

Bodily Fluids: Female Corporeality as Neo-Victorian Agency in Graham Swift's *Waterland*

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Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) creates a gendered hierarchy among modes of memory through its reliance on a male narrator, Tom Crick, who controls the narrative perspective at the expense of acknowledging women's embodied memories. This bias has been perpetuated in the bulk of criticism addressing the novel from a postmodern historiographic perspective, as this framework ignores the corporeal agency of *Waterland*'s female characters. As a result, women in *Waterland* are constructed as powerless puppets on the grand stage of man-made history. However, theorising the novel in light of the emergence of feminist neo-Victorian criticism in the late 1990s and early 2000s has the potential to redress this critical silence. In order to allow the bodies of *Waterland*'s women to "speak," I shift the critical focus away from postmodern historiography toward a corporeal feminist reading of this foundational neo-Victorian novel. Applying such a theoretical framework redresses the silence toward female experience in both the novel and its criticism. This article, in focusing on Crick's wife Mary and his Victorian ancestor Sarah Atkinson, demonstrates the persistence of nineteenth-century gender ideology in the present, particularly in terms of how the boundaries between normative and pathological femininity are defined. I argue that a neo-Victorian reading of the novel shifts the focus from memory-as-story to memory-as-body, which, in turn, reveals the agency inherent in the bodily actions of *Waterland*'s female characters.

A significant body of criticism on *Waterland* has thus far been reluctant to move beyond the ideological context of the novel's reception. Hayden White's work on postmodern historiography and Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction both came to prominence in the 1980s, the decade of *Waterland*'s publication. Postmodern historiography challenges the nineteenth-century model of history as an objective process of discovery by emphasising the transformative role of narrative in shaping our understandings of the past (White 20). From a postmodern standpoint, history is multiple, contingent and devoid of any inherent meaning "because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories" (White 20). Historiographic metafiction is also concerned with narrative as a means to know the past: it refers to novels – like *Waterland* – which "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 5). These theories continue to underpin critical approaches to the novel that probe its exploration of the fiction / history divide (or lack thereof) and the role of narrative in ordering discordant events from the past into a logical and coherent tale of progress.¹ For John Schad, "like postmodernism, *Waterland* may not allow us even the consolation of an end to the "Grand Narrative" of history since, it is implied, there never was such a narrative" (912). However, such interpretations of *Waterland*, which rely on the 1980s ideological context of the narrative turn in history, promote a view of Crick as a victim of the circumstantial nature of history. In so doing, they obscure his complicity in silencing female voices. While the novel does indeed trouble the notion of history as a Grand Narrative, or a linear pursuit of progress, this does not deny Crick's personal attachment to such models of the past. Ultimately, *Waterland* suggests that Crick's attempts to impose order on past events are futile. However, in making

¹ For discussions on the relationship between fiction, narrative and history in *Waterland* see, for example, James Acheson (2005), John Brewer and Stella Tillyard (1985), Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion (2003), Robert K. Irish (1998), and Del Ivan Janik (1989).

the attempt, he nonetheless silences women's histories in service of his quest for catharsis.

The cathartic function of narrative is a key feature of more recent *Waterland* criticism, inspired by the move toward ethical reading practices and trauma theory in literary studies in the 1990s. However this body of criticism tends to reproduce postmodern historiography's focus on Crick at the expense of examining the gendered dimensions of traumatic histories. Richard Rankin Russell argues for an ethical reading of the text in which the key to Crick's catharsis lies in confronting his role in past events and communicating this to his audience through the medium of storytelling. Similarly, Tamás Bényei and Eric Berlatsky both adopt a psychoanalytic framework in order to argue that Crick's narrative is driven by his desire for meaning and explanation. Berlatsky claims that Crick, "like his mother, embraces the necessity of narration as a therapeutic and comforting re-mapping of the chaotic and disquieting otherness of the past" (269). Nonetheless, such a process is only necessary insofar as Crick, wedded as he is to the patriarchal narrative of progress that demands forward movement, cannot accept Mary's stasis. While Stef Craps's trauma-informed approach attends to Mary's rejection of story, she frames this as a retreat into fantasy, while Crick's curiosity is "is hailed as our greatest asset in search for an ethical way of being in the world" (103). Whether from a postmodern or trauma theory perspective, the continued emphasis on storytelling, curiosity, and catharsis denies the fact that the narrativisation of history in *Waterland* necessitates silencing less powerful groups in service of the dominant narrative.

