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SIN, RETRIBUTION, AND SPIRITUAL CHOICE IN THE NOVELS OF MARIE CORELLI

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Summary: *Marie Corelli (1855–1924) occupies a distinctive position in late Victorian literature as a writer whose popular success was combined with a sustained engagement with moral and spiritual questions. Her novels *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) and *Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten* (1886) present ethical conflict not merely as social drama but as a manifestation of inner moral choice. In these works, sin is portrayed as a consequence of conscious ethical decisions rather than external coercion, while retribution functions primarily on a spiritual and psychological level. By examining temptation, revenge, and moral responsibility, Corelli articulates a vision of spiritual freedom grounded in individual accountability. The article analyzes these novels within the context of late Victorian moral thought, arguing that Corelli should be reconsidered as a serious moral thinker whose fiction reflects the ethical anxieties of her age.*

Keywords: *Victorian literature, sin, retribution, spiritual choice, moral responsibility*

Introduction

Marie Corelli was one of the most widely read British novelists of the late nineteenth century, yet her position within the literary canon has long remained contested. While her immense popularity testified to her cultural influence, critical reception often dismissed her fiction as sensational or overly didactic. Such assessments, however, underestimate the philosophical seriousness of her engagement with moral and spiritual dilemmas that preoccupied late Victorian society. The period was marked by rapid industrialization, scientific advancement, and growing secularization, all of which contributed to a crisis of moral authority and religious belief [1]. Literature increasingly became a space in which ethical uncertainty and spiritual anxiety were explored. Corelli's novels respond directly to this moral climate. Unlike many of her contemporaries who approached ethical questions through irony or psychological realism, Corelli adopted an explicit moral framework grounded in the principles of free will and spiritual accountability. Her fiction repeatedly emphasizes that moral failure originates not in social

circumstance or historical necessity but in conscious individual choice. *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten* exemplify this ethical vision, presenting temptation and revenge as distinct yet equally destructive paths toward spiritual alienation. This article examines how these novels construct sin, retribution, and spiritual choice, situating Corelli's work within the broader context of Victorian moral thought.

Marie Corelli and Late Victorian Moral Thought:

The late Victorian period was marked by profound moral and spiritual uncertainty. Rapid industrialization, scientific advancement, and the growing influence of secular thought challenged traditional religious beliefs and ethical frameworks [1]. The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the spread of positivist philosophy contributed to a crisis of faith, prompting widespread anxiety about moral authority, spiritual purpose, and individual responsibility [2]. Literature of the period increasingly reflected these concerns, exploring the

tension between material progress and moral decline [1]. This atmosphere of uncertainty was further intensified during the *fin de siècle*, when scientific rationalism coexisted uneasily with renewed interest in mysticism, spiritualism, and alternative religious systems [3]. Theosophy, occult philosophy, and speculative interpretations of Christianity gained popularity as many Victorians sought ethical meaning beyond institutional religion [4]. Moral thought during this period was therefore characterized not by the abandonment of spirituality, but by its transformation into more individualized and introspective forms [1]. Within this cultural context, Marie Corelli emerges as a distinctive moral voice. Unlike many of her contemporaries who approached spiritual doubt through irony or psychological realism, Corelli adopted an openly didactic and moralizing tone [5]. Her fiction sought not merely to represent moral conflict but to guide readers toward ethical reflection. This approach, while contributing to her immense popular success, also led to her marginalization within academic criticism, which often privileged aesthetic restraint over explicit moral engagement [6].

Nevertheless, Corelli's work aligns closely with a broader Victorian tradition of moral inquiry that includes writers such as Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, both of whom emphasized ethical responsibility as a necessary response to the social and spiritual challenges of modernity [7]. Corelli's moral philosophy is grounded in a firm belief in free will and spiritual accountability. She consistently rejects deterministic models of human behavior, whether derived from social environment, biological inheritance, or historical circumstance [8]. In her fiction, individuals are repeatedly placed in situations that test their moral integrity, and their eventual downfall or redemption depends on conscious ethical choice. Sin, in Corelli's worldview, originates not from circumstance but from the deliberate prioritization of self-interest, ambition, or revenge over spiritual conscience [9]. This emphasis on moral agency situates her work firmly within Victorian ethical discourse while also anticipating later existential concerns regarding responsibility and freedom

