Dangerous Women:

Gender Anxieties and Female Archetypes in Victorian Gothic Literature

by

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Introduction

The figure of the "New Woman" emerged in the late Victorian era as a symbol of social upheaval and changing gender norms. As women began to challenge traditional roles—pursuing education, professional work, and exploring sexual freedom—literature became a space where these shifts were both explored and contested. This thesis examines two key literary representations of these changes: the New Woman and the femme fatale, focusing on how each figure reflects the era's deep-rooted anxieties surrounding female autonomy and growing independence. More specifically, I examine the differences in the representations of the New Woman and her stereotypes in comparison to the real feminists behind the ideals that inspired the literary figure of the New Woman. Amid the anxiety of Victorian society, the New Woman was created as a cautionary figure meant to hinder the progressive efforts made at the time by women seeking a semblance of independence or autonomy. I argue that the literary New Woman is an embellishment of the fears surrounding growing female autonomy in terms of education, professional careers, family life, motherhood, marriage, and sexuality. These literary figures, while potent, often reduce real feminist progress to caricature—distorting the efforts of women fighting for rights and recognition into easily controllable or demonized tropes. However, not all authors engaged with these representations in the same way. This thesis argues that while H. Rider Haggard reinforces the dangers of female power through the fatal allure of his protagonist in *She*, Bram Stoker complicates the stereotype in *Dracula*, ultimately destabilizing the boundaries between threat and empowerment. This project reveals how Victorian literature became a site for both the reinforcement and subversion of gendered fears at the turn of the century.

In late Victorian newspapers and satirical cartoons, the New Woman was often caricatured as an overreaching, masculinized figure—ambitious and intent on usurping male roles while simultaneously undermining the sanctity of domestic life. In literature, she frequently appears as a figure to be reformed, subdued, or eliminated altogether, reinforcing widespread cultural anxieties about shifting gender norms. Yet in *Dracula*, one of the most iconic novels to engage with the New Woman, Bram Stoker resists a simplistic critique. Instead, he constructs a more nuanced portrayal through the characters of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, both of whom initially seem to embody popular stereotypes, only to subtly subvert them. Perhaps in this revelation, he admits there is value to the ideals of the New Woman and dangers to the traditional Victorian woman embodied by the praised Angel of the Home. Haggard, on the other hand, reinforces the fears and anxieties of women navigating their own independence and power. His representation of all powerful Ayesha in *She* embodies all the characteristics of a classic femme fatale, cunning, intelligent, seductive and manipulative. She becomes a figure who must be destroyed for the threat she poses to the patriarchal order of society. In the section in which I discuss the *She,* I examine the differences in the tropes of the femme fatale and the New Woman. It is important not to conflate the two figures, but to acknowledge the similarities, subtle differences, and the purposes and effects of each.

In exploring the anxieties of gender norms at the fin de siècle via gothic fiction, women often are portrayed as fearsome entities, serving as a centrifuge of danger, subversion and anxiety. As traditional Victorian ideals of femininity—embodied in the domestic, submissive "Angel of the House"—began to erode under the pressure of feminist progress, the literary imagination responded by producing female figures that were often fearsome, powerful, and transgressive.

CHAPTER ONE – The Victorian New Woman: Real and Literary Evolutions of Femininity

In the Victorian era, societal norms rigidly dictated gender roles, reinforcing the idea of separate spheres for men and women. Women were expected to concern themselves exclusively with the domestic sphere, which encompassed household duties, child-rearing, and moral guidance within the home. Anything beyond this realm—such as politics, business, or intellectual pursuits—was considered inappropriate and outside their natural domain. Men, on the other hand, were assigned responsibility for the public sphere, which included governance, commerce, and industry. This division was rooted in the belief that women were inherently nurturing and moral, best suited for maintaining the home as a sanctuary from the harshness of the outside world. Men, perceived as rational and resilient, were expected to navigate the competitive and often morally ambiguous world of work and politics. This extreme separation of gender and expectations only perpetuated the separation of other spheres in the Victorian age. The distinct spheres of men and women were engrained in societal expectations and this idea of harsh separation followed through in other spheres like domesticity versus industry and private life versus public life which only fueled the rise of the New Woman as a cultural icon.

I. Angel in the Home vs. The New Woman – A Shift in Victorian Cultural Gender Roles and Representations

The values of the New Woman served to clash with those spheres and encouraged a blending or even disintegrating of the spheres, challenging who was allowed to act within them. No longer were the spheres of men inaccessible to women; education and pursuit of a career were viable prospects for the New Woman. Life apart from men was distressing to the “natural” patriarchal

order way of life. For the New Woman "was both an agent and representative of social change who then became the object of denunciation by those who were anxious about change" (Youngkin 37). Women were not meant to disrupt or challenge the gender roles set in place for them; rather, they were supposed to dote on their husbands, obey his demands and please him in anyway necessary. This figure was seen as the ideal woman, one who spent her life dedicated to serving the home and her husband. They were the designated homemakers and were expected to be content with just that. Their priority was to take care of their family home and children, all while presenting their piousness, obedience and purity. Their role was to be the "Angel of the Home", a term inspired by Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Angel in the House", in which he examines the life of a young woman dedicated to her husband and home. This kind of woman was the ideal one. A woman whose most significant phases in life were courtship, marriage, childhood, and widowhood. It was expected that every woman wish to follow this sequence of life, one always dependent upon, yet always responsible for others, without want for their own wishes. Their identities were solely, in this order, daughter, wife, mother, widow. In each case, a woman's identity is defined not by who she is at her core, but by who she is in relation to others, especially men.

Women were expected only to be concerned with the domestic sphere: anything outside of the domestic would be considered outside of their domain. All else outside of this sphere was to be the responsibility of the husband. A woman's life entailed diligent dedication to keeping up appearances and ensuring the sanctity of the home by raising the children to be moral individuals who abide by the expectations set upon them. It was believed that men and women were inclined to pursue endeavors that aligned with only their respective spheres, for

> this ideology of the separate spheres enshrined a theory of sexual difference based on the complementariness of, rather than competitiveness between, man and woman. Woman was to wield her influence in the domestic sphere, while man exercised his power in the hazardous, hostile, public domain (Pykett 12).

Women who abided by this expectation, in Pykett's term, were considered to be compliant to the system of the "proper feminine"; they conformed to the expectations set for them, did their duty to serve their home and husband without complaint, tended to their children, and remained in the shadows. In other words, the proper feminine woman was representative of "the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim" (Pykett 16). Therefore, when the New Woman came to be, the Angel of the Home's antithesis had been born. If the proper feminine is passionless, asexual and innocent, the New Woman was meant to be passionate, sexual, and corrupt. The New Woman directly challenged the Angel in the House, dismantling ideals of passive femininity and introducing a new model of womanhood—one that prioritized intellect, independence, and sexual autonomy. This ideological clash played out in literature, where authors either embraced the New Woman as a symbol of progress or vilified her as a dangerous force undermining social order. The Angel of the Home no longer had dominion over representations of women in fiction and had surrendered it to her counterpart (See Langland, Poovey, Pykett, etc).