While there are a limited number of attempts to redress the scholarly silence toward women in the novel, such as Katrina Powell's critique of Swift's traditional representation of female sexuality and Pamela Cooper's analysis of Mary as a "placeholder" for male desire (385), these critiques focus on Mary's victimhood and thus fall short of accounting for embodied acts of resistance on the part of *Waterland*'s women. In contrast, an interdisciplinary approach combining neo-Victorian criticism, corporeal feminism, and a theory of embodied memory, enables the collapse of the victim/agent divide in favour of a more inclusive model that accounts for the embodied subjectivity of *Waterland*'s women. A significant body of criticism within neo-Victorian studies focuses on the genre's capacity to re-imagine Victorian gender ideology by representing female characters who embody non-traditional gender roles (Davies, Heilmann and Llewellyn, King, Llewellyn). Jeanette King provides a key scholarly intervention in this field by demonstrating that feminist writers engage with Victorian-era anxieties about the status of women *not* in order to highlight female oppression but, instead, to champion the oft-unrecognised expressions of agency by Victorian women and their modern-day counterparts (3). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz's foundational work on corporeal feminism, *Volatile Bodies* (1993), problematises traditional understandings of gender by arguing that "misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control" (13). Combining King's approach to feminist neo-Victorian fiction and Grosz's corporeal feminism thus enables a re-evaluation of Mary's various bodily "ailments" as markers of resistance – rather than capitulation – to patriarchal oppression.

Crick's preoccupation with fashioning ordered and coherent narratives from the past elides the way in which Mary resists such narrative ordering and, instead, uses her body to express her relationship to the past. Crick's attempt to shape history, "to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories" (Swift 68), is emblematic of his desire for a Grand Narrative capable of conferring meaning on his

experiences, though the novel suggests such a narrative does not exist. Grosz calls for an alternative vision of accounting for the past, whereby “a completely different set of perspectives – this time based on women’s specificities, experiences, positions, rather than on those of men, who hide themselves and their specificities under the banner of some universal humanity – is possible and needs to be explored” (xi). Turning our attention, as Grosz suggests, to the specificities of the female experience, we can read Mary’s abortion as a challenge to Crick’s universalising discourse. For Mary, the abortion exists not as narrative, but as embodied memory, which she mobilises in service of her challenge to Crick’s perception of women’s bodies as sites of permeability and weakness. In her analysis of two neo-Victorian novels, Gail Jones’s *Sixty Lights* and Helen Humphreys’s *Afterimage*, Kate Mitchell asserts, “the body is engraved by time, etched with past experience. In this sense memory is carried with us bodily, not so much remembered as ‘membered,’ or embodied” (162). In this way, the body “becomes a medium for the repetition of the past, [and] its unbidden persistence in the present” (Mitchell 160). Mary’s memory of the abortion, which is inscribed upon her flesh through her consequent infertility, offers a counter-narrative to Tom’s representation of her history. In this sense, her body is not just a catalogue of memory, but plays a pivotal role in memory-making and memory-remaking.

Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have sought to understand the historical association between the perceived weaknesses of the female body and the justification of patriarchal oppression. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the madwoman figure in nineteenth century literature “is usually in some sense the *author’s* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (78). In *Waterland*, Tom performs a version of this doubling, by continually recalling the figures of Victorian madwoman Sarah Atkinson and seventh-century oracle St Gunnhilda in order to position Mary’s madness as a form of gendered inheritance:

In another age, in olden times, they might have called her holy (or else have burnt her as a witch). One who hears the voice of— One to whom— They might have allowed her the full scope of her mania: her anchorite’s cell, her ascetic’s liberties, her visions and ravings . . . Now she gets benefit of psychiatry. (Swift 328)

Crick casts his institutionalisation of Mary as an inevitable consequence of the inherent instability of the female psyche. As Jane Ussher argues, “the outspoken, difficult woman of the sixteenth century was castigated as a witch, and the same woman in the nineteenth century a hysteric, in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she is described as ‘borderline’ . . . All are irrevocably tied to what it means to be ‘woman’ at a particular point in history” (81). Far from being an intrinsic condition of the mind, madness is temporally, spatially, and culturally contingent. Far from being the result of any individual pathology, Mary’s incarceration in the asylum is the result of her failure to produce a child and, by extension, to embody late-twentieth-century ideals of womanhood.

