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# Examination, Surveillance and Confession in Victorian and Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Texts

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That childhood, adolescence and adulthood are culturally constructed categories is almost a truism in critical writing on children's literature. However, the jury is still out on the extent to which modern views of childhood constitute what Michel Foucault calls an 'epistemic break' with Victorian conceptions. In his preface to *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, Don Richard Cox says that 'the Victorian period still holds an attraction for us, because it is in the nineteenth century that we find the true origin of our twentieth-century world and sensibilities' (1984, p.vii). Cox and James Kincaid (1992) follow Foucault in identifying modern conceptions of childhood as originating in the Victorian period. Other commentators have proposed that ideas of childhood based on Victorian ideals and values have been eroded or have disappeared altogether during the twentieth century (Jenks 1996; Postman 1983); and Beverley Pennell and Andrew Calcutt see major changes occurring to familiar conceptualisations of childhood because of a reduction or removal of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood (Pennell 2003; Calcutt 1998).

The lives of real children and the daily circumstances of Western childhoods have changed profoundly over the past one hundred years or so. Twentieth-century children are educated, dressed, parented, receive medical treatment and have legal rights very different from their Victorian counterparts. These real life changes have certainly been incorporated into literary representations of children and childhood from the 1990s. This essay is part of a larger PhD thesis that argues that despite such changes, recent representations of children in English, Australian and American young adult fiction have much in common with those in texts of the Victorian era.

Despite the overt differences in themes and foci between the Victorian period and the 1990s, fictional children from both eras are still represented as subject to, and constructed by, disciplinary forces. My focus in this essay is on the extent to which tropes of examination, surveillance and confession appear in texts from both eras as elements of a regime intended to form adolescent subjects. To do this I will draw on Foucault's theories about how discourse constructs human subjects, focusing on a group of Victorian and late twentieth century texts published in England, Australia

and America. Frederic Farrar's *Eric; or, Little by Little* (from now on referred to as *Eric*), John Marsden's *Dear Miffy* (1997), Sue Welford's *Secrets* (1990) are discussed in relation to forms of examination, confession and the effectiveness of penalties. Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), Helen Barnes's *Killing Aurora* (1999) and Maureen Stewart's *Shoovy Jed* (1997) are used to explore the idea of the self-policing subject. Other novels from both periods are mentioned briefly for additional illustration.

Foucault's theories about the construction of subjectivity through discourse, discipline and punishment appear principally in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (1976) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), where he argues that power is instantiated in knowledge and that disciplinary practices produce régimes designed to know and to control human subjects. Foucault identifies the use of the confession, which was introduced within Catholicism as a religious practice in the seventeenth century, as a central technique of power (1976, pp. 20-21). He describes the act of confessing as:

*...a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.*  
(1976, pp.61-62)

For punishment to be administered, according to Foucault's theories, deviance from the norm must be identified and measured. Strategies of surveillance by which parents, school authorities and official bodies (such as police and social welfare officials) monitor behaviour and measure deviance take different forms but nevertheless appear frequently in both the Victorian and more recent texts. Peer groups are an exception to these generally adult-controlled disciplinary forces. In fact the peer group is one of the most powerful enforcers of normative adolescence as peer groups have the greatest access to the individual for observation, examination and disciplinary action. Punishment inflicted on individuals by the peer group can include ostracisation, bullying, or teasing. Institutions may promulgate discursive truths but the persistence and effectiveness of these truths

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to shape identity, requires that they prevail in society and impact on the individual from a variety of origins and in different modes.

