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# Cultural Practices as Forms of Resilience and Agency in Tracy Chevalier's "A Single Thread"

## ≈ Resumen

Este artículo estudia *A Single Thread* (2019) de Tracy Chevalier, novela donde se pone de manifiesto el interés de la escritora en la resiliencia de las mujeres como aspecto creador de agencia individual y comunitaria, junto con el papel que juegan prácticas culturales como los bordados o el toque de campanas en un contexto como el período de entreguerras y la proximidad de los totalitarismos. Tomando distintos aspectos de la teoría de la resiliencia (Cyrulnik 2006; Herman 1992; Vanistendael 2003), el artículo explora cómo los usos y significados asociados a dichos bienes patrimoniales los convierten en recursos que intervienen en la modulación del duelo y en la activación de dicha resiliencia y agencia en las vidas de las mujeres, tanto desde el punto de vista individual como social. Por último, el artículo contempla la obra de Chevalier en su conjunto, lo cual puede ser de interés para futuras investigaciones sobre la escritora.

Palabras clave:

Tracy Chevalier; prácticas culturales; bordado; campanas; resiliencia; agencia

## ≈ Abstract

This article discusses Tracy Chevalier's *A Single Thread* (2019), with an emphasis on the parallels between the writer's interest in women's resilient experiences, which lead to individual and community agency, and the role played in these by cultural practices such as embroidery and bell-ringing. Chevalier's focus is on the interwar period and its closeness to totalitarianism. Based on aspects from the theory of resilience (Cyrulnik 2006; Herman 1992; Vanistendael 2003), this article explores how the uses and meanings associated with cultural practices can turn them into resources for modulating grief and mobilising such resilience and agency in women's lives, both from an individual and a social perspective. This article also considers that an understanding of Chevalier's oeuvre can be of help in shaping future scholarly research on this writer.

Keywords:

Tracy Chevalier; cultural practices; embroidery; bells; resilience; agency

This article seeks to further the knowledge of Tracy Chevalier's narrative through a discussion of her novel *A Single Thread* (2019), where resilience and agency are used as resources employed by the protagonists through the text to dismantle notions about the cultural practices traditionally engaged in by women, such as embroidery and bell-ringing. Examples of the output resulting from both material and intangible culture<sup>1</sup> have been identified in various works by Chevalier, which have shown the value of these contributions to the history of art practices in modulating women's experiences involving contact with subordination (Pipkin 2018, 134), exclusion, violence and mourning (Morel 2011).<sup>2</sup> This is particularly evident in *A Single Thread*, although it is also present in an earlier work such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999).

*A Single Thread* draws on cultural practices traditionally associated with women, such as embroidery, and others such as bell-ringing to construct a narrative of Violet's resilience and agency against the backdrop of the architectural space of the Gothic cathedral of Winchester, England. As with other novels by Chevalier in which popular elements are present (Morel 2011, 69), in *A Single Thread* aesthetics is central to the narration. In the story, cultural practices such as embroidery and bell-ringing are used to produce expanded meanings that allow us to speak of new opportunities for textual dialogue, specifically about the use of the said practices as resilient resources to present a woman's transformative process after having gone through a series of emotional afflictions and losses. Resilience, the unfolding of our innate capacity to resist and rebuild ourselves in the course of life (Vanistendael 2003), helps us to find a new place in the world, as happens to Violet. This will include the points of resistance used to alter (Diego Sánchez 2018) and transform the burden of the past (Herman 1992), whereby the protagonist shifts from grieving her painful losses to recognising the thread that transforms her into the true driver and owner of her life.

*A Single Thread* is narrated from the point of view of the protagonist, Violet Speedwell, aged 38. While it is not a novel about World War I, it does take this and the interwar period as the context for the story. The reference to the Great War helps the reader understand the past circumstances that the protagonist and those around her find themselves in. The war changed the lives of millions of people, ended the lives of many others, disrupted the world order hitherto known and contributed to feeding individual and collective notions of victory and revenge, of winners and losers. It is not the first time that Chevalier has shown an interest in the marks of violence in people's trajectories (Gullón 2013). Violence is present, for example, in the novels *The Virgin Blue* (1999) and *The Last Runaway* (2013), both of which combine "historical fiction and [...] psychological development" (Gurpegui 2004).<sup>3</sup> This is also the case with *A Single Thread*, although this text offers an in-depth exploration of the emotional and psychological consequences of the armed conflict for one of the nearly two million women who were either widowed or forced to remain single as a result of the war. Known by the nickname of *surplus women* (Chevalier 2019a, 22, 344-5), the story uses the painful impact that this had on the lives of women like the protagonist as a starting point for discussions about both the acceptance of mourning for the traumatic events they had experienced and the significance of the cultural practices that supported the emergence of female resilience and agency in dealing with painful events (Cyrułnik 2006).