I. **Who is the New Woman?**

The New Woman is an ambiguous figure who became a malleable one, adaptable to the purposes of the author. She may be used to represent the admirable progress of feminist ideals;

she may be used to represent the *fear* of the progress of feminist ideals. She may be used to serve as pure entertainment, or she may be used to serve as a critique on societal norms. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis make a great point in their introduction to *The New Woman in Fiction and In* Fact:

> It is time to ask not who was the New Woman? But who *were* the New Women? -- a question which was far from settled at the fin de siècle. For the anti-feminist Eliza Lynn Linton the New Woman was anti-social – a wild woman who would bring the nation to disrepute; for the publisher and essayist Arthur Waugh, she threatened to be the undoing of aesthetics (whether as author or subject); for Sarah Grand she was (or ought to be) a model of civic virtue who would stem and turn round Britain's tide of moral and biological degeneracy; for Mona Caird she was to resist the confusion of nature and history and recognize that social evolution was not biologically but historically determined (Richardson & Willis et al. 12).

The New Woman was versatile, yet it was to a fault. Rather than serving the feminist progress at the turn of the century, she became a weaponized tool to counteract that exact purpose. Thus, the idea of the New Woman at the *fin de siècle* was a deeply unsettling and threatening concept in Victorian England, "a profound threat to established culture' (Dowling 435). The mere thought of a woman existing independently, in any facet of her life, was perceived as dangerous and promiscuous. While the New Woman was predominantly characterized by her rejection of and liberation from the dependence on men, it was her embrace of her *sexual* liberation that frightened Victorian society most. The idea that a woman could claim ownership over her own body and desires upended deeply ingrained ideals of femininity, purity, and obedience. As a

result, the New Woman was often cast as an immoral or even corrupting force when reduced solely to the idea of sexual liberation.

In several works, the depiction of the New Woman was focused on their sexuality, it was their way of expressing their "quarrel with Victorian culture chiefly through sexual means by heightening sexual consciousness, candor, and expressiveness. It was this fundamental kinship described by late Victorian critics of literary decadence and New Woman fiction" (Dowling 440). However, this is not the sole defining characteristic of the New Woman, although this is what she was often reduced to. The emergence of women's independence was both threatening *and* fascinating. Women had opportunities to advance as individuals in society as opposed to dependents of their husbands' or fathers'. Women were capable of obtaining an education, getting a job, and financially supporting themselves, all while exercising their newfound sexual liberation. However, critiques of the New Woman attributed this newfound liberation to the same cause that any other reason for straying from societal gender norms is, female hysteria. Often,

> The New Woman was persistently represented as a hysteric, whose degenerate emotionalism was both symptom and cause of social change … It was also thought to be a form of brain-poisoning induced by the pressures of modern life and by women's attempts to resist their traditional roles and ape those of men. As cause, hysteria threatened social disintegration and, indeed, the future of the race, by disabling women and preventing them from fulfilling their 'natural' roles of wives and mothers (Pykett 141).

However, the New Woman is much more nuanced than distorted representations of her as a mere hysteric. This idea was often used as justification for means of putting the blame on the women themselves. Those who were critical of the New Woman did so because she subverts the

traditional gender roles at the time, disrupting the “natural order” of the patriarchy. The New Woman blurs the line between feminine and masculine traits, practices, roles, norms and everything in between. She takes on roles that are often occupied by men of the time. I.e. initiation of sexual relationships, being financially independent and self-serving, seeking purpose outside of the home.

The birth and growing popularity of the New Woman and her different representations fueled the Victorian anxieties of a cultural disruption. The New Woman would bring about change in the lives of real women and influence further subversion of the patriarchal ideals held so dearly by the patriarchal society. The fear at the time was that the New Woman would inspire social disruption not just amongst women, but across the board, threatening a degeneration of proper English society. Those who were appalled by the ideas of the New Woman and benefitted from women’s “natural order” in society began to worry that their positions in society would become accessible to those of the lower class. These fears were instilled in readers as oftentimes in New Women fiction, the women of the novels fraternized with those of the lower class or somehow found themselves entangled in the throes of some “othered” population, thus tainting the character. Therefore, this literary figure had spurred anxieties about her potential to “not only sap the moral sense of the individual but undermine the distinctions of class” (Dowling 444). The spread of New Woman fiction written with the intention of harboring feminist change and push boundaries only brought about even more criticism and were subdued with works of fiction portraying the New Woman as a demonic, evil figure. Thus, the reputation of the New Woman as a prospective of hope of what women could aspire to be became a cautionary tale, a heed of warning to all women who sought to follow the ways of the literary New Woman.

The mere existence and rising influence of the New Woman troubled Victorian society when life was already turbulent on the precipice of a new century. Their entrenched ideals had been shaken loose and exposed the fears and anxieties the turn of the century may bring. Through literary fiction at the *fin de siècle*, the New Woman become a symbol of autonomy and fear, her representations varying from the strong, determined and intelligent woman to the malevolent, dangerous temptress. New Women characters took to embodying progress while simultaneously acting as a vessel for society's anxieties about female independence, shifting gender roles, and the potential collapse of the rigid structures that had defined Victorian life.

II. **New Woman Portrayals in Media: The Negative Stereotypes Perpetuated**

The values and ideals behind the figure of the New Woman were often misconstrued or lost in translation in the literary and journalistic representations of her. The purpose of the feminist movement—dismantling the rigid spheres and barriers between men and women at the time, had become hyperbolic in the public eye. The feminist push to dismantle the rigid gender barriers was frequently misrepresented, leading to misconceptions about the real goals and beliefs of the women who embodied these ideals. The bad press and negative interpretations of the New Woman constantly destabilized and threatened the progress of the real feminist thinkers at the time. This figure had become something entirely separate from the movement it was originally spurred from. The traits of the fictional New Woman were so conflated with the ideas of the feminist movement that they soon became indistinguishable from one another. It is essential to distinguish between the fictionalized New Woman—a figure who was often depicted as radically rejecting traditional roles—and the real women who sought to redefine, rather than wholly abandon, societal expectations. Rather than rejecting marriage outright or embracing sexual freedom as mere rebellion, these women advocated for the right to pursue relationships

and personal choices on their own terms (Richardson and Willis, et al 9). Or rather than snatching jobs from men in hope of their destruction, they wanted equal opportunity in the professional and educational world. The New Woman, by way of popular media, had become an overly ambitious woman, determined to take over the male dominated spheres of Victorian society in terms of education and professionalism while rejecting all domestic ideals and duties. She was a woman who was averse to marriage and preferred to flaunt her sexuality, taking advantage of her sexual liberation. As a result, she also rejected the role of motherhood and swore off bearing children. In these representations she had become the unwomanly, threatening, obscure figure who was to be regarded with caution, "indeed for her transgressions against the sex, gender, and class distinctions of Victorian England, she was accused of instigating the second fall of man" (Ardis 1).