The use of peer groups to enforce normative behaviour occurs in the novels of both eras, particularly and unsurprisingly, in those novels set in schools. The power of the peer group to punish is explicit in *Eric*. In his first few weeks at school Eric is bullied persistently. The narrator explains this as an inherent function of boyhood, ‘a pseudo-instinctive cruelty’, ‘a wild trick of the ancestral savage’ (p.36). The new boy is being ‘tested and weighed. Their place in the general estimation is not yet fixed and the slightest circumstances are seized upon to settle the category under which the boy is to be classed’ (p.36). The text represents the peer group as functioning according to nature and having an effect similar to the Darwinian concept of natural selection; that the boys are in fact following culturally constructed dictates about acceptable standards of British behaviour is not explored or acknowledged. Likewise, in *Dear Miffy* the peer group can be seen functioning as an institution that creates discursive truths, sets norms, examines and disciplines individuals and generally regulates behaviour. ‘Dobbing’, ‘sneaking’ or ‘lagging’, that is, reporting the misdemeanour of a peer to the authorities, is represented in the school worlds of *Dear Miffy* and *Eric* as a major betrayal and is severely punished by the group. On one occasion Tony accuses Miffy of being ‘a lagging bitch’ for having reported Nick, one of Tony’s friends, to the school principal. This is only a minor incident in the plot but it reveals a complex network of peer relationships in the school and a code of conduct that has strict rules of honour. As the accusation is untrue Miffy is shown to respond with justifiable and (to Tony, acceptable) violence given the slur to her honour. Tony’s peer group, like Eric’s, has strong normative values, and discipline is meted out to those who transgress its rules.

Rites of passage and the quest plot type, so popular in young adult fiction, are another frequently used application of the concept of the examination. In the bildungsroman the protagonist’s progress is charted as the young person encounters life’s trials, after which her/his maturity is examined to determine if s/he has achieved the norm that would indicate passage from childhood to adulthood. The

examination is also textually represented in traditional forms such as medical and academic examinations, which allow very specific categorisation of the individual. Medical examinations confer or deny physical and/or psychological normality. Thus, in *Killing Aurora* and *Secrets*, weight loss is measured against a norm and decreed extreme enough to define the protagonists, Aurora and Leigh, as manifesting psychological pathologies. In Victorian school stories such as *Eric* the examination is used regularly to rank the boys and place them in a hierarchy. Although ostensibly used to measure intellectual achievement, outcomes such as a continuously low place in the academic hierarchy or a drop in performance also indicate a commensurately low standard of morality, such that Eric’s wildly fluctuating personal behaviour can easily be read through his place in class.

The informal examination involved in the rite of passage can be passed or failed in the same way as more formal examinations. In *Secrets*, Jason is represented as passing while Tony in *Dear Miffy* and Eric Williams in *Eric* fail. Jason’s status at the end of *Secrets* indicates that he has made significant progress towards adulthood; he has attained the markers of a socially successful adolescence: a girlfriend, a part time job and his first car. Failure is just as clearly signalled in the lives of Tony and Eric; both are outcasts from mainstream society and while Jason gains in agency, control and influence, Tony and Eric do not. Both boys appear beset by temptation and fall at every opportunity, and neither is represented as successfully mastering any milestones towards adulthood. Jason on the other hand makes all the right choices: he takes risks but he judges correctly. Tony and Eric conversely make wrong choices, hurting themselves and others both physically and emotionally. Success and failure can be very clearly read in the representations of Tony and Jason’s sexual experiences. Jason chooses a partner who is mature, supportive and compassionate, he negotiates problems in the relationship with honesty and achieves a happy and mutually satisfying partnership. This could not contrast more strongly with the disastrous relationship Tony has with Miffy. Because of his low self-esteem Tony is quite overwhelmed by Miffy’s attentions, leaving him blind to the catastrophic direction in which the clearly inappropriate liaison is headed.

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There are two major differences between the representations of Tony and Eric on the one hand, and Jason on the other. Firstly, Jason talks to his mother, to his sister, to his sister's psychiatrist and to his girlfriend and to his mother's boyfriend; he hears their problems and they hear his. Eric and Tony on the other hand are unable to fully share their guilt and their feelings. They do not fully confess and therefore they do not expose themselves to the ultimately healing consequences of confession; that is, to be 'judge[d], punish[ed], forgive[n], console[d] and reconcile[d]' by the confessor as outlined by Foucault (1976, p.62).