My purpose is to show how the identity crisis that the protagonist faces in mobilising her resilience and unfolding her agency through a non-linear transformative process, both from an individual and social point of view, disrupts and influences her relationships with other people and with her environment. In *A Single Thread* this must be understood in the temporal and spatial context of post-World War I Britain, in the years after the Great Depression, in the turbulent political situation in the Spanish Second Republic and in the midst of the rise of Nazism in Germany (Chevalier 2019a, 230).

### Material Practices: Embroidery

Just as her fascination with the painter Johannes Vermeer inspired Chevalier in her *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Chevalier 2004; Morel 2011, 68), she decided to write a novel about a group of women from the 1930s who embroidered a set of fifty-seven cushions and footstools for the knee pads of the many kneelers in Winchester Cathedral (Chevalier 2019a, 343). Chevalier claims that these pieces were "the only thing in the cathedral made by women" (2020a). The works produced by women have served as a backdrop for the construction of female subjectivity and, at the same time, have contributed to questioning idealised femininity (Parker 1986), which linked gender to some types of activities and how they are carried out (Rich 2002). Chevalier followed in the wake of other authors who included needlework in a fictional narrative. As Jennie Batchelor and Alison Larkin mention, examples include texts by Jane Austen and Mary Lamb (2020, 8). They can also be found in novels by Victorian writers, as for example Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (Capuano 2013) or Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (Daly 2008), to name but a few.<sup>4</sup> As noted by Will May (2020, 1), artistic works by different female creators have sometimes been featured as extravagant products or even as the result of mere whims, not to mention the assumptions about women's roles as only passive recipients of such artistic creations (Ágreda Pino 2020, 79). For this reason, the arguments used to designate them as valuable artefacts that are part of the history of the decorative arts and cultural practices should also focus on showcasing specific examples of these practices (May 2020, 1).

Indeed, embroidery has long been practised by women across cultures around the world (Batchelor and Larkin 2020; Brackett 2020; Gómez 2015). Traditionally done by hand, it is an activity that requires discipline and time, reflects the pleasure of dedication and showcases a delicate form of expressive craft work which creates its own language (Ágreda Pino 2008; 2020; Batchelor and Larkin 2020). It has also been said to have therapeutic value (Díaz Martín and Medina 2019; Chevalier 2017 and *Fine Cell Work*, 24; Gómez 2015). Embroidery was first thought of as a pastime of aristocratic ladies (Weissberg 2010, 663) engaged in for mainly artistic and charitable purposes (Greensted 2011). It was practised by middle-class women in the Georgian period, not only in Great Britain but also in the British colonies (Batchelor and Larkin 2020, 7; Duggins 2018). With a similar purpose to the decorative works or *assemblages* that were produced by communities of women who settled in overseas territories during the expansion of the British Empire (Duggins 2018), embroidered materials were very popular, largely due to the multiple uses that they had, which were mainly related to domestic life. In the Victorian era, handicraft practices, needlework in general and embroidery in particular, were given pride of place in the home and were done on cushions, slippers

and tablecloths (Schaffer 2011, 7). After the 1860s, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, these activities began to be considered typical of a bygone age (Schaffer 2011, 7), in which use-value would gradually replace the artistic value given to objects embellished with embroidery (Ellis 2020), somehow “provid[ing] domestic compensation for the loss of manual authenticity in the industrial realm” (Capuano 2013, 234). The existing discourses on this type of work perpetuated the role of women as makers of the perfect home and encouraged them to engage in an activity that would help to keep otherwise idle hands busy (Ellis 1839, 25). These practices allowed women to weigh up and negotiate the limits of the construction of a female ideal based on submission and restraint, which were taken as characteristics of female identity (Parker 1986). In *A Single Thread*, these practices reveal the survival of gender roles that were firmly established in the social sphere and were associated with the economic and social conditions of the historical period marked by the Great Depression.

