style sustains the content. Her written narration contains the inaccurate use of lower-case letters and colloquialisms, grammatical mistakes, lack of punctuation, and the combination of simple and short sentences with long run-on ones. Furthermore, she repeatedly draws on vivid visual imagery that portrays the rural and domestic environment in which she has grown up. The fluidity of her distinctive voice immerses the reader in Mary's constant flow of thoughts and images, as shown in the following fragment: "[…] i must be ware not to rush at it like the heifers at the gate for if i do that i will get ahead of my self so quick that i will trip and fall and anyway you will want me to start where a person ought to" (Leyshon 3). Mary wants to show her self-control through her writing since, as Leyshon points out: "If she hadn't learned to read and write, her story would never have been told" (Leyshon, Interview). Therefore, Mary's fierce determination shows that the farmgirl wants to break the never-ending loop of silence that has conditioned her upbringing.

Mary's willingness to speak her own truth manifests itself in other forms of self-expression. She is perceived as a sharp-tongued girl who, above all, is eager to stick to her principles: "i been getting in to trouble all my life, i said, but it ain't never stopped

me saying what i think" (Leyshon 7). In addition, the fact that she has no religious faith is yet another reason why Mary is reluctant to trust anything that escapes the evidence of her senses. In any case, however self-conscious she may be, Mary still behaves according to her age and the restrictive conditions which have shaped her personal development. After witnessing her sister's Violet sexual encounter with a boy, the fifteen-year-old farmgirl is genuinely curious about her private sexual behaviour. She puts it in simple terms: "[…], i put my hand down there and i touched me in that place" (Leyshon 18). Mary's childlike innocence in approaching her sexual intimacy, both in terms of actions and words, reflects, not so much sex as a taboo subject, but rather the widespread lack of education of working-class children. This hindrance to the right to learn is also exemplified by Beatrice, another of Mary's sisters, who finds comfort in the Bible even though she is illiterate: "[…] she opens it and turns the pages and she moves her head and her eyes from side to side only she can't read" (Leyshon 13). Mary finds an explanation for her sister's behaviour pattern: "[…] father needs us here on the farm to do the work and he can not afford for us to be away at a school learning things which we would not be able to use for who needs to learn to read words and write them down when they are picking up stones from the earth and putting them in buckets" (Leyshon 13). Accordingly, Hopkins evidences that "[…] many could see little point in schooling for children who went out to work as soon as they were big enough" (72). As a result, the reader can guess that it must have been through writing that Mary has discovered the value of education.

Throughout the novel, Mary keeps voicing her strong-willed desire to act on her own terms. She was born with a crippled leg, which can be objectively considered to be a severe handicap, as she comes from a family of agricultural labourers. In a rural England that only recognised the worth of daily physical work, "physical and mental incapacity continued to plague working people's attempts to attain a better standard of living"

(Benson 59). Mary is, undeniably, the black sheep of the family but, instead of craving validation, the girl embraces her physical disability as one of her hallmarks: "when i was a baby they tied it to some piece of wood to straighten it only it rubbed and there was blood and i screamed till they took it off and let my leg go in the way it wanted to" (Leyshon 12). The female narrator describes her leg as bursting with life, and turns her incurable condition into her very source of empowerment as an individual. Mary does not face social or economic exclusion, nor is she provided with special care on account of her disability. In fact, as the story progresses, Mary is simply expected to adjust to the given circumstances so that she can keep contributing to the family budget.

As regards Mary's family background, her father is the authoritarian figure who imposes hard work as a lifestyle at the household. As is well known, during the British Industrial Revolution, the agricultural workforce was built around family labour: "Up to then the typical working man lived in the country, and he worked on the land, together with his wife and children" (Hopkins 2). The man enforces strict discipline over his daughters, which inhibits the emergence of enjoyable family relationships among them. According to Hopkins, "in agriculture, it had always been customary for children to work as soon as they could be entrusted with some simple task, for example, opening and closing a gate, scaring birds, helping to glean or pick up potatoes" (15). Besides, the man often inflicts physical violence on the girls. At one point, Mary recalls being hit by him and feeling helpless: "he clipped the side of my head so fast and quick there wasn't nothing anyone could've done" (Leyshon 21). As Benson states: "[…] when poor families spent time together, it led not to companionship and enjoyment, but to the generation of all kinds of domestic tension" (109). A connection can be established between this instance of domestic violence and the fact that Mary's father is a misogynist. Mary is fully aware of the reasons behind the man's mistreatment of his daughters. Apparently,