[10]. Religion plays a central yet unconventional role in Corelli's ethical framework. Although deeply engaged with Christian symbolism and biblical imagery, she frequently departs from orthodox theology, blending religious doctrine with mystical, metaphysical, and philosophical elements [4]. Her portrayal of spiritual struggle is therefore less institutional than personal, focusing on the individual's inner relationship with moral truth rather than adherence to ecclesiastical authority [5]. This individualized spirituality enables Corelli to critique both religious hypocrisy and moral complacency, positioning her fiction as a response to what she perceived as the ethical emptiness of modern society [6]. Equally significant is Corelli's sustained critique of materialism, which she regarded as one of the greatest moral threats of late Victorian culture. Social ambition, economic competition, and the pursuit of fame are repeatedly depicted in her novels as spiritually corrosive forces [9]. Wealth and success function not as markers of achievement but as moral tests that reveal the vulnerability of the human soul to temptation [8]. By situating Marie Corelli within the moral debates of the late nineteenth century, it becomes evident that her novels engage seriously with the ethical dilemmas of their time. Far from being merely sensational or melodramatic, her work articulates a coherent moral philosophy centered on spiritual choice, inner freedom, and personal responsibility [5]. This moral framework provides a crucial foundation for understanding her representations of sin and retribution, which are examined in greater detail in the subsequent analyses of *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Vendetta*.

Sin and Temptation in The Sorrows of Satan:

In *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), Marie Corelli presents sin not as an abstract theological concept but as a lived moral experience rooted in temptation and choice [1]. The novel's central premise the intervention of the enigmatic figure Lucio Rimanez in the life of a struggling writer serves as a narrative framework through which Corelli examines the ethical vulnerability of individuals confronted with sudden power

and wealth [2]. Importantly, the text resists portraying temptation as an external coercive force, instead, it unfolds as a gradual internal capitulation to moral compromise, emphasizing personal moral responsibility [3]. Lucio Rimanez, later revealed as a diabolical figure, functions less as a conventional tempter than as a moral catalyst who exposes latent human weakness [4]. He does not compel the protagonist to act immorally but offers opportunities that test the protagonist's ethical resilience. Corelli thus subverts traditional representations of the devil as an active corrupter, emphasizing instead human autonomy and responsibility [5]. Sin emerges not through deception or force but through willing consent, reinforcing the novel's central ethical assertion that moral failure is self-generated [6]. A crucial dimension of temptation in the novel lies in its association with material success. Wealth initially appears as a liberating force that promises artistic freedom and social validation. However, Corelli gradually reveals this promise to be illusory [7]. The protagonist's financial security fosters arrogance, emotional detachment, and moral complacency, eroding his capacity for empathy. Sin, in this sense, manifests not as overt transgression but as a subtle reorientation of values in which material comfort supplants moral awareness [8]. Corelli further intensifies this critique by linking temptation to literary fame and intellectual pride. The protagonist's growing sense of superiority and disdain for others reflects what the novel identifies as spiritual arrogance—a sin more insidious than material greed [9]. Intellectual achievement, when detached from ethical humility, becomes a source of moral alienation. By exposing the dangers of artistic vanity, Corelli challenges the Victorian idealization of genius and progress, suggesting that intellectual power devoid of moral responsibility leads to spiritual desiccation [10]. Lucio Rimanez's role in this process remains deliberately ambiguous. Although he facilitates the protagonist's ascent, he repeatedly articulates a philosophy of moral freedom that places responsibility squarely upon human choice [4]. His presence underscores Corelli's paradoxical portrayal of evil as a passive ob-