The New Woman inspired a movement in which Victorian women sought out their own independent lives, whether that be through pursuing an education, a career, marriage of her own accord, sexual freedom or female friendship. However, this shift in independence stirred anxiety amongst the patriarchal lives of Victorians and thus, the New Woman became a movement to fear and suppress. The media took the New Woman and portrayed her in a light which threatened the lives of the typical Victorian, a woman who was uncontrollable and corrupt, a woman who posed a threat to Victorian society. However, this is far from the truth. The New Woman's literary and media counterpart became a caricature of who she truly was,

> [t]his cartoonish figure was lampooned in newspapers and magazines of the day, and was used to terrorize the Victorian public—feeding the fears of women rights. However, in reality, the New Woman was different from the literary figure and the exact opposite of the media caricature. The New Woman in practice were professional career women who

> entered the public sphere and worked to promote Britain and the empire, while at the same time, advocating for women's rights (Clemons 7).

In the media, the New Woman was portrayed as particularly masculine, wearing trousers, riding bicycles, seeking out job opportunities—ones that inherently belonged to men of course. She became an icon for gender panic and societal expectation subversion. The movement and feminist figure had the intention of this to some extent, but the same to which the media exacerbated it. Due to the abundance of coverage in journals and cartoons, the New Woman's cultural influence had been engrained and thus established several negative stereotypes (Richardson & Wills et al 13). Her representation in

> both fiction and the periodical press was attached to journalistic catchphrases such as the 'Revolting Daughters,' the 'Shrieking Sisterhood,' and the 'Wild Woman.' She was linked to the degeneration of Victorian society and, simultaneously, a regenerative force for women who had spent their lives following patriarchal rule (Mendes 2).

Journalists portrayed the New Woman as one who was unabashedly taking on the roles and hobbies of men. In cartoons such as those from *Punch and Judy,* she was portrayed riding a bicycle, offering to carry a man's luggage, blatantly detesting marriage, and shooting rabbits. Such illustrations cast the New Woman as either a "bespectacled, physically degenerate weakling or as a strapping Amazon who could outwalk, outcycle, and outshoot any man" (Richardson and Willis, et. al 13). As cartoons and representations like these began to saturate the media, it distorted the interpretation of the New Woman as well as the understanding of the real women who aligned themselves with the emerging feminist values. These exaggerated portrayals, however, concealed the true essence of the New Woman's intentions. While her public image was distorted into one of sheer defiance and hysteria, the reality was more grounded in the desire for

autonomy and equality. By painting her as a threat to the stability of marriage, the family, and gender roles, the media effectively marginalized the New Woman as a destabilizing force rather than recognizing her as a woman advocating for personal liberation within the confines of societal norms. For the real women behind this literary figure, their intention was not simply to reject all domestic roles entirely but to question the constraints that limited their potential and independence. The New Woman demanded recognition not for the sake of rebellion but for the sake of authenticity and self-determination. This nuance was lost in the public eye, which preferred to sensationalize the notion of the New Woman as an undisciplined, sexually liberated, and unfeminine figure. These gross misrepresentations not only contributed to social unrest but also served as a way to shame and undermine women who were courageously pushing the boundaries of Victorian femininity.

Her intellectual aspirations, professional pursuits, and sexual autonomy were seen as dangerous departures from traditional femininity, marking her as both abnormal and undesirable. As these negative portrayals circulated widely, they solidified a cultural narrative that would keep women in line with Victorian ideals. Thus, while the New Woman sought to challenge and question the rigid gender roles that confined her, the distorted versions of her in the media worked tirelessly to reinforce the status quo, feeding into the societal fear of the evolving female identity. In a society that deeply feared the subversion of traditional gender roles, the New Woman became a convenient scapegoat, used to rally resistance to the changing tides of gender and power (Richardson & Willis et al. 25-27). Her misrepresentation in the press and in fiction was not merely an accident but a strategic tool used to discredit and suppress the very progress she embodied. This distortion played a crucial role in maintaining the patriarchal order, as it

painted the pursuit of women's rights as both unnatural and threatening, rather than a legitimate quest for equality and personal freedom.

CHAPTER TWO - The New Woman in *Dracula*

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* engages with the concept of the New Woman by reflecting and then subverting the negative stereotypes associated with her in Victorian media. The New Woman was often depicted as dangerously ambitious, overly sexual, dismissive of motherhood and marriage, and excessively and selfishly focused on education and professional aspirations—traits that were framed as a threat to traditional gender roles. Stoker challenges these fears by presenting Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker as complex figures who embody aspects of the New Woman while remaining sympathetic and admirable. By crafting characters who possess qualities of the New Woman while still upholding key Victorian ideals, Stoker complicates the one-dimensional caricatures circulating in contemporary discourse, offering a more nuanced exploration of changing gender roles.

I. **"A Man's Brain and a Woman's Heart": The Deconstruction of the Literary New Woman via Mina Harker**

As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest public concerns about the rising popularity of the New Woman was the threat she posed via sexual freedom. While she held a place as a figurehead for sexual liberation, her sexuality was often deemed brazen and utterly immodest. The notions of her sexual liberation became exaggerated and ultimately led representation of the New Woman to run the risk of being oversexualized. The anxieties surrounding the New Woman were exacerbated, the steps towards independence she took were taken malicious and harmful to others. The ambition the New Woman represented for education or career opportunities were seen as threats to the natural order of society, rather than what they were truly intentioned for: the betterment of a woman's place in society. The New Woman was preoccupied with so much more than sex; the New Woman was not tied down to one purpose or intention. The New Woman's

nature as a malleable figure allows for different representational purposes, feminists who were aligned with the New Woman sought out female friendship, education, financial independence, equality and love within marriage, and a chance at leadership. Now, the literary counterpart of these women seldom reflected these values in an admirable light. Rather, they are portrayed as selfish or intentionally harmful to others. While characters like Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker may initially seem to fulfill the role as the vilified stereotypical New Woman, I argue that Stoker actually aims to subvert these stereotypes and shed light on the well-rounded New Woman ideals and intentions and offers a more nuanced interpretation of the maligned New Woman.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* explores the subversion of traditional gender roles among men and women. Stoker blurs the line between the masculine and feminine and provides the New Woman with a newfound understanding and appreciation. Mina Murray-Harker and Lucy Westenra serve as compelling vessels through which Stoker explores the complexities of the shifting gender roles in light of the New Woman. Lucy and Mina, both emblematic of the New Woman in their own ways, challenge conventional expectations and anxieties, embodying a dynamic interplay of strength and vulnerability. Lucy's character serves as a cautionary tale to women who conform to the ascribed passive female role, thus encouraging women to pursue ambition and independence. Mina's character flips the stereotypes of the New Woman and her ideals on its head, showing Victorian readers that the feminist wave of the New Woman is not something to be feared, but rather admired and valued.