The art of embroidery united personal and collective history by relying on individual and group creativity. Traditionally, needlework was passed down from generation to generation as part of the family trousseau, although some samples and patterns were kept in homes over time or appeared in different print media. For example, magazines such as *The Lady's Magazine; or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex*, which was published between 1770 and 1832, included clothing and embroidery patterns for household objects (Batchelor and Larkin 2020).<sup>5</sup> In *A Single Thread*, the individual and collective embroidery project was an important part of the daily lives of the embroiderers in Winchester Cathedral. The work had a twofold purpose: to contribute to the greater comfort of the people who went to the cathedral and to embellish the cathedral space of the choir and the presbytery. The project was aimed at the community that frequented the cathedral (parishioners, embroiderers, bell ringers), and the community that lived in and off the cathedral (clergy, cleaners, workers, electricians, gardeners). A temporal objective was added to the above, since these objects were used at the time, but the intention was also that they would last for posterity. As said, the novel is set in a time tinged with grief, which was exacerbated every time Violet heard the name of her brother George or thought of Laurence, her fiancé, both fallen at the front, as her memories overwhelmed her. As victims of the armed conflict, they occupied a privileged place in the discourse surrounding families and love. The memories of George and Laurence drove Violet's reflection on the magnitude of the war, a monstrous unreason, in which “the [...] anger of the guns” resonated, as in Wilfred Owen's lines (1986, 23).

With her father deceased years before due to illness and her younger brother married, family and social pressure loomed over Violet. As Marianne Hirsch writes (2012), gender can turn invisible as a variable in traumatic experiences. Given Violet's status as a single woman, she was expected to leave her job to take care of her mother. Despite her loneliness and the difficulty she had in becoming independent due to her low income, her desire was to move away from her mother's house (Chevalier 2019a, 16-19) and build a life of her own. The text envisages possible connections with the feminist challenges that inspired it, as with reference to the embroidery project being the only artwork in Winchester Cathedral made by women, as said above. The protagonist's decision to move from her mother's home in Southampton to nearby Winchester, where she applied for a position at the branch of the insurance company where she worked, involved living

in a cold rented room in a house for ladies. Her meagre salary forced her to calculate the number of hot meals she could have per week and to reduce the money she spent on coal in the winter months. The latter in turn meant that she had to spend a long time in the living room, embroidering by the chimney (28-29, 229) while listening to the news on the radio about the “deaths in Spain following political protests, [...] the Nazi Party doing well in regional elections in Germany” (230). She also had to bear her mother's scorn and her actions being misunderstood by her brother. Winchester, with its Gothic cathedral, was to become the centre of a Gordian knot of life whose ends Violet would attempt to glimpse. It was the scenario where she would try to build a life made of scraps, in which pain and precariousness were fixed, tightly packed, like stitches in canvas.

For Violet, the creative legacy of embroidery was non-existent since neither her mother nor other women in her family ever practised it. Violet's learning process began as a need for socialisation once she had settled in Winchester. Given the solitude of her life in a new city, she welcomed the opportunity to meet other women, who were the group of cathedral embroiderers. Thus, focusing on the search for resilience resulted in an initial expansion of her personal limits, extended and strengthened by the slow disintegration of social barriers such as those experienced by her friendship with the couple formed by Gilda and Dorothy, who, as lesbians, were the object of disaffection or rejection by most of the members of the group. This would have doubly traumatic consequences when Dorothy was expelled from the girls' school where she worked as a Latin teacher. Arguably, Violet was not the only *surplus woman* in the group; there were also those who were sanctioned for their sexual orientation in an environment where social control over women's identities and bodies was rigidly exerted. Existing patriarchal and heteronormative norms imposed on female subjectivity operated in Violet's environment, as for example in Violet's family's assumption that she, being single, should stay in her mother's home to look after her (19, 21), in the “disappear[ance]” of a friend from drawing classes after marrying (48), in the hierarchical relationship between Violet and her boss, shown in his “astonishment and disapproval” when Violet asks for a pay rise (77), not to mention the fact that there is not a man in the group of embroiderers: it is “a women's world” (175). Violet's attitudes to dismantle at least part of those power structures and forms of thought as presented in the story are thus relevant.