It is explicitly promoted in both *Eric* and *Dear Miffy* that this inability to 'tell all' to an adult leads the protagonists further into strife and prevents them from truly reforming. Tony repeatedly states that he has no capacity to talk about himself and that he would have enhanced his opportunities if he had been able to do so; he says that: 'they try and teach you here ...that it's better to talk about stuff, but I'm still getting an F in that' (p. 9); 'Talking: that's what I should have done more of' (p. 55); 'When I left your house that terrible day...I nearly went to a shrink. I thought I would find one and tell him what I'd done.... I never did go to one of course...it wouldn't have helped anyway' (p. 99). Eric is similarly unable to fully give himself in confession and it is this inability that ultimately causes his death. The novel is full of references to speaking out, to confessing to wrongdoing, and to the consequences of missed opportunities to speak. The violent ups and downs of Eric's behaviour can be charted through his partial confessions and prayer. His school life is characterised by his many falls into disobedience, dissolution and academic failure, and each of these episodes is closed by a traumatic climax at which point Eric confesses his sins to his teacher and mentor Mr Rose and to God through sincere prayer. Following confession comes a resolution to do better, but as time passes the strength of his resolutions fade and Eric sinks back into his disreputable ways. During Eric's fallen periods he is shown as unable to find relief through prayer and he is also constrained in his conversation with the better boys, as he is too ashamed of himself to speak to them.

Speaking and silence are thus integrally bound up with Eric's welfare, with silence always indicative of failure

and disrepute. His first foray into the town to buy alcohol is typical of this and the episode is littered with missed opportunities to speak. Eric feels great shame and guilt as he and his friend Wildney embark on their escapade but he does not 'dare to suggest this' (p. 206) in case his hesitation is taken for cowardice. Again, on reaching the public-house Eric is disgusted but remains silent (p. 207). Wildney is apprehended but the master Mr Rose strongly suspects Eric and interviews him about the incident, in a passage which repeatedly refers to Eric's silence: 'Eric was silent', 'Eric still silent', and again, 'Eric, still silent' (p. 213). This sequence represents three missed opportunities to confess and precipitates a further bout of drinking on Eric's part, which eventually brings repentance, confession and resolution, beginning the cycle again. The decisive moments in Eric's life are always indicated by his failure to speak: 'For half an hour, in an agony of struggle with himself Eric lay silent. Since Bull's last words nobody had spoken. They were going to sleep. It was too late to speak now Eric thought. The moment passed by for ever; Eric had listened without objection to foul words, and the irreparable harm was done. How easy it would have been to speak!' (p. 100). The importance of speaking and confession is emphasised: 'Ah Eric! Moodiness and petulance cannot save you, but prayerfulness would; *one word* Eric...' (p. 101, my emphasis).

The second significant difference between Eric and Tony's lack of success at navigating their way through rites of passage, and the successful progress of Jason, is that Eric and Tony are both depicted as living in worlds where destiny robs individuals of the power to change. Both novels represent life as a sequence of 'unbreakable chains of consequence...it is a scene of incessant struggle against temptation, and in which the first step leads irresistibly to the last' (Marcus 1974 p.19). Moments of foreboding and hints of the doom that will befall the two protagonists abound in both novels. Tony feels the wings of the dark angels beating (p. 82); but for Eric it is the lack of angels that indicates his fall: 'Eric lay silent. The darkness was not broken by the flashing of an angel's wing, the stillness was not syllabled by the sound of an angel's voice' (p.100).