server rather than an active agent. In this configuration, the devil becomes a witness to human self-betrayal rather than its cause, reinforcing the novel's insistence on ethical accountability [6]. Retribution in *The Sorrows of Satan* unfolds primarily as an internal consequence of moral compromise. The protagonist's choices result in profound isolation, existential despair, and a pervasive sense of spiritual emptiness [1]. Corelli avoids presenting punishment as divine retribution or social downfall, instead, suffering emerges as a psychological and spiritual reckoning that exposes the hollowness of ill-gotten success [8]. This inward conception of punishment aligns with Corelli's broader moral philosophy, in which the gravest consequence of sin is the loss of inner harmony [3]. Significantly, Corelli frames suffering as potentially instructive rather than purely punitive. The protagonist's disillusionment functions as a moment of moral revelation, exposing the ethical cost of his choices [7]. While the novel does not offer a simplistic path to redemption, it affirms the possibility of moral awareness through suffering. Temptation, therefore, serves a dual function: it reveals both the fragility of human virtue and the enduring presence of moral freedom [5]. Through its complex portrayal of temptation and sin, *The Sorrows of Satan* articulates a moral vision grounded in free will and spiritual accountability. Corelli's narrative insists that the true tragedy of sin lies not in supernatural judgment but in the voluntary abandonment of moral integrity [6]. By emphasizing inner moral collapse rather than sensational wrongdoing, the novel emerges as a serious ethical meditation that prepares the ground for comparison with *Vendetta*, where sin assumes a different but equally destructive form [2].

Vendetta as Moral Transgression in

Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten:

In *Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten* (1886), Marie Corelli shifts her moral focus from temptation to revenge, presenting vendetta as one of the most destructive forms of ethical transgression [1]. Whereas *The Sorrows of Satan* examines the gradual erosion of moral integrity through material and intellectual temptation,

Vendetta explores the consequences of sustained moral obsession rooted in resentment and injured pride [2]. The novel interrogates revenge not as a justified response to injustice but as a voluntary moral path that ultimately annihilates spiritual freedom [3]. The narrative structure of Vendetta is built around the symbolic death and rebirth of its protagonist. Having been betrayed and socially erased, he returns under a new identity, seemingly liberated from the constraints of his former self [4]. This transformation initially invites reader sympathy, positioning the protagonist as a victim of profound injustice. However, Corelli deliberately undermines this identification by revealing how the desire for revenge gradually becomes the protagonist's defining purpose. His new identity is not a means of moral renewal but a vehicle for ethical regression [5]. Central to Corelli's critique is the psychological absolutism inherent in vendetta. The protagonist's fixation on retribution replaces all other moral considerations, reducing human relationships to instruments of punishment [6]. Compassion, forgiveness, and empathy are systematically subordinated to the pursuit of revenge. By portraying this narrowing of moral vision, Corelli demonstrates how vendetta functions as a self-imposed moral imprisonment rather than a path toward justice [7]. The protagonist's assumption of the roles of judge and executioner further underscores the ethical transgression at the heart of the novel. By claiming absolute moral authority, he rejects any external or transcendent standard of justice [8]. This moral usurpation reflects Corelli's broader concern with hubris, a recurring vice in her fiction. Revenge, in this sense, is not merely an emotional reaction but a deliberate ethical stance that elevates personal grievance above universal moral law [9]. Unlike traditional revenge narratives that offer cathartic resolution or moral balance, Vendetta systematically dismantles the illusion of satisfaction promised by retribution. The protagonist's anticipated triumph proves hollow, leaving behind emotional desolation and spiritual emptiness [1]. Corelli presents revenge as inherently self-defeating: rather than restoring dignity or moral equilibrium, it deepens the prota-

gonist's alienation from both society and self. Retribution thus operates internally, manifesting as the erosion of identity and the collapse of moral purpose [3]. The Italian setting of the novel plays a significant symbolic role in reinforcing its moral architecture. Associated with intensity, secrecy, and passion, the Mediterranean landscape mirrors the protagonist's inner turmoil and amplifies the emotional extremity of his moral vision [10]. Yet Corelli avoids reducing vendetta to a culturally specific phenomenon. Instead, the setting universalizes the ethical danger of revenge, presenting it as a temptation that transcends national and historical boundaries [6]. Vendetta is portrayed not as an Italian tradition but as a universal moral temptation of the wounded soul. Corelli's treatment of revenge also engages with the broader romantic and gothic traditions of the nineteenth-century novel. Motifs of disguise, resurrection, and psychological doubling evoke the gothic fascination with fractured identity [4]. However, Corelli subverts these conventions by subordinating sensational elements to moral inquiry. The true horror of the novel lies not in external violence but in the protagonist's progressive moral self-erasure [7]. Through its sustained examination of vendetta, the novel articulates a moral philosophy consistent with Corelli's broader ethical vision. Sin, in Vendetta, emerges not from the pursuit of pleasure or success but from the refusal to relinquish hatred [9]. By depicting revenge as a conscious, prolonged moral choice, Corelli reinforces her conviction that spiritual freedom depends upon the rejection of destructive passions [8]. This portrayal provides a crucial counterpoint to *The Sorrows of Satan*, enabling a comparative understanding of sin as both temptation and obsession within Corelli's moral universe [2].