he does not hesitate about sharing his contempt: “he’s stuck with us, he says, and none of us can work as much as a man and none of us has got the sense of a man” (Leyshon 62). Mary’s father longed to have sons, since he always regarded women as inferior to men. The fact that Mary’s father thinks of his daughters as fragile and physically less robust is wonderfully encapsulated by the term “weaker vessels”, which was applied, according to Stonehouse “[…] to all aspects of feminine character and life, and used […] to justify the subordination of women to fathers and husbands” (21). Thus, Mary’s father believes he has the right to control his daughters’ future, as if they were his property. In the case of Mary, her father accepts a job proposal from his well-off neighbours whereby Mary is to become their housemaid. Her father is the one who will get paid, whereas the girl’s reward will simply be to have a bed to sleep in, food to eat and new clothes to wear. The functioning of Mary’s family consequently revolves around the father’s rule, which inevitably drives the female protagonist and her relatives apart.

Additionally, Mary’s mother is emotionally detached from her daughters. She is depicted by Mary as unloving and having an overawing effect: “[…], no fly ain’t never rested on mother since the year seventeen hundred and ninety two when she was a week old and a fly come in the room and rested on her crib” (Leyshon 8). As far as her position in the farm is concerned, she takes on the role of subservient and collaborative wife: “A farmer’s wife was frequently his business partner, taking over the management of the dairy and the poultry” (Burnette 17). This is the reason why the belief that the father is the main and sole representative of authority in the household is deeply ingrained in Mary’s mother: “whose farm is it? who’s the man?” (Leyshon 22). In tune with this, the mother fuels fear and defends the father’s violent reactions, thus reinforcing the oppressive atmosphere in which Mary and her sisters are expected to become decent hard-working women.

Like Mary, her grandfather is physically disabled and has never experienced life outside the farmhouse: “bringing up a calf then milking her. ain’t never done nothing else” (Leyshon 39). He is regarded as a burden, and keeps receiving disparaging comments like the ones the mother mercilessly makes: “might as well be dead for the use he is, she said” (Leyshon 22). In contrast to this form of dehumanisation, Mary considers her grandfather as her only source of affection. The apple room in which he stays is presented as the girl’s oasis of peace amid the surrounding chaos. When Mary is sent to the vicarage, it is obvious that she and the old man keep on protecting and taking care of each other. In her first visit to the farm since her departure, Mary finds out that nobody has washed nor fed him for days. Later on in the story, one of Mary’s sisters feels compelled to visit the protagonist in order to tell her that something is wrong with their grandfather. When they return together to the farm, Mary realises that he has just been complaining in order to get some attention and company from her, since she is the only person who worries about his well-being: “no one comes in and has a laugh with me” (Leyshon 122-123). As regards education, Mary’s grandfather does not fully understand the girl’s need to learn how to read: “you won’t be needing words down here, he said. there ain’t no books to read here. only teats to pull and horses to lead and eggs to gather” (Leyshon 123). However, he ends up encouraging her granddaughter to pursue her goal so that she can read to him some day. As a result, Mary takes her grandfather’s inspiring words –“you’d make an old man proud” (Leyshon 124)– as a promise to herself that she will strive to fulfil against all odds.

4. Setting: The Farm vs. the Vicarage

Despite the abusive conditions at the household, Mary regards the farm as her ultimate place of refuge. The fact that the girl stays true to her roots is illustrated through a number of stylistic choices that concern Mary's writing of the story. As regards the title of the novel, it undoubtedly points at Mary, who claims at the very beginning: "my hair is the colour of milk" (Leyshon 3). What seems to be her most precious physical attribute is assimilated to the yellowish creamy white colour of cow breast milk. In fact, Mary treats the cow at the farm as if it were her dearest friend: "i walked up to her and she let me kneel down by her and lean against her and she was warm and i should have stayed there" (Leyshon 15). This sweet-natured animal provides Mary with a strong sense of security and some kind of emotional support, which emphasises the girl's loneliness there. Animal imagery is also relevant when it comes to representing Mary's limited perspective of the world. The recurrent use of animal similes evidences the fact that the female protagonist has never spent a night away from home. Unsophisticated but beautifully crafted, these similes encapsulate vivid visual descriptions of daily rural scenes at the farm. Mary portrays aspects of her human nature as follows: "my tongue goes fast as the cat's tongue when he laps up the milk from the bucket" (Leyshon 9); "my mind was moving round startled like a new calf and i could not get it to settle" (Leyshon 41); "i perched on the edge of the chair like a hen on the nesting box when she's about to fly off" (Leyshon 79). In addition, the cycle of nature is omnipresent throughout the entire story. The novel is divided into five chapters which follow the gradual change of seasons and, paradoxically enough, both the beginning and the end occur in springtime.

