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# The Return to the Gothic in the Face of Gender Anarchy at the fin de siècle

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The Return to the Gothic in the Face of Gender Anarchy at the *fin de siècle*:  
An Examination of Authorial Technique in Response to the Women's Movement

"The world seems full of good men—  
even if there *are* monsters in it."

-- Mina Harker

## Section I: Introduction to the Gothic

According to James Hogg's *Romantic Reassessment of the Gothic Novel* (1986), there are three essential components of the Gothic aesthetic: horror, suspense and shock (Hogg 4). The term itself has come to be associated with dark nights, eerie winds, deserted castles, and romantic horrors, but once upon a time it signified membership in an Eastern Germanic tribe of medieval Europe, a large portion of which originated in Scandinavia.<sup>1</sup> The formerly pejorative term's application to the post-medieval architecture characterized by the pointed arch and flying buttress was initially intended to comment on its stylistic barbarity rather than its creative source, but nonetheless the British revival of its castles and cathedrals in the seventeenth century served as a source of inspiration for authors such as Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Anne Radcliffe. The resulting Gothic Literature, typified by the eerie and suggestive supernatural, experienced its heyday from 1764 to 1816. Its themes and preoccupations permeated every corner of literate England. However, the rise of the realist novel dispensed with its romance and promoted a carefully constructed realism, optimized for social instruction. The excesses and sensation of the Gothic seemed to have been put to rest. But Gothicism never disappeared from the literary consciousness, which prompts the literary scholar to consider why a revival of the Gothic genre occurred in the later decades of the nineteenth century.

Although the mid-century works of authors like Edgar Allen Poe, Elizabeth Gaskell, and the Bronte sisters borrow isolated elements of its tradition, the full blown revival of the

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<sup>1</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this tribe divided into the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths which established powerful states in Italy and the Iberian Peninsula.

Gothic novel did not occur until the 1870s.<sup>2</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 publication *The Coming Race* was among the first of the Victorian Gothic novels, followed shortly after by Sheridan Le Fanu's notorious *Carmilla* in 1872. The final two decades of the nineteenth century featured a slew of novels containing elements of the Gothic which were perceived to be allied to the *fin de siècle* decadence, including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).<sup>3</sup> The culmination of this literary trend occurred in 1897 with the creation of the most famous of all gothic villains in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The degree to which the aforementioned authors employ Gothic techniques in these works varies, but the general trend is characterized by an increasing adherence to its tenets as the century progresses.

Although Gothic literature fell out of popular favor for several decades during the first half of the nineteenth century, its dark passageways, perilous journeys to exotic locations, and dangerous encounters with elements of the supernatural remained just below the surface of high Victorian literature. For example, many of the characters in popular novels of the pre-Victorian period, such as Jane Austen's Catherine Moreland, the heroine of her 1818 publication *Northanger Abbey*, indulged in Gothic novels and were fascinated by their foreign, but alluring nature. However, in order to completely understand the genre's fully developed revival, the historical gaps between its popularity must be accounted for. Among the most significant social adjustments in England made between 1816 and 1897 were the redefinition of gender roles, the eventual development of the women's movement, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are considered pioneer works of the female Gothic, paying particular attention to the patriarchal structure of Victorian society and women's entrapment within the domestic space.

<sup>3</sup> Latin for "end of the century," the *fin de siècle* is consistently associated with a period of social crisis characterized by decadence and the fear of degeneration.

emergence of the New Woman at the *fin de siècle*. This paper will examine the relationship between the Women's Movement of the late nineteenth century and the concurrent revival of the Gothic novel by male authors as a cautionary retort to social change.

Predictably, not all male authors responded favorably to the increased freedoms to which women were now entitled and many responded even less favorably to the perceived alteration in the attitude and character of many women. With the exception of pro-feminist male authors like John Stuart Mill and Oscar Wilde, the gender prescriptions represented by John Ruskin's view of female sexuality as a mildly repugnant annoyance bore a heavy influence over many conservatives who utilized literature as an outlet for their own social anxieties.<sup>4</sup> At the forefront of these anxieties was the fear that increased female independence would overturn the existing social order and result in a reassignment of the dominant and submissive gender roles. Many male authors like Ruskin and some female anti-feminist authors relied on the contemporarily popular realist novel or direct prose to voice their objections to the changing sexual order of the day, but a select few, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Bram Stoker, chose the Gothic novel as their preferred mode of instruction.

Perhaps this choice was haphazard or coincidental, but the more likely scenario suggests that some aspect of the traditional Gothic form was an attractive vehicle for a work of anti-feminist fiction. In the introduction to his *Gothic Reflections* (2003), Peter K. Garrett writes:

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<sup>4</sup> John Stuart Mill's most prominent work on this topic was his essay "On the Subjugation of Women," coauthored by his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, strongly advocating equality between the sexes. A public advocate for the Women's Movement, Wilde edited the popular magazine *The Woman's World*, from 1887 until 1890. During his editorship, the magazine featured articles and literary submissions from prominent female authors. John Ruskin's marriage to his wife Effie famously ended due to lack of consummation. It is rumored that, having only viewed the female genitalia in sculpture, Ruskin was appalled by his wife's pubic hair.

Sometimes Gothic fiction is credited with deliberate subversion; sometimes it is read symptomatically for the ways its terror betrays cultural anxieties about sexuality and gender, the menace of alien races or the criminal classes—about whatever threatens the dominant social order or challenges its ideologies. As a mode defined by “excess and transgression,” Gothic seems necessarily, essentially opposed to all norms and limits. (Garrett 2)

This paper will assert that the political and sexual liberation of women during the late Victorian era caused male authors like Lytton and Stoker to fear the Victorian woman would evolve into a New Woman, whose opposition to social norms recommended the use of Gothic technique. Authors like Bulwer-Lytton and Stoker repainted the New Woman as one resembling the exotic and sometimes monstrous females of early Gothic literature as a caution to their reader. Additionally, the difference in the degree of monstrosity, sexual aggression, and social perversion each author constructs is most readily explained by the chronological position of the two texts within the women’s movement and in relation to its defining moments.

## Section II: Historical Context on Changing Gender Roles for Women

Although the women’s movement in England did not receive legal consideration until the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, male anxieties concerning female independence surfaced much earlier and in many cases are visible in the contemporary literature. Before the Enlightenment, the female was thought a mere variation of the male, but during the Age of Reason, she was acknowledged to be a separate being altogether. This new attitude toward

gender promoted the development of a masculine Self and feminine Other. Once this distinction was internalized, a heightened fear of otherness and particularly female otherness became recurrent in literature, most notably in those works belonging to the Gothic period. The onslaught of legislation promoting women's rights that occurred throughout the nineteenth century produced a New Woman whose independence and aggressive nature reminded male authors of the horrific perversions of femininity that characterized the Gothic novel. As a result, a notable resurgence of Gothic-themed literature written by conservative male authors functioned as a warning of the dangers associated with the liberated woman in the final decades of the Victorian Period.

The proliferation of Gothic literature between 1764 and 1820 introduced several darker themes to the British audience. In her *Horri-fying Sex* (2007), Ruth Bienstock Anolik asserts that "One theme that typically emerges in any text aligned with the Gothic tradition is the encounter with the unknown" (Anolik 1). While in many Gothic works, this entailed an exotic location, cavernous castle, or supernatural incident, several forms of a sexual Other surfaced during this period as well. This sexual Other is frequently a human figure who is threatening because his or her sexuality is unfamiliar, and as Anolik states "the sexual Other takes on the aura of dangerous power from the supernatural, suggesting that the sexual Other, like the ghostly manifestation, preternaturally dangerous" (Anolik 5). Frequently, this Other was a savage or deranged male attempting to rape English virginity, but in works like Edgar Allen Poe's 1838 "Ligeia" and Florence Marryat's 1897 *The Blood of the Vampire*, the sexual Other is an insatiable, cannibalistic female. Her monstrosity is directly linked to her aggressive sexuality, and although the Gothic retreated from popular literature around 1820, these particular works suggest that the frightening images of the feminine and maternal

lingered in the Victorian literary subconscious until the revival of Gothicism during the British *fin de siècle*.