In *Waterland*, the shifting meanings ascribed to women’s embodied experiences mirror the Fenland landscape that permeates the narrative. For Pamela Cooper, “porous as the Fenland itself, the woman’s body signals through its enterability a general instability of boundaries” (387). However, we need to be alert to the way in which Crick actively *constructs* this affinity between women and water. He connects St Gunnhilda, Sarah and Mary not only to each other, but also to the land-reclamation project of his male ancestors and, in this way, “each of the key women [in *Waterland*] becomes symbolically over-determined by the stories that attach to them” (Mitchell 87). For Crick, female bodies are fluid entities that, like the River Leem, “have a troublesome habit of bursting their banks, [and are troublingly prone to resisting male control] changing their course and every so often becoming choked with silt”

(Swift 72). Women's bodies, like the Fenland waters, require constant (male) observation and intervention. In this way, the "sluices and staunches" built to control the flow" of the River Leem (Swift 75) are akin to the asylum and its gates, which Crick moves freely between after "deposit[ing] my wife, along with certain personal articles, pending psychiatric treatment" (Swift 326). Tom's investment in constructing these feminine lineages is driven by his need to displace responsibility for Mary's madness. His active participation in the patriarchal project of stemming the flow of women's embodied subjectivity belies his professed reverence for Natural History and its imperviousness to human intervention.

Sarah Atkinson's bodily actions provide a counter-narrative to Crick's presentation of her as the archetypal Victorian madwoman. In re-imagining the Victorian era as a "revolutionary, progressive phase" (Swift 334), Crick lauds the Atkinson men as "humble champions of Progress" while Sarah is relegated to the status of a "living fossil" (206). However, Sarah's embodied fluidity continually disrupts Crick's patriarchal desire to define her: she is at once "Guardian Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunnhilda-come-again" (99) and "stark-mad" (89). Like Crick, Sarah's husband Thomas Atkinson is motivated by guilt to pathologise his wife's experiences. Following his attack on Sarah, Atkinson attempts to restore his sense of control by seeking advice from a variety of (male) experts under the guise of curing her:

And that the reply of the wizened occultist . . . drove the last rivet of grief into old Tom's soul: that Thomas Atkinson, as Thomas himself well knew, was only receiving the punishment he merited, and that, as for his wife, no magic in the world could bring her out of the state which she herself – had not Thomas looked closely enough into her eyes? – wished to remain in. (85-86)

According to the occultist, Sarah's body contains an alternative account of her illness: one that is, in fact, not an illness at all, but rather a knowingly and deliberately undertaken vow of silence (Powell 70). Its power lies in denying Atkinson the salvation for his sins that he so desperately seeks. For Mitchell, "Sarah Atkinson impedes the onward and upward march of the Atkinson dynasty, and by extension, of Progress, indeed history itself, by subverting her husband's energies for expansion and redirecting them toward herself" (88). However, Crick remains deeply suspicious of the extent of Sarah's influence. He suspects her of possessing "the gift to see and shape the future" (88), a talent she uses to undermine Atkinson's authority over his sons: "to them indeed she imparted, perhaps in plain words, perhaps by some other mystical process of communication, wisdom and exhortation" (88). Despite Crick's attempt to emphasise the visible, audible actions of his male ancestors – Sarah's experiences are largely confined to a chapter titled "About the Rise of the Atkinsons" – her silent machinations continue to haunt his narrative of Progress.