The fact that Mary is sent to work at the vicarage house comes as a shock to her. Concerning domestic labour, "[…] the practice of employing children was also very widespread" (Hopkins 15). Instead of considering her new occupation as an opportunity

to escape her abusive father, Mary is deeply affected and thinks she will not be able to withstand the pressure of being away from home: “i don’t like it here. i never liked it from when i come and i never wanted to leave the farm […]” (Leyshon 57). Mary feels so terribly homesick that she even decides to run away from the vicarage. However, as expected, her father drags her back. On the other hand, Mary’s stay is also conditioned by her lack of experience and knowledge of the world. For instance, she does not know how to tell the time: “we get up when it’s light, go to bed when it’s dark. animals don’t have clocks and they seem to manage” (Leyshon 49). Furthermore, substantial differences in terms of social class contribute to Mary’s feeling of estrangement at the new workplace. When Mary arrives at the vicarage, she meets Edna, also a domestic worker and therefore Mary’s equal. Nevertheless, the woman does not really have much sympathy for her at first: “reckon it was a sty where you was brought up. and your mother and father were pigs” (Leyshon 57). This lack of working-class solidarity on the part of Edna indicates that she aims to achieve middle-class moral standards, even though she has the same low status as the protagonist. At one moment of domestic tension, Edna even slaps Mary on the grounds that the young girl must obey her instructions. One night, Edna eventually opens up her heart to Mary. She takes refuge in the shrouds she keeps under her bed, which symbolise her lifelong dream of raising a family: “this one’s for me, she said, and this one’s for my husband only i ain’t got one. and this for if i have a child that dies” (Leyshon 65). Edna’s obsession with death is rooted in the traumatic experience that she suffered when she lost her child: “[…] only i was on my own when he was born and there was a cord around his neck. and he never breathed” (Leyshon 65). Thus, Edna’s hostile and violent reactions seem to be the coping mechanisms she adopts to try to protect herself from future misery. Nonetheless, she is eventually fired by Mr Graham, the vicar, an event

that gives Mary yet another cogent reason to keep fighting for literacy in order not to end up like her pitiable thirty-two-year-old companion.

The only familiar face for Mary at the vicarage is Ralph, Mr and Mrs Graham's spoilt son. However, his mere presence causes discomfort in the eyes of the female protagonist. He is the boy that forces Violet, one of Mary's sisters, into engaging in non-consensual sexual activity: "o no, she said, you can't do that. i can, he said" (Leyshon 16). As a consequence of that encounter, Violet gets pregnant against her will. When Mary has the opportunity to confront Ralph in his own house, the boy shows no responsibility for his actions. He brands Violet as liar, and even blames her for getting pregnant. To make matters worse, he implies that women end up getting their lot because they are generally promiscuous: "they go off with strange men and then say stupid things like that" (Leyshon 93). Therefore, Ralph takes advantage of his gender and social power position to justify himself and be freed from the burden of becoming a father. Besides, the boy is utterly presumptuous and believes that he has the right to judge Mary on the basis of her physical appearance: "you'd be quite pretty, he said, if not for your leg" (Leyshon 54). After having been so despicably assessed, Mary is nonetheless kissed by Ralph without her consent. Even though the boy might think he is being playful, he is actually being terribly manipulative and ill-mannered when trying to blackmail her for the act he himself has committed: "you don't want me telling him that you keep trying to kiss me and that you creep around the house at night waiting outside my door, making a chase for me" (Leyshon 101).