Foucault discusses how the power of punishment resides partly in the ability of the populace to read certain 'punitive

signs' (1975, p.94). These signs rest on six rules. Two of these are 'the rule of lateral effects' and 'the rule of perfect certainty'. The former rule refers to the concept that the 'penalty must have its most intense effects on those who have not committed the crime'; the latter refers to the idea that 'each crime and the advantages to be expected of it must be associated [with] the idea of a particular punishment.... the link from one to the other must be regarded as necessary and unbreakable' (Foucault 1975, p. 95). The inexorable downward spiral in which both Tony and Eric are trapped provides just the kind of link between crime and punishment that Foucault suggests is required to maximise the effectiveness of penalty. The 'lateral effect' flows from the inexorable sequence of events presented in these two novels, as readers learn to recognise the infallibility of the process whereby the penalty follows the crime. For a penal system to be truly effective as a deterrent within a society the link between the crime and the punishment must be presented in the form of a 'natural sequence; punishment [must] not appear as the arbitrary effect of a human power' (Foucault 1975, p.105). In both *Eric* and *Dear Miffy*, the link between wrongdoing and its consequences are presented as something fated or predetermined by a force outside the control of the two protagonists. The two novels thus afford clear examples of the effective penalty described by Foucault.

There are moments of hope for Eric in the text, because with each failure comes repentance and resolution, but these false promises come to nothing and Eric's slide into delinquency is inexorable. Eric and Tony's classification as delinquents ultimately locates them outside mainstream society, and encloses them in an alternate world with its own set of norms, examinations and disciplinary processes. As Eric sinks lower he ceases to compare himself with the better boys and is ashamed to be in their company because it highlights his own failings. Once immersed in the lowest set of boys Eric is measured against their standards and tested to see how bad, rather than how good he can be. Tony likewise identifies himself as a delinquent; after his assault on his father's girlfriend he says, 'I went from being a naughty boy to being a fucking juvenile fucking delinquent' (p.30). In a similar way Tony is attracted to Miffy because of her reputed 'badness'; in Tony's world

where deviation from the norm is negative, bad is good and good is bad.

Eric and Tony become cases, 'juvenile delinquents', and through this objectification they gain a definition, becoming known by their deviancy. Caught in the web of institutional discourse that generates and promulgates the truths about teenage delinquency, the individual, as Foucault says, is 'maintained in his individual features, in his particular evolution, in his own aptitudes or abilities, under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge' (1975, p.190). Once identified as delinquent these two find themselves being measured against a norm of deviancy rather than against an ideal. For Eric his only hope of reform is when he is compared to the exemplary boys, but once he has been reclassified by his House Master as one of the reprobates he becomes hopelessly ensnared in the cycle of failure and repentance.

Physical punishment is shown as failing to prevent either boy sliding further into delinquency and degeneracy; rather it lowers their self-esteem and confirms their low status. The punishment Tony receives from his family and the police is brutish and violent, that received from his school is misguided, inappropriate and administered by adults with no insight into his psychological state. Tony sees his punishments as persecutory and related to the authority's attitude to him, rather than to his actual behaviour: 'I just felt like everyone was putting shit on me every chance they got' (p.27); 'I was getting it on the streets, getting it at my uncle and aunt's, and if that wasn't enough, I was getting it at school' (p.28). Eric also responds negatively to physical punishment: 'Corporal punishment, however necessary and desirable for some dispositions always produced on Eric the worst effects. He burned, not with remorse or regret, but with shame and violent indignation' (p. 116).

According to Foucault, from around 1760 punishment began to focus less on cruelty, less on pain and more on kindness, respect and humanity. The soul rather than the body became the site of punishment: 'the expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations' (Foucault 1975, p.16). Over time the notion of punishment gave way to modern concepts of sentencing that aims to 'correct, reclaim, [and] cure'

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(Foucault 1975, p.10). In *Eric*, the contrast between physical punishment and a kinder, more understanding approach to wrongdoing is repeatedly made. Mr Rose's continuing belief in Eric does more to help him than any of the thrashings he receives at the hands of the other masters, doing all 'that could be done, by gentle firmness and unwavering kindness, to recall his pupil to a sense of duty' (p.117). After praying with Mr Rose, Eric rises 'from his knees full of the strongest resolutions, and earnestly promised amendments for the future' (p. 118). The contrast between the negative effects of punishment and the positive outcomes of encouragement is not drawn so clearly in *Dear Miffy*, but the text proposes that the pleasure Tony gets from his relationship with Miffy inspires him to positive behaviour that no amount of punishment from his school or from his aunt and uncle has been able to achieve. After his first physical encounter with Miffy Tony 'floats' home and 'was nice to [his] uncle and aunt for at least half an hour' (p.44); he also stops 'wagging' school (p. 54). The only positive interaction Tony has with a teacher is when Mr Hammond visits him in the correctional institution; this small gesture of compassion towards Tony motivates him to one of the very few positive actions we see him make, that of making 'a bit of an effort in gym' (p. 88).