Crick emphasises the humane treatment of mental illness in the late-twentieth century by framing Mary's condition in the terminology of contemporary psychology. However, slippages in his language and [word missing] in theorising Mary's malady indicate his attachment to Victorian discourses on madness and sexuality. Despite his reference to her condition as "schizophrenia" (152) and treatment by a "psychiatrist" (309) he cannot help but describe "the cloistered precincts of this asylum –" (which itself has allusions to the celibacy of cloistered nuns like St Gunnhilda) before correcting himself "that is, hospital" (327). According to King, Victorian anxieties concerning female sexuality led to fears "that any apparent 'angel' could be harbouring a potential 'whore' if sufficient supervision were not exercised" (23). In Crick's re-imagining of the Victorian past, his ancestor Sarah Atkinson's suspected adultery is punished first by a violent blow to the head, delivered by her husband Thomas, and, later, by institutionalisation at the hands of her sons (Swift 83, 100). Both Crick

and Atkinson are threatened by their wives' sexual agency and alleged infidelity: Sarah and Mary (whom Crick suspects of sleeping with his brother) are "written and rewritten by and as male desire" (Mitchell 88). Though Crick invokes modern understandings of madness, he is driven by the same obsession for control as his ancestor: "Is this a case (like Thomas Atkinson?) of doting solicitude leading to jealous imaginings? For Mrs Crick, you'll have observed, children, even from those atrocious newspaper photographs, is a well-preserved woman" (132). Crick's tacit acknowledgement of the similarities between himself and Atkinson is part of "his subjective desire to present himself in the best possible light" (Acheson 91). In pathologising Mary's behaviour, he fashions himself as the doting husband charged with protecting the honour of his vulnerable wife. In the nineteenth century, "the greatest danger to a woman's mental health, and to her moral worth, came from her sexuality" (King 20-21). However, the same is true in the novel's 1980s present, as Mary is punished for her multiple failings as "woman": first her teenage promiscuity and later her failure to reproduce (Powell 65). As Tom leaves the institution in which he places Mary, "his historian's eye takes in . . . on the pink granite plinth . . . the word which modern preference for plain 'Hospital' or, begrudgingly, 'Mental Hospital,' cannot . . . erase: '. . . Asylum'" (327). Though the terminology used to describe female madness shifts across the centuries, Tom's narrative indicates the persistence of Victorian era anxieties toward female sexual agency in the present.

Crick struggles to transform Mary's bodily memory of her abortion into a self-affirming and coherent narrative of male control over female reproductive rights and, for this, Mary is punished. For Mitchell, Mary's "abortion, which disrupts teleological history, marks too her rejection of history, stories and things made to happen and the meaning that accrues to them" (81). This rejection of story elicits disappointment in Crick, who aligns Mary's mid-life return to religion with her behaviour after the abortion: "he knows that Mary locked herself away of her own free will. Though he does not know . . . whether God spoke to her (then too) as He spoke, above the howls of the demons, to St Gunnhilda; whether she found Salvation; whether, perhaps, she was visited by the ghost of Sarah Atkinson" (Swift 122-23). While Crick seeks to emphasise the irrationality of female behaviour, the underlying issue here is that all three women in the novel voluntarily and deliberately employ strategies that place their bodies outside the reach of male influence: St Gunnhilda "surviv[es] on nothing but her prayers" (25), Sarah undertakes a vow of silence that "cannot be reclaimed" (85), and Mary retreats into religion, "drifting away" from Crick (133).

Creating an affinity between Sarah and Mary legitimises (to himself if no one else) Crick's institutionalisation of her through the rehearsal of a historical precedent of male intervention in female (in)sanity. However, it is important to note that he, not Mary, is descended from the Atkinson line. As such, the most salient similarity between these two women is the extent to which they resist their husbands' attempts to control them. Like Sarah, Mary engages in her own form of deception: in the asylum, she "stares, vigilantly and knowingly (the common ruse of the inmate: it's *they* who are mad, not me), at those frail, playground children" (328). This passage indicates not the ruse of the inmate, but the ruse of the narrator: Crick's construction of Mary as madwoman is self-serving and inaccurate. For Mary, the madhouse is a refuge – and an imperfect one at that – for the independent woman seeking an escape from patriarchal control.