While the monstrous, aggressive female remained a fictional being she was of no danger to Victorian masculinity, but several legislative acts allowed for an evolution of gender roles that introduced the possibility of this woman becoming a reality. Throughout the nineteenth century in Great Britain, women were granted a broader legal standing and married women in particular, especially those who had children, were afforded an increasingly more expansive and socially recognized position. According to historians like David Rubinstein's in *Before the Suffragettes* (1986) and Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's in *Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902* (2004), this very gradual process began in 1839 with the Custody of Infants Act. This piece of legislation granted mothers of "unblemished character" access to their children in the event of separation or divorce. Although these women were still not permitted to contest custody, this act is significant because it acknowledged a mother's right to see her child, and it also paved the way for similar legislation. Almost two decades later, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 gave women limited access to divorce. While men only had to have proof of their wives' adultery to be granted divorce, this legislation provided divorce to women who could prove that in addition to adultery, their husbands had also committed incest, bigamy, cruelty, or desertion. Furthermore, a husband guilty of desertion was denied the right to her earnings and the divorced woman was reinstated the property rights of a single woman.

These property rights were expanded with the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, which together allowed women to keep earnings and property acquired after marriage and to retain what they owned at the time of marriage. These acts gave women



more freedom within marriage and legal means of asserting that freedom when their husbands were neglectful or abusive. Additionally, in 1886 the Guardianship of Infants Act went beyond the parameters established by the Custody of Infants Act and permitted women sole custody of their children in the event of their husband's death. Finally, in 1891 men were denied conjugal rights to their wives' bodies without their wives' consent. This last development afforded women a sexual freedom, which was arguably the most alarming to their husbands. These pieces of legislation are believed to have contributed to an escalating sense of female independence and empowerment which culminated in the final decade of the nineteenth century with the emergence of the New Woman (Rubinstein 142).

Notoriously difficult to define, the New Woman became a political and social force during the 1880s. She evolved from the Odd Woman, whom Elaine Showalter describes in her *Sexual Anarchy* (1990) as "the woman who could not marry—[who] undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles" (Showalter 19).<sup>5</sup> The origin of the Odd Woman is not difficult to identify; around mid-century the English public became aware that women greatly outnumbered men and this numerical anomaly simply made it impossible for all women to pair off and marry. This presented a significant social problem as these women had to find ways to support themselves and were forced to infiltrate traditionally male spheres of the workforce.

The seemingly insoluble Woman Question prompted many of these Odd Women to accept and revel in their independence, resulting in the development of a revolutionary and, to many, frightening New Woman. In *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle*, Sally Ledger reiterates the instability of her subject in literary analysis, but she does

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<sup>5</sup> George Gissing examines this phenomenon in his 1893 novel *The Odd Women*.

note that “Whilst medico-scientific discourse focused on reproductive issues, emphasizing the New Woman’s supposed refusal of maternity, antipathetic discourses on the New Woman concentrated instead on her reputed sexual license” (Ledger 10). These antipathetic discourses often took a literary form, and were particularly concerned with the New Woman’s tendency to don masculine physical characteristics and clothing and her rejection of marriage and motherhood. Showalter writes, “There were fears that emancipated women would bear children outside of marriage in the free union, or worse, that they would not have children at all” (Showalter 3). Anolik also describes the unprecedented fears regarding the consequences of the sexually aware female, stating “Such women were figured in contemporary medical writing as being blood-deprived and therefore parasitic, cannibalistic and vampiric, drawing energy from those around them to replenish the resources lost in menstruation and childbirth” (Anolik 9). With such medical proliferation, it seems inevitable that a new form of instructive novels would surface; those that caution men and women about the perils of active female sexuality.

The *fin de siecle* is traditionally linked to crisis, and several male authors believed the New Woman to have contributed to the rise of decadence and socialism, exacerbating the political, social, economic and literary crises that characterized the final decades of the nineteenth Century. According to Eliza Lynn Linton’s “Wild Women”, which was published in the *Saturday Review* in 1891, the New Woman was popularly, and some say incorrectly, identified with three traits: She was opposed to the institution of marriage and maternity, she demanded political rights, and she sought absolute independence and eventual power over men. These traits coupled with her perceived masculinity and attenuation of the sexual prowess of men led to a paranoia that the New Woman would deplete the masculinity of the

English male and feminize him. A small number of male authors like George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, John Stuart Mill, and Grant Allen embraced the new found female freedom and independence, but many only perceived the consequences of the potential extreme in women's liberation. Showalter writes that male authors and journalists described the New Woman "in the vocabulary of insurrection and apocalypse as one who had ranged herself perversely with the forces of cultural anarchism and decay" (Showalter 39). This attitude manifested itself in literary works as well, slowly moving from prescriptions for female perspectives and occupations to blatant and frightening warnings of what might occur if these prescriptions were ignored.

While prominent feminist authors like Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner envisioned a sexually egalitarian utopia, male authors like Walter Besant and Victor José interpreted any female advocacy of political or sexual equality to be an endorsement of male subjugation. Showalter writes that such men "could only imagine a society of complementary roles, of dominance and submission" (Showalter 43). This limited perspective prompted certain male authors to respond to the New Woman with literary warnings of a society sexually and politically dominated by women. After George Eliot's death in 1880, which many believe to mark the decline of the high Victorian novel, a prevailing uncertainty as to what form would constitute the dominant literature of the day led male authors to reject the complexity and subjectivity that characterized the works of Eliot and her female emulators. Showalter describes this tendency as the male writers' need to "find a place for themselves in Eliot's wake, to remake the high Victorian novel in masculine terms, to reclaim the kingdom of the English novel for male writer, male readers, and men's stories" (Showalter 79). The result of this effort was the male quest romance, characterized by a penetration into an exotic,

unexplored, unknown location, typically situated in a primitive space like caves or mountains. This genre is best represented by the works of authors like Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard, and George Stevenson, but several other authors have borrowed from its precepts and infused their numerous cautions about aggressive female sexuality into its celebration of male adventure and exploration. Among these authors are Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Bram Stoker.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* was published in 1871, in the midst of the legal amendments to the woman's situation, and it exhibits both the tentative fear of aggressive female sexuality and political and social female domination. The narrator's journey into an unknown, undiscovered underworld of cavernous cities borrows from the Gothic tradition and adheres to the quest romance, but the narrator's revulsion and vulnerability in the face of a female-dominated society instructs and warns men and women of the instability and unnaturalness of this social construct. However, Bulwer-Lytton's novel was written at the onset of the women's movement, before the full emergence of the New Woman and the anxieties she produced. Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* 26 years later in the midst of male paranoia regarding female emancipation. Predictably, Stoker's female antagonists are far more horrific and their danger to the English male more pronounced. It is likely these disparities are most readily explained by the progress of the women's movement between the dates of the texts' respective publications, but each exhibits a fear of aggressive and independent femininity and aims to warn society of its associated dangers in proportion to the intensity of the perceived threat historically, as I will later discuss in more detail.