Both boys are clearly represented as responding to trust and compassion rather than physical punishment. Yet neither is shown to capitalise on the opportunities to reform which they receive through the kindness of others. For a curative type of sentence to be effective subjects must open their souls to the observation and examination of those administering the cure. The process through which this was intended to occur, according to Foucault, was that of confession. As I have noted, both Tony and Eric are shown failing repeatedly to give access to their inner selves to those in authority or to examine their own consciences sufficiently for reformation to occur. This inability to submit themselves for examination is depicted in the texts as a major block preventing the boys from reaching their potential and from transforming themselves through experience.

His teachers have told Tony that there is no future for him and no hope for him if he continues to get into trouble at school and with the police; his criminal and antisocial behaviour will only lead him further and further into

trouble. The text makes it clear to the reader that Tony's behaviour is not an innate trait but something that has developed in response to his parent's abuse; moreover, the text draws attention to Tony's exceptionally high IQ, and to his response to positive stimulus. This knowledge about Tony allows the reader to speculate on what he might have been able to realise if circumstances had been different. Indeed the emotional impact of the text depends on the reader responding with 'if only's': if only Tony's parents had not abandoned him, if only his teachers understood him, if only he had not stabbed his father's girlfriend or hit Miffy's mother. The chain-reaction structure of the text means that 'if only' one step was interrupted Tony might have been able to escape his fate, and one of the possible interrupting mechanisms that the novel represents is Tony's failure to acknowledge to himself and to others the full extent of his misbehaviour. The text represents this failure as 'denial' (pp. 44, 56,78). In *Eric* confession is linked to concepts of honesty, honour, courage and manliness. It is recognised that the individual will 'feel better' after the confession has been made and any subsequent punishment accepted, but the primary focus of confession is acknowledgment of one's sins before God and a human confidant. In *Dear Miffy*, however, confession and denial have lost any link with honour and honesty and have taken on an almost purely psychological or medical meaning. Tony's refusal to talk about what he has done (assaulted Miffy's mother) is labelled by staff at the correctional facility as a sign that he is 'in denial' (pp.44; 56; 78), a term used by Freud to describe the ego's 'reaction to an intolerable external reality' (Freud 1984, p.227). Tony also claims that the staff believe that he is 'psycho' for not speaking to them (p.88).

Foucault describes how obtaining confessions and the effect of confession were recodified as 'therapeutic operations' (1976, p. 67). Speaking specifically in regard to sexual behaviour, Foucault states that it was 'no longer accounted for simply by the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression, but was placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological' (1976, p. 67). Foucault describes this change as occurring through the nineteenth century. While Foucault's statement was directed at changes in the discourse of sexuality, it is apparent when comparing *Dear Miffy* and *Eric* that a corresponding change has occurred in how behaviour is constructed. Eric's behaviour is couched