Mina Harker's character serves to counter the anxieties surrounding the ambition the New Woman perpetuated. Where female ambition was treated as a threat to man's power, in Stoker's novel, it is crux of the story. It is Mina's intelligence and devotion to work that ultimately brings the novel's plot to a (largely) positive resolution. All the while, her

participation in intellectual roles is commended and encouraged by the men of the novel. Mina's character serves to blur the line between the masculine and feminine, making it less binary than it traditionally was, "Mina's intelligence and actions challenge the gendered notion of a divide between logic and emotion, and through her character she transcends the gender binary to form a complete identity of personhood" (Boyd 23). Mina is a former schoolteacher, current partner to her husband as a solicitor, and refers to herself as comparable to lady journalists "interviewing and writing descriptions and trying to remember conversations" (Stoker 56), aligning herself with the ideals of the New Woman in terms of professional and vocational independence. Doctor Van Helsing describes Mina as having a "man's brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and a woman's heart" (Stoker 207). Again, Mina is blurring the line between masculinity and femininity. Logic, reason and the brain were associated with inherently masculine traits whereas emotion, thus the heart, was associated with feminine traits. They were seen as strictly separate spheres in Victorian England. However, Mina's character has managed to possess both a brain and a heart without disruption to the gender roles. Mina represents another side of the New Woman Victorian people often overlook, an easily digestible New Woman if you will. Mina is not characterized as sexual or sensual at all. In fact, she is most characterized by her intelligence, dedication to work, and loyalty. This ambition and pursuit of career and education is not deemed as threatening by the male characters either. The men of the novel often praise her for her intellectual insights or loyalty to their mission in defeating Count Dracula. This praise and commending of her intellect and pursuit of justice on behalf of her husband and friend speaks to the value of female autonomy. Mina, as a woman with and educated background and her own career is not meant to stir anxieties or warn the Victorian reader of the dangers of autonomy but instead advocate for them. In Victorian media, women

such as Mina who worked in typically male positions were criticized and made fun of, not praised or admired. In cartoons such as *Punch and Judy,* the woman in a man's position was deemed as unladylike (Richardson & Willis, et al). Stoker, however, has placed Mina in a position where her knowledge of shorthand transcription and exceptional rationality has proved to be indispensable and crucially vital to the survival of the other characters. Rather than be the punchline of a joke, Mina's character takes on a new value.

Because Mina is so active and participatory in her ambitious pursuit of independence, she does not succumb to the same suffering Lucy had after being attacked by Dracula as a result of acting as a conformist to several gender norms. Instead, Mina refuses to become a passive victim and uses the Count's psychological attack against him. The hypnotic connection becomes emblematic of her willingness to explore and express her own desires, aligning with the progressive qualities of the New Woman. Mina refuses to allow her sexuality as a woman to define her and instead relies upon her intellect to distinguish herself from the typical Victorian woman who was detained to the home. In pursuit of making sense of all the strange occurrences happening: Lucy's sudden sickness, Jonathan's strange experience at Count Dracula's castle, Renfield's madness and everything in between, Mina takes it upon herself to compile all the information. Mina takes on this secretarial role, collecting information from various diary entries, letter correspondences and phonograph entries and typing them up into a chronological, cohesive anthology. She even goes as far to track his movements using her memorization of the train schedule. In the novel, Mina's proficiency in shorthand and her meticulous documentation of events showcase her organizational skills and attention to detail. These qualities, often undervalued in the societal context of the late nineteenth century, position her as a character who defies traditional expectations of women. Her contributions underscore her active participation in

the pursuit of Dracula. Mina's role as the group's information hub and her determination to understand and confront Dracula puts her at the forefront of the action. Her decisiveness drives the actions of the male characters of the novel, proving the worth of an educated woman. Moreover, Mina's proficiency in tracking down and ultimately working to destroy Dracula adds depth to her character, portraying her as a dynamic and empowered individual rather than a passive victim. This narrative choice challenges traditional gender roles, portraying Mina as a New Woman who actively engages with challenges. The ambition Mina's character demonstrates is not viewed as dangerous or selfish. It is in fact the complete opposite.

Mina entirely rejects the notion of females playing passive roles in relationships and endeavors. She actively seeks out any way to be of use. Whether it be in terms of taking care of Lucy, taking care of Jonathan, or aiding in the mission to take down count Dracula. Regardless of what the task at hand is, she longs to be of help and importance. Mina is truly the catalyst for all action in the novel. She initiates the recuperation of both Jonathan and Lucy and spearheads the crew's vampire hunting after compiling all necessary information. She even offers her mind and body up to Dracula himself as a means to get closer to him to enact his destruction. This voluntary submission challenges societal norms surrounding female autonomy, presenting Mina as an individual with agency over her own desires. Mina manages to remain unscathed by the vampire for the majority of the novel. This is due in part to her constant action, a critique of the passivity of the patriarchal Victorian woman. It is only after she is forced out of the action by Van Helsing that she becomes a victim of Dracula. Kistler argues that

> Once she is confined to the domestic sphere, however, Mina becomes lazy and lethargic, sleeping all day and unable to focus her attention on any task at hand. She becomes, that is, like the idle middle-class women that New Women revolted against. It

is this domestic idleness that invites Dracula's attack (Kistler 10).

It is clear then why Lucy was such an easy target for Dracula, and why he did not pursue Mina instead. Lucy was more susceptible to the attack because she was not as ambitious in her pursuit of advancing herself in society. Therefore, it seems that Stoker has positioned Dracula, the threat of the novel, as a figure concerned with destroying and corrupting those who conform to the passivity traditional Victorian society perpetuates. Dracula's character, or vampirism in general, is representative of the threat of public degeneration, a fear created by the New Woman as well. However, it is the New Woman, Mina, who saves the characters from the degeneracy Dracula and his vampirism bring to the characters of the novel. Stoker then makes a bold statement, insinuating that New Woman is capable of saving Victorian society from the threat of degeneration at the hands of a foreign other, she is not who they should be concerned or preoccupied with. In fact, she serves as more of an advantage in the fight against degeneracy; the independent, educated and autonomous New Woman will only help Victorian society.