It is significant that in order to accomplish this, both texts rely on the Gothic tradition and its trajectories of the monstrous female. The reader must consider why the Gothic is a

suitable mode for a literary work of caution. The Gothic's imminent encounter with the unknown is ideal for a discussion of female sexuality, which is traditionally veiled and therefore chaste and modest. However, Showalter writes, "The male gaze [upon the female body] is both self-empowering and self-endangering, for what lies behind the veil is specter of female sexuality, a silent but terrible mouth that may wound or devour the male spectator" (Showalter 146). Any conscious interaction with the female body necessarily induces a fear of absence and castration, and the perceived voraciousness of the New Woman threatened to realize this fear. In addition to its possession of appropriate models of the unknown and the socially repugnant, the Gothic's political charge is also well suited for an instructive novel at the *fin de siècle*. Garrett states "The Gothic clearly aims to disturb its readers, and the disturbance it produces can be cognitive or ideological as well as affective, but it is always accompanied by a strong concern for control" (Garrett 2). The bulk of male resistance to the women's movement stemmed from a fear of a loss of control and the transference of dominance. Conservative authors like Bulwer-Lytton and Stoker drew from the ancient horror stories predating Victorian literature to produce patriarchal England's worst nightmare: a reality dominated both politically and sexually by the independent, aggressive female.

### Section III: Edward Bulwer-Lytton and *The Coming Race*

Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton completed *The Coming Race* in 1871, placing its publication in the midst of the aforementioned legislation.<sup>6</sup> The Custody of Infants, Matrimonial Causes and the first of the Married Women's Property Acts had been passed,

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<sup>6</sup> The novel was later reprinted as *Vril, the Power of the Coming Race* and has since developed a cult following of secret societies and theosophists.

while the later and more radical legal freedoms were still under review. Bulwer-Lytton's inclinations concerning the role of women in the home and in society at large were made clear during his very public and largely literary and epistolary battle with his wife Rosina. Judging from their now published correspondence, Rosina seemed ill at ease with her husband's infidelities.<sup>7</sup> In quite a few of his letters, Bulwer-Lytton concedes a suspicion that Rosina engaged in a dalliance as well during her time in Italy. In his *Edward and Rosina* (1931), Michael Sadleir writes "[Her husband's infidelity] went a long way to destroy Rosina's hitherto staunch affection for her husband and consequently to incline her to an indiscretion of her own in Naples, which brought a furious quarrel on her head and contributed a brief but bitter chapter to the tale of tragedy" (Sadleir 170). His wife's purported indiscretion constituted a threat to his commonly held Victorian belief that sexual virtue was expected of the wife, (but not of the husband), and heightened the already prevalent British fear of exotic sexual encounters, most probably resulting from imperialist interaction with previously unknown cultures. While it is obviously impossible to reach such a conclusion definitively, it certainly seems probable that these experiences influenced Bulwer-Lytton's authorial tone toward the anti-patriarchal society his narrator encounters in *The Coming Race*.

*The Coming Race* details the plight of an adventurous young man who ventures into an ominous, unknown fissure in the earth and discovers an older race living in the vacuum beneath the surface. Although he is initially perceived by this race to be hostile, the Vrilya eventually adopt the narrator as a kind of visitor and patronizingly allow him to interact within their civilization. Bulwer-Lytton tells his audience little about the identity of his narrator, simply that he is a young male, presumably average and conveniently typical.

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<sup>7</sup> Rosina's criticisms of Lord Lytton also appear in literary caricatures of her own, such as *Cheveley, or the Man of Honor* and *A Blighted Life*.

Bulwer-Lytton's bland characterization of his protagonist makes him a suitable test subject and implies that his reactions and vulnerabilities are universal to traditional Victorian masculinity. In his introduction to the 2005 edition of *The Coming Race*, David Seed notes "Although Bulwer-Lytton presents the narrator as an American, he displaces aspects of American social style onto a society that represents the narrator's future" (Seed xxx). So despite the narrator's nationality, Bulwer-Lytton meant the troubling aspects of the American and Vril-ya societies to be perceived as threats to Victorian ideology. This pitiable individual stumbles into an alien world that poses a great threat to his survival. Interestingly enough, this subterranean world happens to be run by females.

Bulwer-Lytton's subterranean location of this alternate reality speaks to his audience on several levels. The coming race thrives beneath London, suggesting its politics and ideology exist just under the surface of the current society. Indeed, as the British Empire reached its height under Queen Victoria and England had increasingly more contact with the exotic and the primitive; many feared this exposure had given rise to alternative ideologies within England. As Cannon Schmitt writes in his *Alien Nation* (1997), "Somewhat paradoxically, an internalization of the foreign occurs that results in an uneasy awareness of a hybrid, deeply fractured, and contradictory self" (Schmitt 14). The title of Bulwer-Lytton's work itself suggests that this instability or underlying tendency to upset social norms is indeed *coming*, that it is an inescapable, preexisting demon of Victorian society.

In addition to a metaphoric acknowledgement of this insecurity, the Vril-ya's inhabitation of the bowels of the earth and the narrator's necessary descent into its confines implies the race possesses certain degenerative qualities that threaten the more desirable state

of affairs above ground.<sup>8</sup> In his discussion of the elements of *The Coming Race* pertaining to the Gothic tradition, Seed includes “It describes a human species of the imminent future whose emergence depends on the equally imminent demise of current Western humanity” (Seed xix). Although the journey of any Western individual into a new culture ordinarily contains certain colonial implications, Bulwer-Lytton’s imagery leaves little doubt in the mind of his reader that the social structure and events which occur below the earth are meant to be construed as primitive, exotic, and, most importantly, pernicious. The dark, cavernous realm filled with reptilian monsters and an alternative society into which the narrator descends is very typical of Gothic literature. Although Bulwer-Lytton’s works are considered to be precursors to the science fiction genre, *The Coming Race* is thematically and stylistically better defined in terms of the Gothic.

This hypothetical culture parallels that which many male authors perceived to be an underlying menace to Victorian society. And as Anolik states “the tendency of the Gothic to demonize the Other reveals a conservative tendency: the use of horror to encourage readers to stay on the normative path, showing readers the danger that awaits those who deviate from the norm” (Anolik 16). In this sense, Gothic characteristics are an appropriate vehicle by which Bulwer-Lytton may warn his audience of what he perceives to be an imminent danger to Victorian society. Bulwer-Lytton’s thinly veiled parallel corresponds to his interpretation of the views and ambitions of early nineteenth century British feminists, which is made clear when the narrator himself notes “The Gy-ei (females) are in the fullest enjoyment of all the rights of equality with males, for which certain philosophers above ground contend” (Bulwer-

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<sup>8</sup> Although Max Nordau’s enigmatic work *Degeneration* was not published until 1892, similar concerns about increasing contempt for the traditional views of custom and morality surfaced much earlier. Bulwer-Lytton’s creation of the Vril-ya master race has been linked to German occultism, its tenets concerning the Aryan race, and even the Nazi belief in a super race that would take control of the world by harnessing cosmic forces and ancient wisdom.



Lytton 38). The author's inclusion of this remark so early in the novel sets the stage for the unapologetically didactic storyline which follows.