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squarely in moral terms, whereas the moral rights and wrongs of Tony's behaviour are barely referred to and his delinquency is seen as a result of physical and psychological abuse. Whereas confession for Tony would lead to a 'cure' rather than to punishment, for Eric the primary consequence of confession is punishment. Like Tony, Eric is not only unable to admit his wrongdoings to the authorities, but he is also unable to admit his wrongdoings to himself. However, unlike Tony, Eric's 'denial' is referred to in terms of an unexamined conscience, rather than as a symptom of a psychological illness. Integrating confession into the medical discourse of the nineteenth century 'altered the scope of the confession; it tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labour of a confession' (Foucault 1976, p. 66). As mentioned, the focus of confession in *Eric* is on the disclosure of wrongdoing, so that to fail to confess is construed as dishonesty. In *Dear Miffy* the focus has moved to revealing the subjects psychological truth through confession as a healing process. There is no suggestion of dishonesty in Tony's behaviour, but rather the need for him to talk about what he has done is driven by the damage he is doing through hiding his failings from himself, not through a demand for honourable conduct. Whatever the terminology used to explain Eric's lack of confession it produces an effect similar to Tony's denial; that is, Eric fails to fulfil his potential or to reach the behavioural standards expected of a youth of his age. Referring to one of Eric's classmates the narrator observes 'He was getting steadier, more diligent, more thoughtful, more manly; he was passing through that change so frequent in boys as they grow older, to which Eric was so sad an exception' (p. 249).

### **The Self-policing Subject**

Eric and Tony are both represented as unable to internalise the watchfulness required to self-administer discipline. External authorities must conduct examination of Eric and Tony through observation, as both boys fail to examine themselves. There are, however, many examples of fictional individuals who have so absorbed their lessons of obedience that they require very little external observation; instead they monitor their own conduct and consciences to a very high standard. Elsie Dinsmore, the eponymous protagonist

of Martha Finley's 1867 novel, and Daisy Randolph (*Melbourne House*) have highly sensitive consciences, are pious and have adult male and female mentors to whom they confess with frequent abandon.

According to Foucault, there prevailed in the Victorian period, a lingering reliance on rules, text and the word, and tradition to enforce right behaviour. Foucault is referring to the 'word' in the Saussurean sense of 'parole' or speech. In terms of discipline this refers to spoken commands or authority exercised through speech, and 'text' refers to written laws. Rules of propriety, religious observance, obedience to parents and guardians are all overt forms of control in novels such as *The Wide, Wide World* (1853), *The Daisy Chain* (1856) and *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867) and *Melbourne House* (1864). Obedience to adults is clearly represented in nineteenth century fiction as valuable and worthy of cultivation in the child. Both Elsie Dinsmore and Daisy Randolph (*Melbourne House*) are expected to unquestioningly accept their fathers' commands; for both girls their father's word is law. Daisy's father would 'never even hear a supplication to reconsider a judgement' (p. 10), and as for Elsie, on questioning one of her father's proclamations she is told 'because I forbid it...that is quite enough for you to know; all you have to do is to obey, and you need never ask me why, when I give you an order' (p. 94).

Despite these overt representations of parental discipline it is clear in the Elsie Dinsmore series that Elsie has so internalised her father's control that his actual presence is barely required. Elsie's identification of herself as sinning where other characters acclaim her goodness and her overly sensitive conscience that forces her into frequent confessions both indicate the degree to which she has absorbed the disciplinary regime of Evangelical Christian doctrine and her father's dictatorial authority. The traumatic episode in the second of the Elsie novels, *Holiday at Roselands*, in which Elsie is prepared to die rather than break the prohibition against singing secular songs on a Sunday, epitomises the power of internalised religious belief to control behaviour.

There is another group of characters in twentieth century fiction who display this internal watchfulness. This group of self-punishing individuals includes the suicidal, the

self-harming and the anorexics who appear in young adult fiction from the 1990s. The anorexic characters Aurora (in *Killing Aurora*) and Leigh (in *Secrets*) undertake active and exacting regimes of self-scrutiny and discipline similar to those in which Elsie engages. Aurora's step-father, her peers, workmen and school boys are all depicted examining and judging her; the power of their judgements produce in her a specific subjectivity, including a sexual identity that is based on self-loathing and revulsion towards her maturing body. Through Aurora's focalising perspective the reader is led to see adult physicality and sexuality as pathetic and ugly, and Aurora is shown to reject her body's progress towards what she considers a horrifying outcome. The adult female body possesses the knowledge of sexuality that Aurora seeks but is afraid of: 'to the adolescent, middle-aged sexuality, and more especially, overripe femininity is an obscenity scarcely to be contemplated' (Thomson 1999, p.24). To modify herself so as to conform to the demands of the judgements made of her, Aurora must impose upon herself a strict dietary and physical regime. In doing this she becomes a conduit for the power exerted by others, channelling the power through self-discipline and punishment directly to her own body. When she fails to adhere to her diet she punishes herself with frenetic exercise. Her dieting and exercise are to correct her body, to punish her body for being perceived as fat and for being sexual. Aurora's feminine, sexualised body is, to her, an external sign of her weakness and inability to control herself physically and sexually. In her essay 'Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power', Sandra Bartky describes the self-policing female subject as follows:

*To subject oneself to the new disciplinary power is to be up-to-date...it represents a saving in the economy of enforcement: since it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies, men get off scot-free. . . . The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate*

*of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance.*  
(Bartky 1988, pp.63-64)

The Panopticon to which Bartky refers is Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) panoptic prison design, whose basis was a building designed so that every inmate could be seen at any and all times by one centrally located supervisor. The great efficiency of this design rested on the principle that 'power should be visible and unverifiable' (Foucault 1975, p.201) and ensured that prisoners should never know when and where they were observed, and this lack of certainty led them to behave on the assumption that they were in fact always observed, resulting in a highly efficient and cost effective system that could be used for prisons, factories, schools or other institutions. Aurora is represented as believing herself to be the object of her community's constant critical gaze and accords with Bartky's description of the self-policing subject: 'Everybody's talking about Aurora, she knows they are. They're sizing her up. They're cutting her down. They're all listening devices, they're all spy cameras, they're all wearing x-ray specs' (p. 34).

Foucault describes this efficient disciplinary machine as moving out of 'enclosed institutions' (1975, p. 212) and operating in a disseminated fashion throughout society. The dispersed version of panoptic discipline relies, like the institutional version, on 'the gaze, and interiorisation' (Foucault 1980, p. 154). Bartky adapts Foucault's idea that each individual will interiorise this inspecting gaze until she functions as her own overseer to explain women's compliance with the ideals of femininity. Indeed this relentless self-gaze is characteristic of Aurora's adoption and absorption of the gaze she feels constantly observing her. Aurora internalises scrutiny of herself to such a degree that she completely loses any external perspective on her body and sees herself as fat when in fact she is emaciated and near death; she has become the ideal self-policing adolescent and no external input is required in the disciplinary regimes of observation, examination, judgement and punishment that she administers herself. The Victorian equivalent of this self-policing individual is the highly effective piety and sense of Christian duty attributed to Elsie (*Elsie Dinsmore*) and Edwin Russel (*Eric*) and so conspicuously absent in Eric. God's omniscience, the word of the father

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and the well-exercised conscience are a cost-effective and efficient form of interiorised discipline and control in these nineteenth century novels.

The individual's capacity for self-surveillance is facilitated in the panopticon through the isolation of the individual, who 'is seen, but he does not see, he is the object of information, never a subject in communication' (Foucault 1975, p.200). Another significant factor in the success of disciplinary power is invisibility, the possession of which allows disciplinary power to function yet arouse little resistance. Aurora's recovery from anorexia is due to the fact that these two aspects of the system break down through Aurora's friendship with Web, who inspires resistance in Aurora through identifying for her the forces that subjugate women, making those forces visible. Web and Aurora's peers, both male and female, compare the two girls to an ideal of femininity and find them wanting. Images from this commercial, market driven ideal surround the girls, in magazines, on billboards and on television. In the microcosmic world of school Aurora, Web and the rest of the students are categorised in relation to norms established through the commercial media. Various environments depicted in *Killing Aurora* reflect quite precisely the disciplinary mechanism described by Foucault: 'The disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate' (Foucault 1975, p.223). In the novel's opening pages Aurora scans the station billboards depicting sexualised, objectified scantily clad women; school boys watching Aurora mockingly give her a 'score' of six out of ten for attractiveness and then reduce it to five in criticism of her bottom (pp. 4-6). Aurora is given her position on the scale, and when she first sees Web at the station she readjusts her own position in the hierarchy, gratefully acknowledging that the distance between the billboard girls and Web is even greater than her own distance from the norm. On her first day at a new school Aurora has already identified and understood the peculiarities, classifications and relative popularity of her peers; the narrator lists 'the subversives', 'the Dead Girls', 'the Christians', 'the girlie swots', and the 'jolly nice girls' and explains their place in the hierarchy. Unflattering as some positions and classifications may be, no one on this list has been disqualified or invalidated;