The presence of the queer gaze connects Chevalier's novel to the discourses about “the modernist woman” as found in Virginia Woolf's narratives (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2007, 1). Other examples of this include Violet's amorous relationship with Arthur, a love that was forbidden because he was a married man, and her pregnancy as a single mother. The pedagogical relationship forged between Violet and the sixty-year-old Miss Louisa Pesel, her embroidery workshop instructor at the cathedral, is traced in the text. An accomplishment of the novel is to have endowed the real-life Louisa Pesel (Manningham, Bradford, 1870-Winchester, 1947) with literary substance. Pesel studied in London at the Lewis F. Day School of Design. Encouraged by the school, she travelled to Athens in 1903 to investigate the Hellenic tradition of embroidery design (Greensted 2011, 50). Pesel's contact with the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework and Lace, of which she became director until 1907, was not only aimed at improving her training; there was also a social and pedagogical element involved, as Mary Greensted informs, as it contributed to her disseminating the work of the women and girls employed at that institution. Over

the years, Pesel founded branches of the school in other locations of Greece (Greensted 2011, 50). Her curious and restless spirit is revealed in the novel on several occasions and for different reasons. Miss Pesel's authority was grounded in her training, her skill and her ability to take on the teaching of embroidery and pattern making (Chevalier 2019a, 43).<sup>6</sup> Her knowledge came from her eagerness to know more about a practice that allowed her to become acquainted with different cultures and traditions, an art capable of inviting interpersonal and historical dialogue that "...unite[s] the past and present" (8). All this was at the service of the context in which Violet operated. She valued Miss Pesel's generous teaching (43). She saw Miss Pesel's willingness to share knowledge as a way of understanding the autonomous role of the creator, of creative work as a source of beauty, with its ability to awaken the aesthetic experience in people, including a dimension that dismantled social and historical forms of oppression, as seen, for example, in Miss Pesel's arguments to overcome Arthur's doubts regarding Violet's choice of a pattern that recalled the shapes of the Nazi swastikas (279-89).

Adding to this thread of exchanges of knowledge, it is worth mentioning little Marjory (Violet's niece), who was interested in her aunt's creative output. Marjory would become not only a repository of technical knowledge about embroidery, but also of the desire to keep alive the creative component transmitted by her aunt. The relationship between Marjory, whose age is not specified in the narrative, and Violet went beyond their family and affective bond, one of mutual respect and admiration. Marjory's openness was a dedication to the joy of learning and its progressive internalisation, an event where individual experience makes room for the experience of the new (Bárcena and Mélich 2000).<sup>7</sup> The creative process is also presented through the eyes of women in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Young Griet, Catharina, her four daughters, Maria Thins, even Tanneke, are all witnesses, in different degrees, to the production process of Vermeer's works, although Griet is the only one with an observant eye for art and aesthetic pleasure (Bretonne 2009, 78). Griet will also play an active role in Vermeer's production, by, for example, grinding colours for paintings. Similarly, in *A Single Thread* Violet watches and learns to take an active part in the creative process, as Marjory will do with her aunt's teachings regarding embroidery. Furthermore, in *A Single Thread*, contrary to the rigid power relations among the group of women in *Pearl with a Girl Earring*, the transmission of knowledge facilitates an intergenerational continuity (Boccardi 2004, 192) based on their aspiration to and appreciation of both self-care and care for their peers. It is also an attempt to give themselves opportunities to welcome beauty into their lives. Examples of this include the relationships between Violet and Marjory, Violet and Miss Pesel and Violet and Gilda.