During the course of his initial interactions with the Vril-ya, the narrator gradually becomes aware that the Gy-ei are superior to the Ana (males) in physical and mental abilities, and hold equal if not superior political and social rights. These traditionally masculine characteristics are presented as a perversion of femininity. Bulwer-Lytton describes the nature of the Gy-ei as "being by constitution more ruthless under the influence of fear or hate" (Bulwer-Lytton 40) and as such more effective hunters. The Gy-ei are larger and stronger than the Ana, they are more frequently appointed to academic and political positions of power, and they are even associated with numerous phallic symbols. The Gy-ei have noticeably prominent thumbs and their vril staffs are more potent than those of the Ana. Seed writes "Zee's evident capacity for independent thought and action, her display of sexual initiative and her physical strength are all described implicitly by Bulwer-Lytton as a displacement of sexuality from one gender to the other" (Seed xxix). The vril staff comparison in particular denotes a sexual inversion as vril is described as having the ability to "influence variations in temperature, exercise influence over minds, induce trance or vision, destroy and replenish" and is the "life source, the all-permeating fluid" (Bulwer-Lytton 34).<sup>9</sup> This description coupled with the visual representation of the vril staff suggests an intentional association with male genitalia. Bulwer-Lytton's symbolic assignment of female control over the male reproductive organs is also consistent with the Gy-ei's dominant role in the courtship rituals of the Vril-ya.

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<sup>9</sup> Bulwer-Lytton's preoccupation with an all-permeating fluid which synthesizes different spheres of experience and can either be used as a benign force or weapon first appears in his 1842 work *Zanoni*, in which a character professes to have found a fluid link between all intellectual beings.

Once again, the narrator voices Bulwer-Lytton's intention to compare the subterranean society with that advocated by English feminists in the 1870s. When he describes the pre-marital pursuit, the narrator states "There is one privilege the Gy-ei carefully retain, and the desire for which probably forms the secret motive of most lady asserters of woman rights above ground" (Bulwer-Lytton 42). He goes on to annotate the process by which the Gy-ei pursue their chosen Ana, ascribing all traditionally masculine characteristics of courtship to the females and all traditionally feminine characteristics to the males. The narrator's tendency to perceive relationships exclusively in terms of dichotomies echoes that of several male authors during this time period. Perfectly equal rights and balanced relationships were simply incomprehensible to a significant number of literary respondents to the women's movement.

Bulwer-Lytton's narrator provides a detailed description of the language, history, and political and technological evolutions of the Vrill-ya, but he devotes the largest section of his report to gender relationships, suggesting that of all the ways the familiar and alien societies differed, this was the most inconceivable.<sup>10</sup> Beginning with their dominant role in courtship, the narrator goes on to illustrate the continuation of that role in the sexual relationship. Evincing some of the fear Showalter mentions in her discussion of female sexuality and its portrayal as a "silent, but terrible mouth that may wound or devour the male spectator" (Showalter 146), Bulwer-Lytton includes an instance in which a Gy used her "extreme conjugal powers" (Bulwer-Lytton 41) to kill her spouse.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the fear of

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<sup>10</sup> Bulwer-Lytton was a staunch supporter of the famous nineteenth century philologist Max Muller and in his effort to investigate linguistic origins as they relate to evolution in *The Coming Race*, he adheres to many of Muller's theories.

<sup>11</sup> This is a reference to the *vagina dentata*, which is Latin for "toothed vagina" and appears in the folk tales of several cultures primarily as a cautionary device to discourage rape and warn of the dangers of sex with strange women.

aggressive female sexuality goes beyond a misogynist desire to retain a position of power and in reality constitutes a terror of a physical injury. In the case of Bulwer-Lytton's narrator, this injury is both inevitable and likely to be fatal. Additionally, the narrator's descent into the cavern could be linked to the traditional association between "the terrifying descent into darkness and anxieties generated by the feminine and by the maternal" (Anolik 29). The veiled and potentially violent nature of female sexuality poses a problem to our narrator and consequently the average English male, highlighting internal insecurities concerning emasculation and potentially castration.

In his discussion of marriage in the Vrilya society, the narrator refers to the union as "the fatal noose," but when the daughter of his host begins to view the narrator as a romantic object, this metaphor takes on a strikingly literal meaning. Zee is Bulwer-Lytton's anti-paragon of femininity, the exotic woman in all of her subversively alluring glory, but any sort of union, be it sexual or social, with the English male must surely precipitate his demise. Whether by way of Zee's dangerous, voracious sexuality or her race's interference in what it deems an unnatural alliance, the narrator will die if he succumbs to Zee's enticements. In the same way the offspring of interracial marriages were considered to be unnatural or at the very least unsavory, the offspring produced from a union with a sexually aggressive female is perceived to be a form of hybridity and as such unacceptable to our conventional narrator and, we can only imagine, Bulwer-Lytton himself and the Victorian male.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Vrilya's condemnation of any such union as abomination seems to be the only point on which Victorian England and the subterranean society can agree. Later in the novel, it becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Hybridity is a term originating from Latin biological designations, but came into popular use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as many began to fear that miscegenation would result in the dilution of the European race. Hybrids were seen as an aberration, worse than the inferior races, a weak and diseased mutation.

clear Zee has no intention of pursuing a physically intimate relationship with our narrator, but still persists with a romantic interest. In this way, Zee is similar to the New Woman in that she also embraces a union without society's approval or the possibility of children.<sup>13</sup> Even though the narrator believes the social construct of the Vrilya to be degenerative and dangerously similar to socialism, Zee's defiance of the norms of her own nation is terrifying to the narrator.

Her lack of maternal inclination is equally appalling and perhaps the most unnatural aspect of her attraction. When Zee offers our narrator a simple and pure union of souls as a solution to the objections raised by her people, Bulwer-Lytton writes "I faltered forth evasive expressions of gratitude and sought to point out how humiliating would be my position amongst her race in the light of a husband who might never be permitted the name of father" (Bulwer-Lytton 123). The narrator's fear of a sexless union gives voice to a very logical objection to the views perpetuated by the New Woman: if women cease to have children, men will have no means by which to extend their line and establish their genetic legacy, and in the extreme, the race itself will cease to exist.

Many of the anxieties Bulwer-Lytton presents might be construed as irrational or paranoid, but his concern about an increasingly large number of women who are unwilling to bear children seems a relatively sensible one, especially considering the author's tendency to view probable outcomes only in their most radical possibilities. In his essay "Plain Words on the Woman Question," published in the *Fortnightly Review's* October edition in 1889, Grant Allen, a prominent author and scientist recognized for his defense of the Women's Movement, sardonically articulates this apparently widespread viewpoint:

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<sup>13</sup> Feminist extremists of the English *fin de siècle* like Margaret Oliphant and her "Anti-Marriage League" advocated flexible free love relationships as opposed to the bonding constraints of marriage.

A woman ought to be ashamed to say she has no desire to become a wife and mother. Instead of boasting their selflessness as a matter of pride, they ought to keep it dark, and to be ashamed of it. They ought to feel they have fallen short of the instincts of their kind, instead of posing as in some sense the cream of the universe, on the strength of what is really a functional aberration. (Young 365)

The position Allen explores was presumably popularly held at the time of this essay's publication in 1889, so it is reasonable to assume it was prevalent during the time in which Bulwer-Lytton wrote *The Coming Race*. Ledger also acknowledges that children are an integral component of traditional marriage and "the establishment's desire to defend marriage as an institution was underpinned by a belief that, without conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric upon which Victorian society was based would begin to crumble" (Ledger 12). The narrator is not able to conceive any sort of alternative romantic arrangement because conventions of this sort were so ingrained in Victorian England, many very strongly believed that without them the country would literally fall apart.