this ignominy falls on Web. Unable of reaching even the minimum threshold of acceptable femininity Web is depicted as resisting and rejecting dominant images of young womanhood. Eventually her subversive resistance interrupts the disciplinary cycle entrapping Aurora and she too resists the power of the normative gaze to enforce conformity. This does not mean that the girls ignore or are unaffected by the external observation and examination they are subjected to, since on the contrary their resistance is highly reactive, Web's rejection of commercial femininity being represented in the novel as a way of coping with her own sense of inadequacy rather than as positive self acceptance.

Bartky notes in the passage I quoted earlier that 'men get off scot-free' and that it is only women who practice discipline 'on and against their own bodies', but this is not the case in late twentieth century young adult fiction. Adolescent boys are by no means immune to internal disciplinary regimes similar to that which controls Aurora. Jed Barnes, otherwise known as Shoovy Jed (*Shoovy Jed*), believes, like Aurora, that he deserves to be punished, and like Aurora he subjects his body to various disciplinary practices climaxing in an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Shoovy Jed is constructed as feeling 'different from everybody else on this earth' (p. 3), not being 'normal' (p. 23), being 'a total failure as a human being' (p. 25); and he is isolated and has no one to talk to. His parents argue constantly, their negative focus on each other excluding Jed and his sister India, and increasing his feelings of failure and inadequacy.

Like Eric and Tony, Jed does not know how to discuss his negative feelings, but he does find an alternative means of making his confession: he displays it on his body. Jed cuts his wrists repeatedly in the course of the novel and on one occasion stubs a cigarette out on his arm. Like the physical display created by the anorexic, Jed makes his confession of unworthiness visible. Self-harming adolescents achieve the conflation of confession and punishment in one act; the punishment they inflict on their bodies through starvation or through cutting form a ritual of torture; 'the art of maintaining life in pain' (Foucault 1975, p.34). Torture, as an element of punishment must 'mark the victim...to brand the victim with infamy' (Foucault 1975, p.34). In *Secrets*, Leigh believes that she caused her father to leave



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and never return. As a little girl she writes letters to him, which she never sends, begging him to come home and promising that she will be a good girl:

*I try to be good but I am afraid I am not very good at it. I don't suppose you are sorry you missed Christmas with us – what with me being so horrible and making everyone's life a misery. Do you ever think Daddy how lucky you are not to have to live with me any more? I have always known it was my fault that you went. Have you got a new family now, with a little girl who is not ugly and not horrid?*  
(p. 144)

The content of the letters is revealed to the reader and most of the characters only eight pages before the end of the novel. But the letters do not constitute her confession; since this has already been produced through Leigh's emaciated body; rather, the letters interpret her body. The punishment for Leigh's perceived 'badness' has already been administered through her starvation. The acceptance of her confession therefore signals the end of the penalty and Leigh is depicted as being on the road to recovery after this turning point.

In the texts I have considered in this essay, disciplinary operations incorporating surveillance, examination, confession and punishment are represented in Victorian and more recent novels as administered either by adults or peers, or enacted internally by the individual and directed towards the self. In both modes disciplinary power in these novels functions to create subjects measured against norms established by adults through their assumption of knowledge about the young. The durability and power of these strategies of control over young people as they are represented in fiction from the 1990s suggests that constructions of childhood and adolescence continue to draw on Victorian conceptions even as systems of morality are displaced by psychological accounts of deviant behaviour.



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