### Intangible Practices: Bell-Ringing

In the story, thirteen years after the end of World War I the population of Winchester shared a past full of painful memories inscribed in an everyday life which was overshadowed by the ravages of the Great Depression. Frequented by tourists who were attracted by the beauty of its cathedral, Winchester preserves the provincial air of a small town where relations between members of the community are subject to tensions that manifest themselves in the form of rumours or through the rejection of those whose ways of life diverged from those set by the social norm. In my view, the choice of Winchester and its cathedral as *loci* where much of the story takes place plays a relevant role in the novel. As it is one of

the most outstanding Gothic cathedrals in the United Kingdom, locals are aware of their valuable heritage. Violet spends time sitting alone on a church bench, looking up in silence, observing, perhaps searching; her senses perceive the beauty of the interior of the temple, the light filtering through the stained glass windows, the colour of the rose windows, the majestic flying buttresses crossing the cathedral skies. As with Griet and later with Marjory, Violet's natural aesthetic sense leads her to appreciate what she perceives and her gaze is important because, as Pauline Morel affirms (2011, 68-71), observation places a woman at the epicentre of what she observes. For both Griet and Violet, the gaze is central to their aesthetic experience. Violet looks up hungrily to capture the nuances of a splendid beauty, visible to anyone able to appreciate it. Together with the cathedral's rose windows and magnificent flying buttresses, at the top of the building is the bell tower and in it the bells, filling the space inside and outside the cathedral with their sound as a continuous presence for centuries.<sup>8</sup>

The experience of refining her gaze and her hearing the bells amazes Violet. She is not an expert in bell language, but while listening to them she cannot help associating some strikes with "...martial tongue", as Wilfred Owen writes in his poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1986, 23). The painful memories reawaken in her the idea of a nonsensical world subjected to violence, where "not all the loss could be replaced" (Chevalier 2019a, 12). But the bells also help her recover from pain. As in Owen's lines, bells not only address the collective memory of a violent time (Badruzaman 2018) but also recall individual memories, as also appreciated in Tennyson's poem, in which the listener wishes the bells to "...Ring out the old, ring out the new / Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes / But ring the fuller minstrel in" (Tennyson 1986, 1166). Time stands still for Violet as she listens "for a pattern in the chaos" (Chevalier 2019a, 180). This connects her to an inner order that may be called resilient, an order that seeks to be both essence and unity. This is so because Violet's mental story is not based on the knowledge of the musical language she listens to, "the magical method that kept the bells ringing" (213); rather, she becomes aware of a repertoire of emotions that she sees as an opportunity to focus on a melody unique to her, an experience of the here and now of the listener, which serves as a tool for restructuring her present. The structure of the bell peals, of varying complexity, encapsulates Violet's world, in which she constructs herself as both protagonist and the agent of her own reality. Hearing the bells also helps her to acknowledge her desire to ring them: "I want to do that" (179). It was Arthur that had helped her realise this. Violet rang the bell once, in a parish town near Winchester, where Arthur lived. There was no bell tower, and bell ringers performed at ground level, with only a curtain separating them from the congregation attending the service. Violet's bell-ringing helped her overcome her fear of being seen. She rang the bell with the group of men and face to face with Arthur, in a wordless dialogue where there was a mutual recognition that occurred in parallel to the bell striking and its reverberation, as a metaphor for the gradual reconstruction of a woman who recognised her desire and acted to meet it. Violet progressively understands that she is responsible for her acts and choices. A similar case is that of Griet in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, in which, according to Cortney Cronberg Barko, Griet grows as a young woman capable of making wise decisions to secure her job and to economically support her family (Barko 2016, 24). Violet's resistance, like Griet's, makes both women resilient subjects that create new possibilities to go ahead in life despite the adverse conditions they have to overcome. At the same time, bell-ringing allowed Violet to do something for herself, not just for everyone

else: “that is what we women are trained for – to give to others, to make others comfortable, whatever we feel ourselves. [...] to be a bellringer – just to [...] concentrate on nothing but the sound of the bells and my place in them” (Chevalier 2019a, 291). The bells did not ring in mourning anymore, but as a sign of her readiness to fulfil her wish to lead her own life.