If there were any doubt as to the narrator's attitude toward the sexual and social demeanor of the Gy-ei, his constant references to and endorsements of the soft, pure, domestic, and submissive "Angel in the House" that resides above ground solidify his prescriptions for a paragon of femininity.<sup>14</sup> During his first comparison of the Gy-ei and the women to which he is accustomed, the narrator notes "though the two females were of taller stature and ampler proportions than the males; and their countenances, if still more symmetrical in outline and contour, were devoid of the softness and timidity of expression

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<sup>14</sup> "The Angel in the House" is a poem written by Coventry Patmore in 1854 in which he describes his wife, whom he believes to be the perfect Victorian wife: sympathetic, charming, unselfish, submissive, and sacrificial. The phrase came to reference a woman who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal.

which give charm to the face of woman as seen on the earth above” (Bulwer-Lytton 20).

While he recognizes their visual appeal, the narrator will never approve of the Gy-ei because they seem to lessen his masculinity. The meek, maternal personification of Victorian virtue is paramount to his understanding of social hierarchy.

Later in his anthropological study, the narrator describes the Gy-ei’s attempts to please their spouses and deduces “the Gy-ei are the most amiable, conciliator, and submissive wives I have ever seen even in the happiest households above ground” (Bulwer-Lytton 43). In the few instances that the narrator approves of a practice of the Vril-ya, he typically finds a similarity to English society, the norms of which are the only practices he deems natural. These lines in particular evince his whole-hearted endorsement of the submissive role of the wife and its logical, necessary connection to familial bliss. Seed additionally notes the exacerbating influence of the ideas of John Stuart Mill on Bulwer-Lytton’s perspective when he writes “Mill directed his main argument against the rationalization of systematic repression as “natural and ironically questioned the special value attached to meekness and submissiveness as an essential part of sexual attractiveness” (Seed xxix).<sup>15</sup> Bulwer-Lytton’s representation of his narrator’s beliefs concerning gender identity and the necessary proponents of sexual attraction seem consistent with Mill’s assessment of Victorian sexual repression.

If we are to rely on the assumption that Bulwer-Lytton’s own views are reflected in the thoughts and reactions of his narrator and that his narrator is meant to reflect the views of a typical male in Victorian England, Bulwer-Lytton’s cautions about the consequences of an inversion of gender roles seem unmistakably clear. A society dominated both politically and

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<sup>15</sup> John Stuart Mill published *The Subjection of Women* in 1869 which argued that inequality between the sexes was a hindrance to human development. His wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, co-authored the essay.

socially by females poses a danger to English masculinity. The reassignment of traditionally masculine and feminine traits is indicative of a more serious trespass on social norms. The sexually aggressive female constitutes a physical threat to the Victorian male and her dominance becomes a form of emotional castration for him. Any union with such a female produces an unknown and therefore unsafe hybrid. Non-conventional, sexless, or childless unions are a humiliation to the participating male and a sign of the decline of the species. Happy marriages are characterized by submissive, domestic, and maternal wives and are an integral component of the social system. Bulwer-Lytton's intense commitment to this particular ideal is evident in his own letters written to Rosina reproving her for unacceptable conduct:

You will excuse my presence until I receive those expressions of apology and regret which are my due. I insist upon receiving that courtesy and respect which a man without stain and without reproach has a right to expect from every human being, even from those who injure him too deeply to pardon. (Letter CCXCV)

Judging solely from authorial tone, of all the aforementioned dangers, an insubordinate, independent wife prompts the greatest degree of revulsion.<sup>16</sup> Throughout his text, Bulwer-Lytton enforces and reinforces these tenets upon his audience in an effort to combat the changing legal and social roles of women in Victorian England with didactic literature.

However, the scope of Bulwer-Lytton's critique is limited by his own experience and imagination. His wife's perceived insubordination and rumored exotic indiscretion coupled with the increasingly popular women's literature of the day and legislative changes fueled his anxieties concerning gender roles. In the typical male Victorian's limitation to perspectives

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<sup>16</sup> The hundreds of letters that passed between Bulwer-Lytton and his wife were published in competing volumes, each intended to publicly vindicate the publisher and vilify the opposing spouse.

built upon dichotomies, Bulwer-Lytton can only conceive of dominant and submissive power relations between genders and so any upset of the current order seems to signal a perfect inversion of gender roles. This perspective prompts Bulwer-Lytton to create his parallel world, his idea of a social catastrophe. He utilizes aspects of the male quest novel and the Gothic to accomplish this, which is fitting according to Garrett who asserts that the “Gothic opens an internal dialogue between perspectives, posing alternative visions” (Garrett 3). Bulwer-Lytton engages in a thorough comparison of two social constructs both entirely reliant upon gender roles. The alternative society represents what Bulwer-Lytton believes to be a complete inversion of these roles and the detrimental consequences of such an inversion on the Victorian lifestyle. And while he does include instances of violent female sexuality and the unnaturalness of feminine betrayal of maternity, the women’s movement had yet to reach its more radical stages at the time Bulwer-Lytton conceived his parallel, and so his text lacks the more extreme portrayals of aggressive female sexuality which manifest themselves in later works like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

#### Section IV: Bram Stoker and *Dracula*

For the purposes of this literary comparison, the most significant advancement in women’s rights that occurred between the publication of *The Coming Race* in 1871 and that of *Dracula* in 1897 was the 1891 legislative act that denied men conjugal rights to their wives’ bodies without their wives’ consent. In her *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (1988), Lynda Nead writes “The moral panic is an important mechanism in the definition and regulation of licit and illicit forms of sexual behavior. It describes the way



in which at particular historical moments widespread social fears and anxieties may become articulated and concentrated in terms of a moral crisis” (Nead 80). The perceived consequences of this latest legal development prompted a form of moral crisis to which many authors, including Bram Stoker, responded emphatically. Judging from his public opposition to the New Woman and her advocates, Bram Stoker, an Irish native although curiously supportive of the British Empire and its international endeavors, would have been especially disturbed by this particular step in the women’s movement. The Victorian era is notorious for its repression of female sexuality in particular, and it seems that, for Stoker, the idea of a sexually independent female is far more frightening than that of a politically dominant female. The idea of sexual awareness and independence is linked strongly to the New Woman and perhaps plays a large part in her traditional association with the decadents of the 1890s. In the introduction to her *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (1965), Barbara Charlesworth writes, “The Decadents’ ideal was the attainment of as many moments as possible of heightened sensory experience, enjoyed within the mind outside the society” (Charlesworth xv). The perceived alliance between the decadent and the New Woman is built upon the belief they share an affinity for sensuous and oftentimes sexual experience. In *Cultural Politics at the fin de siecle* (1995), Sally Ledger asserts “What most obviously linked the New Woman with the Wildean decadents of the 1890s was the fact that both overtly challenged Victorian sexual codes. The New Woman fiction is generally characterized by a sexual candor which was also a feature of literary decadence” (Ledger 25). There is a similar being from the Gothic tradition: the vampire.

Jonathan Harker’s journey to Transylvania initially exhibits all the trappings of the male quest romance, except in this instance the quest’s destination possesses the essential

horrors of the Gothic nightmare. The Victorian male travels unaccompanied to an exotic location full of mystery, nighttime carriage rides through an eerie forest ending at a magnificent and terrifying castle. However, once Jonathan enters Castle Dracula and is introduced to the Count, all pretense of the male quest is discarded and our hero becomes subject to the most infamous Gothic villain in all of literature. The castle itself is similar to the cavernous space Bulwer-Lytton describes in *The Coming Race*; Stoker creates a fortress with like connotations to descent, disorientation, and imprisonment. In his journal, Jonathan writes “I am not in heart to describe beauty, for when I had seen the view I explore further; doors, doors, doors everywhere, and all locked and bolted. In no place save from the windows in the castle walls is there an available exit. The castle is a veritable prison and I am a prisoner!” (Stoker 29). Descriptions such as these are meant to generate empathy for the plight of the Victorian hero thrust into conditions contrary to his beliefs and experience and his powerless submission to forces stronger than he.