Tom considers Mary's madness to be a by-product of her inability to fashion the traumatic memories of her abortion into an ordered, coherent narrative. According to Craps, "the unassimilated event, which brings time to a halt, goes on happening in the world of the

trauma: it continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (74). While this suggests that Crick’s attempt to transform trauma into narrative is futile, he nonetheless remains convinced that the route to catharsis lies in storytelling:

First there is nothing; then there is happening. And after the happening, only the telling of it. But sometimes the happening won’t stop and let itself be turned into memory. So she’s still in the midst of events . . . which haven’t ceased. Which is why it’s impossible to get through. Which is why she can’t cross into the safe, sane realm of hindsight . . . (326-27)

Far from having an intrinsic mental disturbance, Mary is deemed mad because she cannot order her bodily recollections in a way that affirms Crick’s narrative of patriarchal progress. He cannot – or, more aptly, *will not* – afford Mary’s embodied memories the same credence as his own acts of storytelling, as this would undermine his authority as narrator:

Children, women are equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and to issue in consequence . . . And it was Tom Crick, history-teacher-to-be who . . . was responsible for filling the then avid and receptive vessel of Mary Metcalf, later Mrs Crick. (48)

Mary’s abortion, as an act of “unhappening,” quite literally destroys Tom’s “issue.” He cannot acknowledge Mary’s reproductive autonomy because “for the Atkinsons, invested in empire and progress, paternity is related to the desire to control reality, to shape the future” (Mitchell 75). Crick’s obsession with male acts of “happening” and his reductive conceptualisation of women’s bodies work together to deny the existence of Mary’s bodily autonomy.

The teenage Mary’s decision to terminate her pregnancy without recourse to Crick demonstrates her embodied agency. While Craps claims that Mary’s decision to abort is motivated by “a sense of guilt about the death of their friend Freddie Parr” (74), I argue that it represents her determination to challenge the idea of man-made history. In discussing the pregnancy with Crick, “Mary says firmly: ‘I know what I’m going to do’ . . . And turns and leaves him sitting beneath the bank and doesn’t move her head or speak when he gets up and shouts: ‘What’s that then, Mary? *What* are you going to do?’” (emphasis in original; 137). Here, Crick is forced to adopt the passive position – he is no more in control of Mary’s decision than he is able to coerce the plan from her. Her power to make “something . . . un-happen” erases Crick’s claim to paternity and, in so doing, his desire to leave a legacy (294). Though Crick attempts to fill this void through teaching, Mary’s ability to make do “with nothing” threatens his grasp on reality (131). For Mitchell, “Mary’s disruption is an attempt to abort history itself. Mary’s empty vessel has been filled, things have been made to happen inside her, just as history is made to happen within an empty reality” (89). Her body refuses to be contained by the narrative boundaries Tom seeks to impose upon her. Instead, the memory of Mary’s abortion is embodied as infertility, thereby acting as a continual reminder of her power to intervene in history. Tom’s obsession with storytelling is no match for the fluid, shifting nature of Mary’s body: “he’s already reached the limits of his power to explain, just as his wife (a once dogged and patient woman) has ceased to be realistic – has ceased to belong to reality” (113-14). Mary’s abortion and its re-enactment decades later, in the form of the kidnapping, demonstrates not a loss of reality, as Tom would have it, but the presentation of an alternative reality where women’s reproductive rights are separated from male desire.

Mary’s present-day kidnapping of a child from the supermarket is an attempt to express the