The family and social order put pressure on Violet to face the issue of her singleness in a practical way: a woman of her age was expected to be married; if not, the *spinster* label justified the *surplus women* discourse discussed earlier. This is so in her family life, in the house where she stays in Winchester and among the group of bell ringers. Chevalier has stated that women’s singleness was “another form of slavery” during the period in which the novel was set (Chevalier 2020b, n.p.). Indeed, Violet experienced different emotional states regarding her singleness. Like other women, she had suffered both before and after the Great War as a result of her fiancé and her brother having been killed and yet, those events strengthened her desire not to become a victim of the past, either to herself or to others. Not being a victim meant living with no resentment and taking responsibility for her feelings and actions. This is worth noting when we think, for example, that precariousness pervaded Violet’s days and nights to the point of starvation, but accepting her situation and making a decision to improve her living conditions made her aware of the need to look after herself, which gave meaning to her life. The aesthetic experience plays an outstanding role here for Violet. It is mobilised every time she joins both the group of embroiderers and the group of bellringers (mainly Arthur and his friend Keith). These meetings and the practices carried out within the groups in a collaborative manner create bonds that help Violet feel involved in the world. By looking outward, beyond herself, Violet meets others and allows a set of emotions and affects to circulate. We may wonder what would have been of Violet had she not met Miss Pesel, or Arthur, or Gilda. The creation of these bonds is beneficial for Violet, who feels that she is being cared for by different members of this community regardless of her age or her being single.

Violet’s singleness and loneliness make her the object of male attention. In the story, middle-aged Jack Wells is on the lookout for Violet, monopolising her attention and depriving her of the full enjoyment of some of the experiences she lives as a single woman trying to build up a new life. This is the case during her first solitary holiday walk through the countryside, where her appreciation for the landscape is interrupted by Jack Wells, who follows Violet for some time. The presence of this man is irregular but sustained, like a thread that is thickened throughout the narration due to the tension caused by his stalking violence. The man appears again, this time in Winchester, to follow Violet on New Year’s Eve. Violet seeks refuge in the bell tower next to Arthur, where he is about to ring the bells at twelve o’clock. Jack Wells appears a third time, after Violet and Arthur’s last walk together in the countryside, when Violet decides to challenge the story of female silence about desire and the knowledge that her performativity entails. Violet asks: “Would you come into this field with me? Because I am ready” (Chevalier 2019a, 315). Violet asks not only because she loves Arthur, but also because she places herself on the same plane as the man with whom there is reciprocated love. The expression of a form of love that is sanctioned in the social space collides with – but is not negated by – the experience that follows: Violet, alone in the field after saying goodbye to Arthur, is a victim of an attempted rape by Jack Wells. Violet reflects on her experiences

of the last weeks in this way: “...so full of Arthur and the bells that she had [...] managed to remove [the threat] until now” (317). In a short time span, circumstances change. Violet is faced with Jack Wells, who wishes to impose his desire for domination: “I think a man can take what he likes” (317). When the perpetrator claims that “...a woman shouldn’t be [alone]. She needs a man to protect her. Otherwise everything can happen” (318), Violet recognises his attempt to undermine her act of freedom and affirmation. She abruptly becomes aware of the fact that she can do nothing to prevent Wells from violently attacking her and yet, she finds the inner strength that allows her to run off in self-defense. But Violet does not know if Jack Wells has witnessed the love encounter between her and Arthur. This influences her decision not to report the incident to the police for fear of not being believed or, worse, of being blamed for having met Arthur alone or for walking alone in the country, which means that Wells is finally exempt from justice. The truth is that her silence and her reluctance to go to the police highlights the need to build a democratic order, a more just and equitable order between men and women in public and private spaces. Violet’s attitude after this experience, after the dislocation of her identity along the way, together with the affirmation of her wishes involving her being part of the group of embroiderers, ringing the bells, loving Arthur and bearing his child, makes Violet the creator of her own decisions and life path.

## Conclusions

This article has considered the role played by cultural practices such as embroidery and bell-ringing in *A Single Thread*, Tracy Chevalier’s latest novel, as elements used to explore the mobilisation of resilient resources as a strategy employed by the main character, Violet Speedwell, to handle vulnerability derived from personal and collective contact with violence, pain and loss. The meaning conveyed through these practices is explored, giving the reader an insight into the women who embroidered the cushions and kneelers of Winchester Cathedral, of their individual and historical circumstances and of the value given to the attitudes and intentions involved in their making. In *A Single Thread* the transmission of material culture through practices such as embroidery was carried out through intergenerational networks of women who were not necessarily linked by family or friendship ties, as for example in handicraft associations or traditional guilds. This fostered interpersonal relationships and resilient affirmation supported by the exchange of learning between instructors or teachers and learners.