Among the most threatening of these forces are Dracula’s brides, three strong, alluring, and aggressive women the voracity of whose sexual appetite is both repugnant and enticing to the impressionable Jonathan Harker. The erotic and later homoerotic scene in which Jonathan first encounters these vixens represents the complete inversion of the Victorian sexual hierarchy. Jonathan’s journal reads “I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart” (Stoker 42). In this scenario, not only is the woman the sexual aggressor, but her dominance has feminized the male who describes himself as “supersensitive” and waiting in ecstasy for her to continue the experience. Nead writes “Feminine power is

constructed differently from masculine power; woman is seen to weaken man through discreet mechanisms, through guile, persuasion and sexual charm” (Nead 60). Stoker ascribes all agency to the female and denies Jonathon any semblance of autonomy.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this encounter for the conservative male is Jonathan’s enjoyment and desire to succumb to what could be construed as the rape of Victorian masculinity. Jonathan writes, “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, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (Stoker 41). Red lips are commonly associated with prostitution, the presence of which had long been considered one of the greatest social maladies of England, but more importantly in these lines, Jonathan articulates the link between submission to wanton female sexuality and death. Like Bulwer-Lytton, Stoker betrays exogamic concerns that a union with the exotic female precipitates the demise of the English male, but while Bulwer-Lytton preoccupies himself with a sociopolitical union, Stoker’s fear is explicitly sexual.

Also important to note, during the course of the brief, three paragraph description of this particular aspect of Jonathan’s stay at Castle Dracula, Stoker cites three separate anxieties concerning various forms of sexual taboo: female aggression, group sex, and homosexuality. When the Count discovers the interactions between his guest and his brides, he responds, “How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me!” (Stoker 43). Considering the association between the New Woman and the decadent, the decadent and the dandy, it seems probable their perceived relation is a consequence of a negative reaction to social change and Stoker’s

tendency to lump all kinds of sexual anxieties into one brief experience indicates a rejection of radical upset of the social norm.<sup>17</sup>

Having adequately expressed the danger posed to the English male by aggressive female sexuality and the exotic woman, Stoker returns to London to explicate the problems posed by sexual awareness and experimentation to the virtuous Victorian woman. Although in some ways she represents feminine purity and innocence, Lucy Westenra exhibits certain behaviors inconsistent with Victorian ideals that render her vulnerable to the influence of the threatening sexuality Jonathan stumbles across in Transylvania. In her letters to Mina, Lucy admits she did all she could to aid Arthur Holmwood in his attempts to see her alone, she suggests an additional romance for Mina, and when presented with multiple suitors Lucy complains “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?” (Stoker 65). Although her conduct is not subject to reprimand, Lucy’s admission of such a desire suggests a lack of personal conviction with regard to Victorian morality. Stoker’s selection of Dracula’s first victim indicates that women whose adherence to traditional views of female duty is not absolute are in greater danger of succumbing to alternative sexualities.

Ironically, Stoker grants Lucy a kind of union with the three men she knew as her suitors and an additional, paternal figure as well. The multiple transfusions of blood from Arthur, Dr. Seward, Quincy, and Van Helsing can also be read as a kind of physical union. Van Helsing recalls Arthur’s recognition of this fact, declaring “Said he not that the transfusion of his blood to her veins had made her truly his bride,” but the professor also realizes “If so that, then what about the others? Ho, ho! This so sweet maid is a polyandrist!”

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<sup>17</sup> Emerging around the *fin de siècle*, the dandy was a man placed particular importance on physical appearance, leisure, and sophistication and generally maintained a lifestyle dedicated to aesthetic reflection.

(Stoker 193). Dracula's assault on Lucy occurs during the course of several nighttime wanderings when she has been lured out of her bed and leads to her infusion with the blood of four men. One might argue these trespasses on Victorian prescriptions for female sexuality resulted in her demonic mutation. Additionally, the language Stoker employs to describe Lucy's vampiric transformation is that of orgasm, further strengthening the connection between promiscuity and monstrosity.

After the death of the angelic and chaste Lucy Westenra occurs, her resurrection brings to life the worst nightmares of Victorian masculinity. She becomes the "Bloofer Lady," the cannibalistic devourer of children. An exaggeration of the New Woman's perceived rejection of maternity, Stoker explores infanticide in his descriptions of vampiric Lucy's exploits and the habits of Dracula's brides.<sup>18</sup> When Van Helsing insists on a graveyard vigil to ascertain Lucy's whereabouts and the men catch her with a child, Dr. Seward writes "With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone. The child gave a sharp cry, and lay there moaning" (Stoker 232). Stoker takes great pains to emphasize the unnaturalness of the way Lucy discards the wounded child, which emits the first groan from Arthur, almost as though Lucy's lack of maternal instinct is more painful to behold than her blood-stained lips or sharp, fang-like teeth. Earlier in the novel, Jonathan witnesses Dracula's delivery of a human child to his brides for their consumption and its mother meets a similar fate when she arrives to reclaim it, Jonathan writes "There was no cry from the woman, and the howling of the wolves was but short.

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<sup>18</sup> While at the time of *Dracula's* publication, intentionally causing the death of an infant was legal in some countries as a means of population control, no tolerance for this practice existed in Great Britain until the Infanticide Acts of 1922 and 1938 provided some leniency to disturbed mothers guilty of this crime.

Before long they streamed away singly, licking their lips. I could not pity her, for I knew now what had become of her child, and she was better dead” (Stoker 50). Jonathan exhibits a similar reaction to Arthur when confronted with the cannibalism of a child, but goes on further to assert that a childless mother is better off dead. This is consistent with the belief that the only utility of female sexuality is procreation, and women who reject their reproductive responsibility are of no alternative use to society.

In contrast to the attitudes of the vampiric women, Stoker is careful to give his reader a positive maternal figure to further highlight the unnaturalness of women with no regard to children. When Arthur is overcome with grief after Lucy’s death and turns to Mina for comfort, she notes in her journal “We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked; I felt this big, sorrowing man’s head resting on me, as though it were that of the baby that some day may lie on my bosom, and I stoked his hair as though he were my own child” (Stoker 253). In these lines, we learn that women have not only a responsibility to care for their own children, but their maternal care applies to all children and, in some instances, grieving adults. The favorable way in which Stoker portrays Mina and his inclusion of these particular thoughts of hers suggests that he considers femininity and maternity permanently linked, that the former void of the latter is a monstrous perversion.

Mina’s inherent maternal inclinations are not the only attributes which garner both a beneficent authorial tone and the good opinion of her fellow conspirators. Paramount to her station as a paragon of femininity is Madam Mina’s happy and obliging acceptance of society’s prescriptions for her gender. In a letter to Lucy, Mina glibly expresses distaste for the New Woman, writing “We had a capital ‘severe tea’ at Robin Hood’s Bay in a sweet little

old fashioned inn, with a bow-window right over the seaweed-covered rocks of the strand. I believe we should have shocked the 'New Woman' with our appetites" (Stoker 98). In linking the New Woman to appetite, Mina cements Stoker's consistent association between female empowerment and insatiability. With her righteous disapproval of progressive views on women's rights, Mina allies herself with the traditional Victorian woman. When describing the particulars of the Count's final assault on her virtue, Mina finishes with the exclamation "Oh my God! my God! what have I done? What have I done to deserve such a fate, I who have tried to walk in meekness and righteousness all my days" (Stoker 288). Her words betray a strong association between meekness and righteousness that suggests the latter term is indeed a result of the former.