Spiritual Choice and the Concept of Retribution:

In both *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten*, Marie Corelli constructs moral narratives in which spiritual choice functions as the decisive factor determining the protagonist's fate [1]. Despite significant differences in plot, genre, and narrative strategy, the novels articulate a shared ethical

framework grounded in personal responsibility and the primacy of inner moral autonomy [2]. Corelli consistently rejects externalized models of moral causality, emphasizing instead the consequences of voluntary ethical decisions sustained over time [3]. Spiritual choice in Corelli's fiction is defined not by singular dramatic acts but by enduring moral orientation. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, the protagonist repeatedly privileges material success, literary fame, and intellectual superiority over humility and compassion [4]. These cumulative choices gradually estrange him from authentic human relationships and spiritual fulfillment. In *Vendetta*, by contrast, the protagonist's moral orientation is shaped by an obsessive commitment to revenge. Although his actions are motivated by genuine suffering, his refusal to relinquish resentment transforms pain into a governing ethical principle [5]. In both cases, sin is portrayed as a process rather than an event, reinforcing Corelli's view of moral failure as gradual self-alienation [6]. Retribution in Corelli's novels operates primarily on a spiritual and psychological plane. Rather than depicting punishment as legal consequence or divine intervention, Corelli presents moral reckoning as an inward collapse of meaning, identity, and emotional equilibrium [3]. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, retribution manifests as existential emptiness and moral disillusionment, while in *Vendetta* it appears as the fragmentation of identity and irreversible isolation [1]. This inward model of punishment reflects Corelli's conviction that the gravest consequence of sin is

the loss of inner harmony and spiritual freedom [7]. A defining feature of Corelli's moral philosophy is her rejection of moral determinism. Neither wealth nor betrayal predestines the protagonists' downfall, instead, these circumstances function as ethical tests that expose character rather than dictate outcome [8]. By emphasizing free will even in situations of extreme temptation or injustice, Corelli challenges Victorian narratives that attribute moral failure to social conditions or historical necessity [9]. Her fiction insists upon the individual's capacity for moral self-governance, regardless of external pressure. The contrast between temptation and revenge further illuminates Corelli's conception of spiritual choice. Temptation in *The Sorrows of Satan* seduces through promises of fulfillment and recognition, while revenge in *Vendetta* sustains itself through memory, resentment, and wounded pride [5]. Yet both ultimately result in spiritual confinement. By aligning these distinct moral trajectories, Corelli suggests that sin, regardless of its form, culminates in the same ethical outcome: the forfeiture of inner freedom [6]. Through this comparative lens, Corelli's novels reveal a coherent moral vision in which retribution is neither arbitrary nor imposed from above. Instead, it emerges organically from chosen moral orientation [3]. Spiritual choice thus stands as the central ethical principle governing Corelli's fictional universe, uniting disparate narratives within a single philosophical framework and reaffirming her significance within late Victorian moral discourse [2].

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten* demonstrates that Marie Corelli's fiction articulates a coherent and sustained moral philosophy centered on spiritual choice and personal responsibility. Far from presenting sin as an abstract theological construct or a consequence of external forces, Corelli depicts it as the outcome of deliberate ethical decisions that shape individual destiny. Through distinct narrative trajectories

temptation through material success in *The Sorrows of Satan* and revenge-driven obsession in *Vendetta* she explores complementary dimensions of moral transgression. A central finding of this study is that retribution in Corelli's novels operates predominantly on an internal, spiritual level. Punishment is neither juridical nor overtly divine but manifests as emotional isolation, loss of moral clarity, and the erosion of personal identity. This inward conception of retribution