Similarly, intangible cultural practices such as bell-ringing are used as a resource to progressively alleviate the impact and wounds of a ravaged past and contribute to responsibly embrace the present. An atmosphere of loss due to the emotional and psychological impact left by the war, with a feeling of painful recovery, pervades the story. However, Chevalier was not interested in bringing to fiction a mere guilt and punish scheme of a story. The protagonist’s actions to move away from an initial wreaked havoc and emotional austerity lead her to explore the potential for doing herself justice. This demonstrates the parallelism between Violet’s appreciation for aesthetics, her realistic acceptance of her past life and her intelligence to negotiate the need to use all available resources to rebuild herself and be able to move forward. Moreover, it is seen in her multiple decisions along the way, as when she goes on a countryside walk on her own from Winchester to Salisbury on her first holiday alone, when she starts the practice of embroidery and to ring the bells as a way to detach herself from remembering the

past by building a memorial of the horrors of the war or when she realises that she loves a married man and eventually gets pregnant. At this point, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that the text is not the fictionalisation of a love story, nor is it a male adultery story. The value of Violet, her awareness of herself as an individual, is strengthened by her acceptance of her life and her ongoing reflection upon her trajectory, which gives her credibility as an individual that is present in the world.

Life tensions are present throughout the novel. Political and social changes, as well as memories of a painful past, fears of a foreseeable rise in totalitarianism and a new military conflict on the horizon alternate in importance with the circumstances of individual lives, whereby a central role is given to reflection and to emotions as ways to resist and transform individual and group vulnerabilities. As seen, Violet refuses to live in forgetfulness; thus, her background is not deprived of its role in rebuilding her life course. These resilient actions liberate her; they direct her towards gaining restitution for what was lost (Ricoeur 1999) and through them she is transformed into the main agent in the reordering of her life. This story of construction and reconstruction of reality thus produces fruitful acts of individual agency that also have consequences in the interactions with the community. The creative process regarding the embroidery practices is pervasive in the novel; nevertheless, it does not prevent the reader from acknowledging the reach of another creative force such as bell-ringing and its impact in Violet's transformative process from grieving, precariousness and vulnerability to a transformative articulation of herself and her place in the world.<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

1 I use the term intangible practices following the UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage, meaning "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledges, skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith, that communities, groups, and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage [...] is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment [...] and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity" (Francioni 2020, 52).

2 Most of the references to Chevalier's production can be found on the author's website ([www.tchevalier.com](http://www.tchevalier.com)). As regards scholarly studies, the few existing contributions deal mostly with the cultural and historical content of Chevalier's work. In this respect, the articles by Mariadele Boccardi (2004), Pauline Morel (2011) and Amanda Pipkin (2018) and Cortney Cronberg Barko's book (2016) show valuable critical insight and no doubt are appreciated as examples of the interest in Chevalier's work as inspiration and support for interdisciplinary critical approaches. Although this article does not focus on the reception of Chevalier's work in Spain, mention should be made to the numerous interviews with the author that have been published in Spanish media. Most of them can be found in digital editions of *El País*, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, *El Periódico*, *La Vanguardia* and the magazine *Qué Leer*.

3 My translation.

4 The context of the early twentieth century in Europe in which the novel is framed does not prevent us from mentioning the presence of needlework practices by women in other contexts, as in the Afro-American quilting traditions. For further information, see [http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting\\_history/afam.htm](http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/afam.htm).

5 Batchelor and Larkin have argued that some of these patterns may have inspired the craftwork done by the protagonists in works by Jane Austen (2020, 7). They are held by the Jane Austen's House Museum, England.

6 For further knowledge on embroidery patterns and design, see Ágreda Pino (2020).

7 Chevalier mentions her history teacher as a relevant influence on her awakening to art appreciation when she was nineteen (Chevalier 2019b, n.p.).

Some of the existent critical work on Chevalier's oeuvre takes it as a pedagogical resource (see McGlenn and McGlenn 2003; Pipkin 2018).

8 Winchester bells can be listened to at <https://www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk/our-heritage/cathedral-bells/>.

9 This piece of research has been produced within the Campus of International Excellence CEI-Patrimonio (University of Almería, Carretera de Sacramento, S/N, 04120 Almería, Spain).

Título:

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en *A Single Thread* de Tracy Chevalier

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