After the Count's final visit to her bedroom, Mina bows her head and presses it to Jonathon's breast in an ultimate expression of submission and need for protection. Her shameful acceptance of her contamination is yet another demonstration of inferiority and she laments of herself "Unclean, unclean! I must touch him or kiss him no more. Oh, that it should be that it is I who am now his worst enemy, and whom he may have the most cause to fear" (Stoker 285). Once again, Stoker revisits the idea that the sexually aggressive female poses a physical danger to the male, and contact between the two must be avoided for his own safety. Most relevant to this discussion, however, is Mina's unquestioning acceptance of Victorian morality and her shameful awareness that her infection constitutes a danger to this system of morality.

Keeping these aspects of Mina's character in mind, the Count's attempt to infect her with the vampiric virus, which has consistently been associated with rampant and inappropriate sexuality, can be read as a deliberate scheme to subject the docile Victorian woman to a

lifestyle and perspective she neither seeks nor has the agency to refuse. Dr. Seward describes the scene, writing “His right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress” (Stoker 283). The image of Mina’s white nightdress smeared with blood echoes of the traditional motif of the red stain on white sheets which indicates a loss of virginity. The inclusion of the Count’s bare breast and open clothes infuses sexual overtone into the forced submission.

However, the most significant aspect of this encounter is Mina’s reaction to the Count’s advances. When the Count appears in her bedroom and begins to drain her life-source, Mina remembers “I was bewildered, and, strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him” (Stoker 287). Thus, Mina becomes the most attractive of all damsels; she must be saved from herself, from her own subconscious desires. Garrett writes “Mina’s heterogeneity implicates her in monstrosity and makes it impossible to represent Dracula’s threat as wholly alien” (Garrett 136). So while Mina possesses all qualities incumbent upon a Victorian woman, she is subject to subconscious betrayal, a fallacy that implies the sexual menace Dracula poses is internal as well. Mina appropriately lacks the fortitude to stave off temptation and indulgence, so in the same way her social role has been assigned by patriarchy, the men in her life must eliminate those forces which limit her ability to fulfill that role. Jonathan, Van Helsing, Dr. Seward, Quincey, and Arthur are dealt the task of destroying all the vampires, effectively quashing the threat posed by aggressive female sexuality and restoring the Victorian women to their angelic dispositions.

The vendetta of Stoker’s male characters also promises the byproduct of masculine restoration. Van Helsing’s militant strategy and the violent nature of the task at hand allow



the five men to reclaim their manhood and return all gender inversion to its rightful state. The four defenders of Victorian morality are clear in their mission, especially where Lucy Westerna is concerned. Van Helsing explains “Instead of working wickedness by night and growing more debased in the assimilation of it by day, she shall take her place with the other Angels” (Stoker 236). The capitalization of the final term implies a wish to restore Lucy to her rightful position as the Angel in the House. To do this, they must brutally murder the wanton, cannibalistic, vampire. Stoker’s detailed account of Lucy’s final demise is that of a paragon of masculinity, steadfast and powerful, and his righteous defeat of a snakelike monster.

He struck with all his might. The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it; the sight of it gave us courage. (Stoker 237)

In addition to providing his audience with the image of “Thor” slaying the great beast, Stoker also creates a virtual rape scene in which the Victorian male has his final vengeance on the aggressive female, penetrating her over and over with a violent phallic symbol. Stoker’s language seethes with sexual innuendo, from the writhing, quivering body and the welling, spurting blood, but when the rape is over, all is as it should be. Lucy is returned to the peaceful, submissive state that “was to reign for ever.”

Although the accounts pertaining to the demise of the other three female vampires are not quite as graphic and extended as that of Lucy's, each is granted several paragraphs and the nature of the language is similarly sexual. In his memorandum, Van Helsing describes "the horrid screeching as the stake drove home; the plunging of writhing form, and the lips of bloody foam" (Stoker 362), but he repeatedly reassures his reader that the three slayings, which he refers to as "butcher work," were all done for Mina's protection. Van Helsing also articulates the most immediate danger posed to the Victorian male by these vicious, insatiable women: their sexual appeal:

She was so fair to look on, so radiantly beautiful, so exquisitely voluptuous, that the very instinct of man in me, which calls some of my sex to love and to protect one of hers, made my head whirl with new emotion. But God be thanked, that soul-wail of my dear Madam Mina had not died out of my ears; and, before the spell could be wrought further upon me, I had nerved myself to my wild work. (Stoker 361)

In these lines, Stoker examines the conflicting emotions of the Victorian male towards the sexually aware and aggressive female. She possesses alluring, but dangerous qualities the male must reject and stamp out in order to foster and protect virtuous Victorian women such as Mina Harker. The entire purpose of Stoker's male characters' journey back into Transylvania and their subsequent slaying of multiple monsters is to save Mina from what they perceive to be the worst fate imaginable. Indeed, when the five avengers succeed in their quest and destroy the Count at the cost of Quincey's life, the last words of the brave defender of English virtue are reported to be "'Now God be thanked that all has not been in vain! See! the snow is not more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!' And, to our bitter grief, with a smile and in silence, he died, a gallant gentleman" (Stoker 368).

While Stoker's narrative inarguably compels its reader to engage in the storyline and the progression to conclusion is suspenseful, the final defeat of the titled villain is somewhat anticlimactic and only granted five lines. A simultaneous slash of the knives of Jonathan and Quincey cause Count Dracula to immediately dissolve into dust. A fitting end to be sure, but compared to the gruesome, brutal slayings of Lucy and Dracula's brides and the detailed, graphic explications of which Stoker allows multiple paragraphs, the demise of the most infamous Gothic villain in literature seems descriptively inadequate. This disproportion suggests the true antagonists of Stoker's tale are in fact the female vampires, not the notorious Count. As we have established that the female vampires represent the perceived danger of aggressive female sexuality, it seems logical to link the latter to the novel's central antagonistic force.

The vampiric virus and its associated sexual impact on the female cause her to lose her maternal and submissive characteristics. Throughout the course of her transformation, Mina becomes increasingly less susceptible to Van Helsing's hypnotism, or his attempts to subdue and utilize aspects of her subconscious. This resistance parallels the resistance to patriarchal manipulation felt by a traditional woman once exposed to alternative sexual and social experience. Also, during their stay in the Transylvanian forest, Dracula's brides try to entice Mina to stray from her male protector saying, "Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come!" (Stoker 359). Perhaps the only instance of feminine sexual temptation of a female, these lines suggest that exposure to sexually aware females will tempt previously virtuous women to adopt the habits of their more promiscuous counterparts. These two aspects of Stoker's construction of vampirism are consistent with the perceived dangers of aggressive female

sexuality, permitting the reader to interpret the latter as an infectious virus whose only cure is containment.

Although this construction appears a far more elaborate and exaggerated parallel than Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, Stoker also creates an alternative reality on which he projects his own anxieties about the dynamic social trends of his day. In Stoker's construction, vampirism is treated as a kind of infectious virus which transforms the infected host into a monster. In the case of all infected females, this monstrosity manifests itself in the form of wanton sexual aggression and complete disregard for maternal instinct. Dracula's brides and the vampire Lucy are presented as examples of these trespasses against Victorian morality. Mina Harker is the antithesis of these women, the Angel in the House whom a host of men risk their lives to restore and protect. She exemplifies the qualities of maternity and submissiveness, but her subconscious desire to allow the vampiric virus to infect her indicates that even the most docile Victorian women are vulnerable to the temptations of sexual awareness. It is the duty of the English male to shield the female from all threats to her virtue, be they external or internal.