II. **Before and After the Bite: The Two Sides of Lucy Westenra's New Woman**

Lucy Westenra is a pivotal figure of Stoker's novel, most known for her acting as a figurehead for the New Woman in terms of her sexuality. The New Woman of Victorian England was most often characterized by her liberated sexuality and promiscuity. Lucy's character is often interpreted as an epitome of this kind of woman. Her characterization as hyper feminine and "promiscuous", however, is only a scratch at the surface of the extent to which she embodies the ideal of the New Woman. Karen Winstead argues, too, that there is much more to Lucy than her physical and sexual appeal. She explains,

> Though critics generally read Lucy as a frivolous naïf, there is far more to her than the sweetness her beaux enthuse over. Her nerve and intelligence come through in her diary entries and in the remarkably lucid memorandum she pens just before her death (Winstead 4).

Lucy's character transcends mere sexuality, a facet often overshadowed by critics who fail to acknowledge her intellectual depth. Regrettably, she is frequently dismissed as a naive and romantically inclined young woman fixated solely on securing a marriage proposal. While Lucy does participate in traditional ideals of the time such as pursuing suitors and marriage, remaining a woman of the home, and acts perfectly ladylike, she also possesses qualities of the New Woman. Though Lucy is fixated on marriage, she does not let it deter her from where her priorities lie: with Mina. Her profound connection with Mina surpasses her concerns about an engagement. She herself acknowledges the absurdity of relying on men to take care of them, exclaiming “I suppose that we women are such cowards that we think a man will save us from fears” (Stoker 59). But in fact, it is her dearest friend Mina, who saves her from danger. Lucy is an intelligent woman who values her female friendship with Mina and maintains that friendship through writing correspondences back and forth. Lucy and Mina’s friendship is a demonstration of the female solidarity that was associated with the New Woman and the feminist conversations surrounding it. The two women both show mutual, genuine love and support for one another, willing to do anything for each other. Mina is in fact the one who rescues Lucy from her first interaction with Dracula and brings her back to safety. They profess their love for each other numerous times throughout the novel. In the beginning of the novel, we are informed of the origins of their friendship where they “have slept together and eaten together, and laughed and cried together” (Stoker 57). They have endured all of life's tasks together, miniscule or

monumental, and have been through it all side by side. Mina professes her love for her dear friend, signing her letter to Lucy “I love you with all the moods and tenses of the verb” (Stoker 141). Although their friendship is genuine and wholesome, it was still a concern for the Victorian audience. The rise and presence of female solidarity and friendship at the age of the New Woman was threatening to the “natural order” of the patriarchy, “the potential of the passionate female friendship, especially in the cultural climate of the New Woman, is that a woman could decide to live outside of standardized Victorian gender codes” (Prescott & Giorgio 490). Female friendships such as Lucy and Mina’s were perceived as inspiration to delineate from their ascribed roles in society. Instead of being dependent upon the men in their lives, they were seeking love and support from other women. Stoker creates this friendship amongst the two female protagonists in a way in which readers find endearing and wholesome, not threatening though. The positive New Woman traits of Lucy shine through in her correspondence and conversations with Mina. Thus, showcasing Mina as a positive female influence on Lucy through their friendship. The relationship between these two women is genuine and loving without any threat to other characters in the novel nor to themselves. It is their friendship that inspires the demise of Dracula himself, if it weren't for Mina and Lucy’s devout friendship, Mina would not have gone through the trials and tribulations of stalking, tracking, and defeating the vampire. The anxieties surrounding female friendships perpetuated by the media at the height of the New Woman threat is undone here in Stoker’s articulation of Lucy and Mina’s relationship.

When taking into consideration the idea of Lucy’s sexuality, it is important to note that the moments when Lucy’s sexuality is most at play are the moments when she lacks all agency, contrary to the belief perpetuated about the New Woman among the public press. In the public eye, the New Woman “displayed untoward sexual instincts” (Murphy 81). However, I argue that

Lucy is not pursuing any sexual encounters, rather, she is victim to the sexual instincts of the male characters in the novel, not her own. The only resistance against the status quo of the proper Victorian women is that she is entertaining the idea of several suitors and wishes to choose hers. She is not flaunting her sexuality or acting in a sexual or rebellious manner as critics like Carol Senf (Senf 43) and Rebecca Clippard (Clippard 69) suggest. I argue that she only becomes overtly sexual and seductive when she is fully transformed into a vampire at the hands of Dracula. Therefore, her vampiric transformation is not a reflection of *her* desires, but of those who desire her instead. Lucy's first sexual and vampiric encounter happens with Dracula himself when Lucy is out sleepwalking. Although Lucy was out alone at night, she was unconscious of it. It is no coincidence that Dracula strikes while she is asleep. She was not a willing or consensual participant in the encounter; she was raped. Her sexuality having been defiled and taken advantage of; she is susceptible to the replication of this experience. Lucy is left in an utterly vulnerable position after being bitten by Dracula. Her life is dependent upon the men of the story, Van Helsing, Seward, Morris and her husband, Art who give their blood to save her. The blood transfusion scenes are moments of graphic sexual violation. If we see Dracula's penetration of Lucy via his vampiric bite marks, sucking her blood as a sexual act, then consequently, the transfusion of blood from one body to another is inherently sexual as well. When this blood transfusion takes place (four separate times), Lucy is completely unconscious again, without any consent on the matter. Her state before the second transfusion is referred to as "a narcotic sleep" (Stoker 119). The procedure is made even more sexual and romantic through the eyes and narration of Dr. Seward as after his blood has been transfused into Lucy's body, he takes pride in this experience, claiming "It was a feeling of personal pride...to feel his own life-blood drawn away into the veins of the woman he loves" (Stoker 119). Seward, a former

suitor of Lucy is able to sexually connect with Lucy and make his mark on her body through this blood transfusion. The transfer of the bodily fluid, blood, via penetration is uncoincidentally parallel to the transfer and deposition of bodily fluid that occurs during sex. Now not only has Lucy been violated or raped by Dracula but also has been by the men who "so generously" volunteered their blood to save Lucy's life. Only, this "selfless" act is truly *selfish*. The men are taking advantage of the vulnerable state Lucy is in to sexually conquer her, not just once, but in four different instances of this blood transfusion or more accurately, rape. This is not a reflection of Lucy's insatiable lust for desire but of men's manipulation of her vulnerability.