Mrs Graham, the vicar's wife, turns out to be Mary's only friend at the vicarage. She is severely ill, and the girl's task is to provide her with everything she needs. Thus, Mary is not only the chief caregiver of her grandfather, but also of Mrs Graham, who is at the same time depicted as the mother figure that Mary has always lacked. Mrs Graham

actually enjoys the expressive part of Mary's nature: "i like the way you speak" (Leyshon 49). She accepts the girl's background, and does not try to change her inexperienced and unconventional way of doing things. When Mary prepares some bread and cheese for Mrs Graham –this is what the working-class family usually eats at the farm– the lady is very appreciative of her help, even though the meal does not meet her expectations: "that is not what i normally have […] it's all right. i'll eat it, she said. you made it for me so i will eat it" (Leyshon 61). With the passing of time, both of them develop some kind of bond over their shared feeling of rejection on their respective fathers' part. Mrs Graham confesses: "my father was not a nice man […]. i think i was permanently scared of him. i think that's why i was happy to get married. […] my father's skin was cold when touched him, she said, though i didn't touch him many times. he wanted sons, you see. […] i was his only child, she said, and i was a girl. i don't think he could have been more disappointed" (Leyshon 87-88). After undergoing this painful experience, she was left with no other alternative but seek approval and love in marriage. With regard to Mr Graham, her husband, the woman confidently states: "sometimes that is all we need, a small piece of human kindness" (Leyshon 88). It is precisely this woman's caring soul that actually makes Mary feel committed to her occupation. In fact, it is when Mrs Graham's condition gets worse that Mary for the first time prefers to stay at the vicarage rather than to return to the farm, which makes it clear that Mrs Graham's well-being is the girl's overriding concern. Mrs Graham's death will consequently become a turning point in Mary's life story.

5. Mary's Traumatic Past and Its Impact on the Writing Process

Mr Graham, the local vicar, welcomes the arrival of Mary at the vicarage. In contrast to her father, he is portrayed as a peaceful and kind-hearted man who is seriously concerned about his wife's health. However, he carries an air of intellectual and moral superiority which thoroughly irritates the female protagonist: "you are very sharp, aren't you? he said. i can't say intelligent for you are entirely uneducated, but you do bring something" (Leyshon 111). Mr Graham addresses Mary as if she were a simple-minded and incomplete person belonging to an early stage of evolution: "it's unformed, more animal, primitive. […] i don't mean that as an insult. animals are survivors. they know what to do without having to be told" (Leyshon 111). After Mrs Graham's death, the vicar discovers one of Mary's weaknesses: her inability to read and write. The girl is eager to learn, and thus a connection can be established between Mr Graham's apparent generous offer to teach her and Mary's writing of her story: "i told you i wrote this with my own hand" (Leyshon 113).

It is from this moment onwards that Mr Graham plans to take advantage of Mary's underprivileged position and good nature. First of all, Mr Graham plays the victim by pointing out how lonely he feels after the death of his wife and his son's departure. His ultimate reason for sounding apologetic is to nurture intimacy in his relationship with Mary: "i'm sorry, he said. i don't know why i think it's appropriate to confide in you" (Leyshon 116). By agreeing to be given reading lessons at Mr Graham's study, Mary is eventually caught in a trap: "and that is when i felt his leg press against mine and i moved away for there was not enough room behind the desk with the two chairs. […] and then i felt his hand drop to my knee" (Leyshon 139). After this unexpected first instance of undesired fondling, Mr Graham stops being a mere sinner in the eyes of God to turn into a sexual predator instead. He decides to blackmail the defenceless girl, since her freedom

is more than ever in his hands: “you have to come in to my room, he said, other wise there will be no lesson and then as a result you will not learn to read or write, and i know you want to” (Leyshon 141). Mary does not want her process of learning to be interrupted, so she is forced to pay the price –put up with sexual harassment and limited freedom– in order to keep her promise.

Mary has to undergo a horrible traumatic experience over a rather long period of time, and her resulting trauma is expressed through the recurrent use of certain literary techniques. To quote Whitehead’s words: “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection” (3). When Mary finally discloses the traumatic experience that she has suffered, her repressed anxiety is both revealed and released through her accelerated writing style: “as i write these words i find i can not breathe and i reach for the window and i try to open it to let the air in but i can not and so i lay my head upon my hands and upon my papers” (Leyshon 139). The more traumatic the event, the more fragmented the narrative becomes, thus showing the girl’s emotional exhaustion: “i am stopping now for i need to lay down and rest” (Leyshon 93).

As regards Mary’s traumatised mind, from the beginning of the story there is a sense of foreboding which contributes to building up suspense through the girl’s decision to withhold information. Although Mary is willing to take one thing at a time when disclosing the course of events, the narration shows an urgent pace in keeping with Mary’s constant reminder that she has something confidential to share with her readers. This effect is continually reinforced through the use of the intradiegetic female narrator, who is inside the narrative and chooses to tell the story in retrospective. This narrative voice is also unconsciously dispersed thanks to the incorporation of silences and gaps that

represent Mary's inability to handle such an emotional burden: "and some days i have to stop for i have to think about what it is i have to say. and what it is i want to say. and why it is i am saying it" (Leyshon 83). According to Laub, "The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events" (64). The protagonist feels the urge to verbalise her traumatic experience at the vicarage, but struggles to express it at the level of both form and content. Even though she tries hard to give some temporal order to her traumatic past, she must endure the pain inflicted by those painful memories that keep on haunting her: "at times to have a memory is a good thing for it is the story of your life and without it there would be nothing. but at other times your memory will keep things you would rather never know again. and no matter how hard you try to get them out of your head they come back" (Leyshon 136).