The culmination of these fairly evident themes constitutes a wholly negative authorial response to independent, assertive female sexuality. The directional expansion of the women's movement at the time of *Dracula's* publication, in large part, accounts for its preoccupation with sexual hierarchy as a branch of gender convention. Like Bulwer-Lytton, Stoker can only conceive of probable developments in the extreme, but unlike Bulwer-Lytton, Stoker was confronted with an inversion of sexual prescriptions in addition to the changing political and social role of women. In an effort to caution those who might be enticed by such possibilities, Stoker utilizes Gothic horror to transform aggressive female sexuality into a viral

threat Victorian England remembers: the vampire. This metaphor, while extreme, is effective in conveying the danger of what Stoker believes to be a legitimate menace to Victorian masculinity and his recommendation for its removal.

## Section V: Conclusions

Absent an author-written admission of explicit social prescriptions in their texts, all symptomatic historicist criticism unavoidably relies upon a certain amount of intuitive license on the part of the reader. However, similarities between thematic suggestion and historical context are certainly suggestive guides to interpretation. While it is unlikely, or at the very least impossible to prove, that the nineteenth century women's movement in England was the sole inspiration for either of these primary texts, anxieties resulting from its development appear to have influenced the portrayal of the female characters in *The Coming Race* and *Dracula*. Each of these texts borrows heavily from the Gothic tradition, containing elements of the supernatural, a cavernous, seemingly infinite locale from which the protagonist cannot escape, and a distortion of social convention. In both works, the distortion at least in part arises from an inversion of gender roles, but the focus of this inversion is the point at which the texts diverge.

Bulwer-Lytton published *The Coming Race* in 1871, a historical point at which women had only been legally granted certain political and social freedoms. During this time, sexual liberation was only a whisper and had yet to be given serious legal consideration. Consistently, Bulwer-Lytton's parallel conceives of society in which females are politically and socially dominant, but also in which their sexual prowess is only suggested and rumored,

never literally encountered by the narrator. Zee's willingness to entertain the possibility of a marriage without children horrifies the narrator as well, but the non-procreative union remains a vague idea and is never realized. Bulwer-Lytton only addresses the unnaturalness of a lack of maternal inclination, but never goes so far as to suggest an active rejection of maternal values. The majority of Bulwer-Lytton's focus centers on the suggestion of a female superiority to the degree they are granted positions of power and authority, possession of mental and physical capability surpassing that of the males, and the social privilege of the dominant role in courtship. The tendency in *The Coming Race* to keep its speculation in line with the specific historical development of the Women's Movement indicates that Bulwer-Lytton was influenced, and in many cases limited by, the social and political changes of his day and their impact on gender relations. As his reaction to these changes, judging from his literary text and personal/public epistolary objections, was emphatically negative, Bulwer-Lytton turned to the Gothic to construct a work of social caution. As he perceived the advances of women's rights to be adverse to social norms and limits, the Gothic served his purpose well. However, as these legal advances had yet to reach their maturity, Bulwer-Lytton's subtle sexual insinuations were not textually realized, but merely acknowledged to be *coming*.

Although the second of the Married Women's Property Acts and the Guardianship of Infants Act were passed during the years between the publications of *The Coming Race* and *Dracula*, neither possessed the social implications of the legal denial of a husband's conjugal rights to his wife's body without her consent. Prior to this movement, female sexuality was largely ignored, but when recognized was certainly not perceived to be a matter of her own control. With the passage of this legislation in 1891, independent female sexuality was

frequently construed as aggressive, a perception logically coloring Stoker's construction of female sexuality in *Dracula*, released just six years later. It seems, for Stoker, the gravity of this sexual concern outweighed any political or social impact caused by advances in women's rights, as these issues are largely ignored in the 1897 text. Where Bulwer-Lytton left off with suggestion, Stoker picked up with a radical, vehement depiction of aggressive female sexuality and the resulting perverse effects on traditional Victorian values.

Stoker's metaphor for female sexual aggression is the vampiric virus, implying his own preconceptions of such tendencies to be infectious and, most importantly, contagious. He recommends an advocacy of containment for the feared epidemic, which in his novel is frequently violent and sexually suggestive. A female contaminated with the virus is not only sexually aggressive, but her dominance feminizes the male and poses a physical threat to his masculinity. Her voracious sexual appetite borders on cannibalistic and her rejection of maternity is so complete she is linked to infanticide. Mina and Lucy represent two varieties of Victorian women: respectively those whose personal convictions are consistent with society's moral code and those who only outwardly adhere to such values but truly desire more freedom. In her "Technologies of Monstrosity," Judith Halberstam writes "Mina and Lucy, the dark and fair heroines of Stoker's novel make Englishness as function of quiet femininity and maternal domesticity" (Ledger 249). However, Lucy is beyond the aid of Stoker's band of masculine avengers and can only be destroyed, while Mina's docility and submissiveness are worthy of brave and gallant protection. Stoker clearly states that his band aims to kill Dracula and the female vampires in order to save Mina, even from her own subconscious desires, in order to preserve the Victorian Angel in the House. The reclamation of patriarchy is a violent display of masculine revenge.

The true instance of good overcoming evil, of moral fortitude rejecting temptation occurs in the slayings of the female vampires, indicating that it is they who are the true villains of Stoker's tale, their aggression which constitutes the real threat to his protagonists. Conveniently, their aggression in almost every instance of conflict is sexual in nature. Like Bulwer-Lytton, Stoker molds his thematic inclusions around a relevant social commentary. The historical context of *Dracula's* publication determines this relevance. An independent, assertive female sexuality perceived to be aggressive causes Stoker to retreat from realism to Gothic horror in order to adequately convey the dangers associated with these kinds of social changes. This technical decision parallels that of Bulwer-Lytton, but the degree to which Stoker engages aspects of the Gothic far surpasses that of his predecessor.

While *The Coming Race* includes an unknown, cavernous region from which the narrator cannot escape, an encounter with social and sexual Other, and an eerie, ominous tone indicating physical peril, Bulwer-Lytton does not engage the more radical and horrific aspects of the Gothic genre. In addition to possession of each of the aforementioned tenets and the previously discussed exaggeration of female monstrosity, *Dracula* exhibits more emphasis on subtle psychological control, as demonstrated by its preoccupation with hypnotism, dreams, and mental health anxieties. Stoker's language is also far more graphic and horrific, with frequent descriptions of blood, physicality, and brutal slayings. These characteristics indicate a more complete reliance on the tenets of the Gothic.

The variation in the degrees to which these authors adhere to the prescripts of the genre is most readily explained by the subject matter each wishes to discuss, which in turn is most readily explained by the historical context in which each author constructed his textual parallel. In more general terms, these authors also participated in the prolonging of the



association between the Gothic and the aforementioned gender prescriptions, which continues today in many varieties of pop culture phenomena. Halberstam writes “Gothic describes a discursive strategy which produces monsters as a kind of temporary but influential response to social, political and sexual problems” (Ledger 255). For the purposes of this discussion, the most fundamental aspect of Gothic literature is its association with the upset or inversion of social norms, and the degree to which its tenets are employed is often consistent with the gravity of the upset or inversion. In the case of the nineteenth century women’s movement, the more radical trespasses on Victorian gender conventions did not occur until the final decade of the century, accounting for the disparity in authorial Gothic reliance between Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1871 *The Coming Race* and Bram Stoker’s 1897 *Dracula* and their respective commentaries on changing gender roles.

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