It is only after Lucy has been attacked and transformed by Dracula that she embodies the stereotypical New Woman role perpetuated by Victorian media. Her demonic pursuits as a vampire speak to the anxieties and fears that had hold of Victorian men and women. Perhaps as a result of the promiscuous sexuality the vilified New Woman participated in, the New Woman was deemed as one averse to marriage and motherhood. Lucy's targets and victims are not those she is sexually attracted to or related to her sexuality at all as most may argue. It is children who she preys upon. The New Woman rejected the stereotypical womanly desire to bear and care for children, rejecting the idea that "every good woman is by nature a mother, and finds best in maternity her social and moral salvation" (Ardis 92). Instead, she was content with being independent and had no interest in bearing children. Pykett describes their views on children as "'conspicuously innocent' of any interest in children: She has tried to prove that woman's mission is something higher than the bearing of children and the bringing them up" (Pykett 139). Lucy's predation on children is a blatant rejection of motherhood and the expectation of being the maternal caretaker. Instead, she takes out this resentment through the violence and corruption of the children she attacks. Lucy was violated by Seward, Van Hesling and Arthur, unwillingly

receiving their bodily fluids via transfusions. Lucy's violent pursuit of the children can be read as an act of vengeance and rejection of the sexual violation she endured. She is decimating the possibility of semination and conception at the hands of the men. Lucy's vampiric victims are not chosen out of sexual desire, but as a rejection of motherhood. Several criticisms of Stoker's *Dracula* attribute Lucy's vampiric transformation to her explicit sexuality. But, as argued earlier, Lucy is not as sexually forward as critics make her out to be. The common argument is that "Lucy Westenra's vampirism becomes a necessary mechanism to express the level of evil presented by her voracious sexuality (Murphy 247). On the other hand, it can be argued that she behaves as a typical Victorian woman would in terms of romantic pursuits. It is not clear that she ever made any advances on her suitors, nor was she sexually expressive. She merely accepted the advances of the men, none of which were explicitly sexual. Her transformation instead is symbolic of the consequences of conforming to the Victorian ideals for women. If women are complacent in their lives, living to be married and have children, as Lucy's initial intention was, then she will suffer.

CHAPTER THREE: Reimagining the New Woman Through the Femme Fatale

The femme fatale is an archetype that was created long before the rise of the New Woman, but as the cultural context evolved, so did she. The femme fatale became the ultimate caricature of the New Woman ideals. Though they are not the same figure and cannot be used interchangeably, the femme fatale takes on many of the same negative stereotypes the literary New Woman does which only further questions and disrupts the patriarchal norm in Victorian society. While the New Woman sought greater autonomy, education, and control over her own body, the femme fatale embodied these traits in an exaggerated, sinister form. Her ambition was reimagined as ruthless manipulation, her intelligence as cunning deception, and her sexual freedom as dangerous seduction. She became a warning against the perceived dangers of women who rejected traditional roles, reinforcing the idea that an independent woman was not just unnatural but destructive. Ayeesha, the immortal queen in H. Rider Haggard's *She* exemplifies this archetype. She is beautiful, powerful, and sexually autonomous, ruling over men with a supernatural authority. Her vast knowledge and mystical abilities make her an awe-inspiring figure, yet she is ultimately portrayed as a threat that must be neutralized. Like many femme fatale figures, Ayesha represents the fears surrounding female power and desire, embodying the worst stereotypes of the New Woman, and serving as a cautionary tale about the consequences of unchecked female autonomy.

I. Haggard's Feared Femme Fatale

In *She*, Haggard presents Ayesha as the quintessential femme fatale—intelligent, manipulative, and dangerously seductive, wielding power over the novel's male protagonists. This femme fatale is a *type* of New Woman, one that upholds the independence and power-seeking aspects of the literary trope, as well as inducing the same anxieties about gender

and class degeneration (Braun 2). The growing movement of women advocating for shifts in gender norms not only set a precedent for societal change but also sparked deep anxieties about the broader implications of such progress. Many feared that if women succeeded in challenging traditional gender roles, it would pave the way for questioning and dismantling established social spheres and boundaries, including those pertaining to class. Yet, the femme fatale is not the same as the New Woman. They share some of the same ideals or characteristics, but the femme fatale's defining quality is that of her sexual power to *destroy* by means of her victim's own desire. The manipulative nature of the femme fatale only further perpetuates the destruction (Braun 3), where she may even attempt to warn her victims of her power and influence, ultimately convincing the victim to challenge her and succumb to her. In portraying powerful and threatening women under the scope of "other-worldly" she is further ostracized, feared, and critiqued. Where Stoker seemed to value the New Woman and offered nuances to the stereotypes surrounding her, Haggard's novel serves to critique the New Woman, destroying the power and influence she has both in the novel and in its readers.

Haggard's adventure novel brings two men across the world, to seek out the ever-powerful African queen, Ayeesha: leader of the Amahagger civilization and frightening temptress. The interactions between Ayeesha and the novel's male protagonists explore the misogynistic anxieties and perceived threats men like Horace Holly held. Horace Holly's character is a reflection of the ideals held by patriarchal men at the time, which only makes him bigger target in the eyes of Ayesha. For literary representations of femme fatales intentionally pursue men who sought to repress their desire for power; "femme fatales take action against such conventional restraints by threatening men who represent the Victorian ideology that oppresses women. Cunning, strong-minded, independent, and unconventional" (Hedgecock 5). Ayeesha's

character is meant to probe the anxieties Victorian men were experiencing at the hands of the rise of the New Woman and expose the threat and possibly fatal consequences of her success (Murphy 749). Her role as a ruthless, intelligent leader sets the stage for an immediate connection to the characteristics of the Victorian New Woman. She was to Holly, a "terrible but most fascinating woman" (Haggard 61).

Though she is devout to her ancient lover, Kalikrates, she is not averse to entertaining flirtations with Holly or using her beauty and sex appeal to get what she wants, a common stereotype of the literary New Woman. At their first meeting, Holly's curiosity gets the best of him. Without regard for her warning, Holly insists Ayeesha unveil herself to him, believing he will be immune to the effect her beauty has on those who gaze upon her. As a result, Holly has become victim to her trance, recounting his feeling of being "[d]rawn by some magnetic force which [he] could not resist...that bewildered and half blinded [him]" which he later has little recollection of what happened after (Haggard 70). In femme fatale fashion, Ayeesha warns Holly of the consequences of viewing her unveiled, thus stirring his desire to become even stronger. Once he does, it is as if he had become enraptured by her beauty, unable to look away or pull himself out of the trance. From then on, Holly is under her control.

Ayeesha's unrelenting violence against those who come in the way of her union with Kalikrates and reunion with Kalikrates' reincarnation in the form of Leo, contributes to the terrorizing qualities of the femme fatale. Such violence signals a threat posed by women who seek out their own love and relationships, rather than following the conventional submissive role in courtship women were expected to adopt. Haggard's representation of Ayesha in this way speaks to his views on women who dared to defy conventional Victorian norms.