Despite her mental distress, Mary strives to complete the written narration of her life story. In order to do so, the girl relies on a set of strategies that contribute to providing her with some self-assurance. Repetition is one of them: the female narrator uses the same opening sentence at the beginning of the five chapters –"this is my book and i am writing it by my own hand" (Leyshon 3, 33, 83, 129, 169)– and also repeats the year in which those traumatic events took place: "the year was eighteen hundred and thirty by the years of our lord" (Leyshon 5). Mary does not want her identity as a writer to be doubted: "i am mary. m. a. r. y." (Leyshon 68). Furthermore, the girl tries to gain control over herself and muster inner strength by raising her own voice: "stop. look up. out of the window. breathe" (Leyshon 107). On the other hand, Mary demonstrates her honesty and strong commitment to her readers, who are regarded as her confidants throughout her self-opening process: "i know i sound like i was being calm but i was not. my heart was beating so fast it felt like it would leave me" (Leyshon 157). She sticks to her promise of sharing

the truth of what happened, even though the process is utterly painful for her: “i am tired from doing this and my wrist aches from doing this. but i promised my self i would write the truth and the things that happened” (Leyshon 33).

6. Conclusion

This dissertation has tried to explore the value of literacy in the eyes of Mary, the first-person female narrator in *The Colour of Milk* (2012) by Nell Leyshon, who attempts to disrupt the unjust nineteenth-century system that perpetuates male dominance and power. The girl's assertion of this fundamental human right represents her willingness to have a say in her fortune after having fallen victim to her abusive father and Mr Graham, a religious leader who turns out to be a sexual harasser. The fact that Mary is finally able to read and write amid those surrounding appalling conditions makes possible the written narration of the heart-rending story that she has firmly and personally committed to share: "where had been a mess of black lines there was now letters. and words. and sentences. and then i closed the book. and that is when i knew i was done. i could read and i could write. i was done" (Leyshon 155). Once Mary acknowledges her achievement, she is sure about the first decision she will make on her own –murdering Mr Graham– even though she will have to suffer the consequences. Before handing herself over, her only purpose in mind is to return to the farm and show her grandfather that she has faithfully honoured the promise that she would learn how to read: "tell me i made you proud. he looked at me for a while, then said, when you was reading that, you made me proud. yes, he said. you did" (Leyshon 165). Mary's need to urgently record her story is revealed when the girl confesses that she has been writing from prison, where she is waiting for her upcoming execution. Thus, the ending reinforces once again the undeserved marginalisation and punishment of the most wretched and vulnerable individuals in society whose crisis and needs have always been hidden from view.

Through this powerful outstanding female voice, however, readers are allowed access to the realistic plight of an originally illiterate fifteen-year-old farmgirl in the context of nineteenth-century rural England. Mary truthfully describes the strenuous

working conditions in a family of agricultural labourers, as well as class distinctions when she is forced to work as a domestic servant at the vicarage. The leading role of nature at the farmhouse is then exchanged with homesickness in the domestic sphere, where Mary is provided with emotional support and friendship, but also confronted with death and sexual abuse. Therefore, the story also represents the gaze with which Mary looks at her own traumatic past. Without the ability to read and write, her suffering would have probably been in vain. Nevertheless, Mary manages to give shape to her traumatic experiences through a reliable written testimony that reflects both the physical and emotional cost of revisiting her past.

It can be concluded that *The Colour of Milk* (2012) grants Mary the narrative control to reveal her own truth. This story would have remained unheard if it were not for the female narrator's record of the events, which shows that acquiring knowledge leads to power. Mary finds solace in reading and writing, as it allows her to escape both the oppressive socio-economic context to which she belongs and her emotional pain. As a result, the novel portrays the evolution of Mary, who experiences the intellectual and emotional awakening whereby she regards writing as the powerful tool that will eventually set her free, no matter the high price she must pay to achieve her freedom.

7. Works Cited

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