reflects Corelli's conviction that the gravest consequence of sin is the forfeiture of spiritual freedom. By situating moral reckoning within the individual conscience, her fiction resists deterministic explanations of ethical failure and affirms the primacy of free will. The comparative approach adopted in this article highlights the structural and philosophical unity underlying the two novels. Although differing in genre, setting, and narrative strategy, both texts reinforce the same ethical principle: moral downfall arises not from circumstance but from sustained choices that prioritize desire, pride, or resentment over compassion and humility. Temptation and revenge, as depicted by Corelli, function as distinct yet equally destructive paths toward spiritual alienation. Reassessing Marie Corelli within the context of late Victorian moral thought

allows for a more nuanced understanding of her literary significance. Rather than a merely popular or sensational writer, she emerges as a serious moral thinker who engaged deeply with the ethical anxieties of her time. Her emphasis on inner accountability and spiritual autonomy aligns her work with broader Victorian debates on faith, morality, and modernity, while also anticipating later existential concerns. In light of this analysis, Marie Corelli's novels merit renewed critical attention as complex moral narratives that challenge reductive interpretations of her work. By foregrounding spiritual choice as the decisive factor in human destiny, Corelli contributes meaningfully to the ethical discourse of nineteenth-century English literature, reaffirming her place within its intellectual and philosophical tradition.

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MARİE KORELLİNİN ROMANLARINDA GÜNAH, CƏZA VƏ MƏNƏVİ SEÇİM

İlahə Quliyeva

Xülasə: *Marie Corelli (1855–1924) gec viktorian dövrü ədəbiyyatında populyar uğuru mənəvi və ruhani problemlərə ardıcıl maraqla birləşdirən yazıçı kimi özünəməxsus mövqe tutur. Onun Şeytanın iztirabları (1895) (The Sorrows of Satan) və Vendetta: Unudulmuş bir insanın hekayəsi (1886) (Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten) romanlarında etik münaqişə təkcə sosial dram kimi deyil, daxili mənəvi seçimin təzahürü kimi təqdim olunur. Bu əsərlərdə günah xarici məcburetmanın deyil, şüurlu etik qərarların nəticəsi kimi göstərilir, cəza isə, əsasən, mənəvi və psixoloji müstəvidə fəaliyyət göstərir. İmtahan, intiqam və mənəvi*

məsuliyyət məsələlərinin təhlili vasitəsilə Korelli fərdi məsuliyyətə əsaslanan mənəvi azadlıq anlayışını formalaşdırır. Məqalədə bu romanlar gec viktorian dövrünün mənəvi düşüncəsi kontekstində təhlil edilir və Korelli yaradıcılığının dövrün etik narahatlıqlarını əks etdirən ciddi mənəvi düşüncə sistemi kimi yenidən qiymətləndirilməsinin zəruriliyi əsaslandırılır.

Açar sözlər: viktorian ədəbiyyatı, günah, cəza, mənəvi seçim, mənəvi məsuliyyət

ГРЕХ, ВОЗДАНИЕ И ДУХОВНЫЙ ВЫБОР В РОМАНАХ МАРИ КОРЕЛЛИ

Илаха Гулиева

Аннотация: Мари Корелли (1855–1924) занимает особое место в литературе поздневикторианского периода как писательница, сумевшая соединить широкую популярность с глубоким интересом к нравственным и духовным проблемам. В её романах “Скорь Сатаны” (1895) (*The Sorrows of Satan*) и “Вендетта: История все забытого” (1886) (*Vendetta: A Story of One Forgotten*) этический конфликт представлен не просто как социальная драма, но как проявление внутреннего нравственного выбора. В этих произведениях грех осмысливается как результат сознательных этических решений, а не внешнего принуждения, тогда как воздаяние функционирует преимущественно на духовном и психологическом уровне. Анализируя искушение, месть и нравственную ответственность, Корелли формирует представление о духовной свободе, основанной на личной ответственности. В статье данные романы рассматриваются в контексте нравственной мысли поздневикторианской эпохи, что позволяет переосмыслить Корелли как серьёзного морального мыслителя, чьё творчество отражает этические тревоги своего времени.

Ключевые слова: викторианская литература, грех, воздаяние, духовный выбор, нравственная ответственность