However, this is not her only tool as the leader of her civilization; she relies more on her knowledge and influence to maintain her power and leadership position. Like the New Woman, Ayesha is educated and knowledgeable and her intelligence is one of her most striking and threatening qualities. She is not only fluent in multiple languages, including Greek, Arabic, and English, but also possesses an extensive knowledge of history, philosophy, and science. Holly, a scholar himself, is deeply impressed by her intellect and enjoys conversing with her. In one of their first interactions, Ayesha reveals her knowledge of Egyptian, Greek Roman and Hebrew histories, recounting the details clear as day. She even delves into philosophical debates about change and death in which she articulates herself in such a sophisticate manner that Holly is left in complete awe of her capabilities and even doubts his own capacity to comprehend the breadth of her knowledge and passion (Haggard 64-65). However, despite his admiration, Holly remains wary of her, as her intelligence is inseparable from her dominance and ability to manipulate those around her. Unlike the conventional wise male mentor figure, Ayesha's knowledge is portrayed as dangerous, fueling her ability to control others and reinforcing the idea that a woman with too much wisdom is a threat to men and society. Her intellectual power, rather than being celebrated, becomes another tool of seduction and destruction, solidifying her status as a *femme fatale* whose abilities make her both mesmerizing and perilous.

Hedgecock in her book, "*The* Femme Fatale *in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* , she makes an argument for the complexity of Victorian age femme fatales, claiming she "is different from historical figures such as Cleopatra, Salome, Helen of Troy, or the sirens because she does not always bear a sexuality that is blatantly predatory; instead she represents the social and cultural changes; the myriad of problems faced by Victorian society" (Hedgecock 7). While this may be true to an extent, I do believe the New Woman figure plays a

much bigger role in the commentary on the social and cultural issues at hand. The femme fatale was an archetype created to instill fear and terror within its readers and warn society of the dangerous threat she posed. However, she had become a caricature in her representations and perpetuated ideals that went against feminism at the time. Rather than seeing the femme fatale as a tool to produce progress in the lives of real-life women, she was a weaponized tool used by authors afraid of such progress happening. Yes, there are representations of femme fatales that are deeper than her sexuality, like Ayesha of course. The representation of an extremely intelligent, matriarchal power is admirable, but these parts of her identity are exactly what Haggard fixates on to justify her destruction. Women who hold power as Ayesha does, or have a breadth of knowledge and intellect, or pursue love and marriage in their own ways are to be destroyed according to Haggard. For women like this would be the cause of the devolution and destruction of man.

II. **Stoker's Sexualized Femme Fatales**

From the outset of *Dracula*, Bram Stoker implements the femme fatale archetype, positioning it as a central force in the novel's exploration of fear, desire, and power. Jonathan Harker becomes the first victim—though not of Count Dracula himself, but of the Count's three brides, whose seductive menace establishes the danger of female sexuality. Harker is at once enraptured and terrified, his conflicting impulses exposing the destabilizing effect of the femme fatale's allure.

> The other was fair as can be, with great wavy masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires. I seemed somehow to know her face, and to know it in connection to some dreamy fear, but I could not recollect at the moment how or where. All three had brilliant

> white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked desire that they would kiss me with those red lips (Stoker 42).

The interaction between Jonathan and the female vampires underscores the femme fatale's defining paradox: she is both irresistible and perilous, her beauty a weapon that renders her male victims defenseless. Against his better judgement, Jonathan has become enraptured by these three women, seemingly possessed by their beauty and allure. Thus is the trademark of the femme fatale's power. These women are the first instance of vampirism in the novel and establish the inherent sexual nature of vampiric pursuits. So, while Jonathan acknowledges these women are dangerous and to be feared, he cannot help but feel urged by desire to be dominated (and penetrated) by them; making him utterly vulnerable to their power. Within a matter of seconds, the female vampire overpowers Jonathan, relying on her beauty to manipulate Jonathan into *wanting* to be attacked by her. The femme fatale, in this instance, is not merely a symbol of temptation but of the collapse of normative power structures, where the male protagonist is stripped of his authority and rendered helpless under the force of feminine allure. The fair bride's beauty: her brilliant white teeth, voluptuous red lips, golden hair, and sapphire eyes are tools, rather, weapons, made for destruction. The femme fatale relies on her sensuality to assert dominance and invoke surrender of her male victims. The vampiric brides "inspire sexual appetites in the most virtuous of souls and force them to question their conceptions of gender-prescribed behavior" (Braun 103). In Jonathan's case, his yearning to be kissed by the brides suggests a subconscious desire to submit, to surrender himself to their power despite knowing the danger they pose. Even further, his desire to be punctured (penetrated) by the teeth

of these female vampires potentially insinuates a desire for homoerotic penetration, ultimately subverting expected sexual behavior of a wealthy Victorian man. Here, the femme fatales, the vampires, evoke a fear of hypersexuality within women and an unearthing of "unnatural" desires within men who typically ascribe to conventional norms. Surrender to the vampires would not only fuel the fear of sexually forward women, but it would also cause panic for a sexual corruption and degeneration. Christopher Craft argues a similar point in his essay, "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's Dracula,"

> Immobilized by the competing imperatives of 'wicked desire' and 'deadly fear', Harker awaits an erotic fulfillment that entails both the dissolution of the boundaries of the self and through the subversion of conventional Victorian gender codes, which constrained the mobility of sexual desire and varieties of genital behavior according to the more active male the right and responsibility of vigorous appetite, while requiring the more passive female role to 'suffer and be still' (Craft 1).

Thus, the femme fatales have broken down the distinct boundaries separating men and women and reversed their roles. Jonathan's feminine role in the interaction with the brides perpetuates the threat the femme fatales pose. Their sexuality is dangerous and threatening, yes, but they have also proven they can deconstruct the sexuality of those around them and inverse them.

Lucy Westenra of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been considered one of *the* femme fatale figures. However, her role as a femme fatale figure does not happen until her vampiric transformation does. Lucy Westenra's transformation into a vampire marks her transition from a passive object of desire to an active agent of seduction and destruction, aligning her with the archetype of the femme fatale. She becomes a figure who is hell bent on the destruction of others and uses her sexual allure to do so. In death, she becomes the ultimate transgression: a woman

whose allure is not only conscious but weaponized, her beauty no longer a passive trait but a tool of domination. As the "Bloofer Lady," she weaponizes her beauty and sexual allure, preying on children and men alike, embodying a lethal femininity that threatens the social and moral order. No longer merely an object of desire, Lucy becomes an active agent of destruction, her sexuality turned predatory and deadly. In this way, her vampirism not only marks a physical transformation but also unleashes the repressed erotic power that renders her a true femme fatale—dangerous precisely because of the desire she incites and the destruction she leaves in her wake.