lingering trauma of her abortion through embodied action. According to Powell, “while maternity in this novel symbolizes normality, infertility symbolizes unnaturalness and a lack of completeness only attained through motherhood” (71). In response to Mary’s attempt to reclaim the socially revered role of mother, Crick redoubles his efforts to control her: “the wife pulls. The husband pulls. Baby blankets unravel . . . As the husband pulls he cannot suppress the sensation that he is pulling away part of his wife. He is tearing the life out of her” (267). While Craps asserts that “Mary re-enacts past traumatic experiences in contemporary reality” (75), she does not examine Crick’s role in re-traumatizing Mary. Plucking the child from Mary’s body, as Tom once plucked a duck during her abortion, is a violent, non-consensual act designed to punish Mary for her expression of agency. While Crick removes the physical baby, he cannot remove the trace of Mary’s lost maternity: “she hands it over, in a trance. But it’s still there really, still in her arms. Always will be,” (310). For Powell, women in *Waterland* “are either mothers or insane” (71) but, unlike Mary, Sarah’s status as mother is a redeeming feature that mitigates her alleged madness (Powell 63). Returning the baby prevents Mary’s reclamation of a maternal identity and thus enables Crick’s institutionalisation of her as a madwoman. However, Crick’s assumption that Mary’s trauma can be confined within the walls of the asylum – or, more ludicrously, cured – demonstrates his limited understanding of embodied memory. Mary’s trauma cannot be excised because it resides within her very flesh.

In contrast to the kidnapping, where Tom plays an instrumental role in returning the stolen baby, he is positioned firmly – and quite literally – off-stage during Mary’s abortion. This is a female-only realm, involving a partnership between Mary and the local “witch,” Martha:

‘An’ you best make yisself scarce, bor. You best sit you outside quiet an’ not git in owd Martha’s way. An’ stop that blubbering’ . . . And so, while, inside, Martha Clay ministers, as only she can minister, to Mary, your future history teacher sits outside and dutifully begins to pluck a duck. (306)

Though the losses of both children inflict trauma on Mary, the abortion is distinguished by Mary’s consent. According to Gilbert and Gubar, “from a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects . . . but from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation (79). As such, Tom’s attempt to demonise Martha by labelling her a “witch” who “got rid of love children” (296-97), is born of his indignation that such a person – such a *woman* – can perform the role of accomplice in Mary’s abortion while he himself is excluded. In this collaborative pact between Martha and Mary, the abortion is symbolic of the female body’s capacity to rewrite its past, present, and future. Crick is tasked with discarding the remains of the foetus in the pail: “what the future’s made of” (307), and though Martha instructs him not to look, he cannot resist: “I howled. A farewell glance” (315). Craps reads Tom’s determination to look in the pail as emblematic of his “resolve not to blind himself to the true horror of the abortion” (76). However, I argue that his disavowal of Martha’s instructions represents his desire to wrest control back from these women, that in bearing witness to his loss of posterity, he seeks to reclaim it. Despite this, Mary’s actions cannot be overwritten by Crick’s narrative. The very act of reversing Tom’s impregnation of her – of making it “unhappen” – allows Mary to assert her autonomy by undermining Tom’s power over her body and, by extension, her embodied memories.

As critics, we must be prepared to read not only the explicit narrative Crick presents, but also find ways to account for the implicit, non-vocalised, forms of “speaking” one’s memories. His narrative is designed to endear himself to his audience and, in so doing, scapegoat his

own misogyny onto his Victorian ancestors, so that his culpability is significantly reduced, if not negated. However, Mary's embodied memories disrupt Crick's quest for narrative catharsis by troubling his reliance on storytelling as a means to order the past. Her abortion, which destroys Crick's legacy, demonstrates that women are capable of erasing men's contributions to history. These acts of erasure, when controlled by women themselves, need to be afforded the same level of agency that Crick applies to male acts of happening. However, Crick actively discourages viewing Mary in this light. Mary's action can only be construed in the negative, as making something *unhappen*. Attending to Mary's embodied actions in the novel challenges the association between women and powerlessness by suggesting that, paradoxical as it may seem, an embodied act of "unhappening" can be just as influential in shaping history and constructing cultural memory as an act of happening. From a feminist neo-Victorian perspective, *Waterland* is thus revealed to be about both the voiced memories of (male) narrators *and* the memories of (female) bodies, whose capacity for corporeal agency has thus far been neglected in criticism of the novel. Though *Waterland* is temporally removed from the explosion of feminist neo-Victorian criticism in late 1990s and early 2000s, the novel's female characters can nonetheless be read as exemplars of Jeanette King's feminist neo-Victorian women. Viewing Mary and Sarah in this way intervenes in the critical bias toward postmodern historiography by focusing upon their capacity for bodily autonomy, rather than the narrative determinism inherent in Tom's account.

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