Once Lucy undergoes her vampirization, she is transformed into a dangerous predator, nondiscriminatory in her hunts. Our first glimpse of Lucy post-transformation is one of violating pursuit. She is found sucking the blood of a dying child, the blood spilling over her mouth onto her white dressing gown. When she is caught by the party of men intent on destroying her, she seemingly recognizes Arthur, her fiancée. Though she is consumed by her lust for blood, she is not slave to the desire. She still has her wits about her, she is rather cunning and manipulative. Seeing Arthur's vulnerability and desperation for her love, she beckons him to her, willing him to give into his temptation, willing him to her.

> When she advanced to him with outstretched rms and a wanton smile, he fell back and hid his ace in his hands. She still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said: -- 'Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!' There was something diabolically sweet in her tones – something of the tingling of glass when struck—which rang through the brains of even us who heard the words addressed to

> another. As for Arthur, he seemed under a spell; moving his hands from his face, he opened wide his arms (Stoker 188).

Lucy's beckoning of Arthur is calculated and manipulative, feigning affection, and sincerity to lure her fiancée into death's arms. This moment epitomizes the femme fatale's power: the ability to make her victim desire his own undoing. Lucy, as a femme fatale, is incredibly cunning and intelligent, knowing exactly how to use her sexuality and relationship with Arthur to assert control over him. And it worked. Arthur, enraptured by Lucy, willingly succumbs to his desire, opening his arms to his undead fiancée. It is only because of Van Helsing that Arthur is safe from Lucy's devious allure. Like Jonathan and the vampire brides, they surrender of their own volition, again positioning the femme fatale as serious threat to the autonomy of men.

Now, critics including Rebecca Stott and Jennifer Hedgecock, have argued that Lucy Westenra's portrayal as a femme fatale is relatively one-dimensional. According to their readings, Lucy functions as a textbook embodiment of the archetype—an eroticized, monstrous woman whose sole narrative purpose is to seduce and destroy, serving as a cautionary figure rather than a fully realized character. Within this interpretation, Lucy exists to dramatize the Victorian fear of female sexuality, and her death is simply a narrative mechanism to restore patriarchal order. However, I would argue that such a reading flattens the complexity of Lucy's character and fails to account for the subtleties of her transformation and tragic fate. Far from being a mere symbol of destructive femininity, Lucy emerges as one of the most dynamic figures in *Dracula*. Her arc traces an evolution from ideal Victorian womanhood to a deeply transgressive figure who challenges the boundaries of gender, power, and desire. A figure who must be destroyed to restore order. Her death—ritualized, sexualized, and orchestrated by men—is presented not only as a necessary act of salvation but as a moral and ideological

reassertion of control. Arthur's staking of Lucy, described in terms disturbingly close to penetration, is more than a physical act: it is the symbolic destruction of female autonomy and reestablishment of traditional gender norms. Only in death can Lucy be "purified" and made into a passive, peaceful figure once again. It would be a disservice to Stoker's novel and the nuances he grapples with to consider Lucy as a one-dimensional figure. Stoker has deviated from the typical representations of femme fatales and offered a different interpretation of the gender norms being challenged in Victorian England.

While the femme fatale and the New Woman may share certain characteristics such as intelligence, sexual autonomy, and independence—they are ultimately distinct figures with different purposes. The New Woman reflected the desire for real social change and the redefinition of womanhood in the late Victorian period. Her presence in literature often captured the nuanced tensions and anxieties surrounding this shift, offering both critique and celebration of the evolving female role. The femme fatale, on the other hand, was not a reflection but a distortion—a hyperbolic, often monstrous exaggeration of these same traits, created to instill fear and reinforce patriarchal norms. While the New Woman questioned the status quo for the most part, the femme fatale served to uphold it, functioning as a cautionary figure whose autonomy was inherently dangerous and whose destruction was necessary to preserve social order. In this way, the femme fatale becomes a caricature, used not to explore the possibilities of gender progress but to suppress them. Her intelligence becomes manipulation, her sexuality becomes weaponized, and her independence becomes a justification for her downfall. These literary representations do more than just dramatize male fear—they actively participate in the cultural project of policing femininity, turning the rise of the New Woman into a spectacle of peril rather than progress. Characters like Ayesha and Lucy are not simply products of gothic literature; they

are multifaceted tools shaped by ideological resistance to and desire for female empowerment. Their fates—whether crumbling into ash or being staked through the heart—signal that a woman who resists prescribed gender roles must ultimately be neutralized.

CONCLUSION

This exploration of the representations of the New Woman in *fin de siècle* fiction has revealed the fraught tensions between gender norms deeply entrenched within the status quo of patriarchal Victorian society. The autonomy the emerging feminists at the time sought out after had incited a cultural panic rooted in fears of degeneration and the perceived unraveling of the so-called natural order. In the face of such panic, these ideals had been contorted into literary figures such as the New Woman and the femme fatale, meant to critique and resist the advancement feminists desired. However, some representations of these figures are not a easily classified as entirely villainous or entirely flawless. Rather, they had become indeterminate figures who could fit the purpose of any author. My study of the different implementations of dangerous women in *fin de siècle* fiction has uncovered the instability of the tropes and acknowledged complicated nuances.

While the female archetypes like the New Woman and the femme fatale have been studied as critiques of the progressive *fin de siècle* women, there are nuances to some of those characters that require a closer examination. Characters like Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker in Stoker's *Dracula* embody the ambiguity and malleability that made the New Woman both so threatening and so compelling. They are neither entirely rebellious nor fully submissive; rather, they function as amalgamations of different stereotypes bleeding through the walls of Victorian society and in turn, twisting and turning each of them on their head.

The femme fatale, while she predates the New Woman, functioned as a severe projection of the cultural fear surrounding female sexuality and power and thus perpetuates the horror of the progressive woman and turns her into something both desirable and destructive. The femme

fatale, while separate from the New Woman, inspired similar critiques of female sexuality and power. Thus, Ayesha's matriarchal reign was destined to be destroyed. Though her intellect and grandeur are acknowledged, they are rendered dangerous when coupled with dominance and desire. Her fall, and Horace Holly's reluctant triumph, reinforce the idea that the progressive woman must be neutralized to preserve the stability of Victorian ideals. In this way, the femme fatale becomes not just a cautionary figure, but a cultural response to the growing visibility of women who challenged the status quo. Such a narrative speaks to the call for action of Victorian society in the face of powerful, progressive women.

The New Women and femme fatales of late Victorian Gothic fiction are not mere inventions—they are distorted reflections of real feminist ideals that emerged during the period. However, these ideals are often embellished, contorted, and caricatured into literary tropes that serve to regulate female power. Yet within these caricatures lie moments of contradiction, complexity, and unexpected agency. It is in these slippages that we can locate the deeper cultural ambivalence toward women's changing roles. By reading beyond the surface of these archetypes, we uncover not only Victorian society's anxieties, but also its unconscious admissions: that the future of womanhood was not so easily controlled.

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