Helon Dobbins

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Professor Hawkes

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“Who Run the World?” The Feminist Evolution of the Gothic Heroine

The Gothic novel’s popularity did not end with the Victorian era. Rather than see itself replaced, the Gothic novel endured and created multiple subgenres to weave itself into 20th and 21st-century literature and retain its popularity through new additions to the body of canon. Yet, as it changed so did its common tropes. The settings reflected a modern take on the Gothic aesthetic, the themes spoke to contemporary audiences, and the central characters underwent modernizations to keep up with the changing societal attitudes of the readership. However, this evolution did not happen overnight and resulted from the author’s understanding of the changes happening off the pages. One such change addressed in many Gothic stories was the evolving role of women in society outside of the traditionally accepted role of wife, mother, and domestic hostess**.** Early Gothic novels feature women who the men around them restrict to their traditional roles. Often used as archetypal damsels in distress needing rescuing by the male heroes, Gothic female story arcs end with the men coming to their rescue. Yet, in written works produced in profound times of changing societal views, such as the late Victorian era, the popularity of women-centric tales such as Charlotte Perkins-Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula,* have the heroine who either frees herself from her predicament or has the most important role in defeating the evil while the men of the story take a backseat, progressing the heroine from the conventional damsel in distress to an empowered woman in her own right capable of saving herself and others.

The Gothic novel itself symbolizes changing attitudes. Though the most famous pieces of "Gothic" literature come from the Victorian period, Gothic fiction is a lens through which authors share their views on topics often shied away from in other genres. Though the traditional thought of Gothic horror as a genre fits into a Victorian context, works before and since fall into Gothic conventions. Stories like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* though technically a Regency-era piece, reflect complex attitudes on taboo subjects like sexuality and fear of the 'Other' while later novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* tackle maternal grief and the empowerment of women despite trauma. These complex themes lend themselves well to the Gothic genre because authors have horror elements to use as they present these themes in ways that the readers have the job of interpreting. Without the conventional Victorian presentation of things as black and white or surface level, Gothic horror's ability to take on the current issues of the society producing it ensures that its popularity as a subgenre endures well beyond even as it recycles and reuses themes originating from Victorian times. These updates to the foundational archetypes that define Gothic literature occur in any facet of the typical Gothic novel. Still, the most interesting reinvention lies in changing characters, especially the Gothic heroine. Gothic stories, especially borne out of the later Victorian era, see the rise in the crucial role of the female protagonist and shift her from a bystander helpless to the will of the men around her to an active participant in determining the outcome or securing the defeat of the evil herself. In her article, 'Gothic Repetition', Michelle Massé examines the connection between using Gothic horror and discussing and exploring how Gothic heroines' story arcs often aim to put them in line with the acceptable feminine role of the era. This includes the manifestation of feminine trauma, and the solution to it by shoving the heroine into the conventional marriage plots that end up reducing the importance of the heroine's identity as established throughout the story. "Repetition in the

Gothic functions as it does for certain other traumas: the reactivation of trauma is an attempt to recognize, not relish, the incredible and unspeakable that nonetheless happened." (681) This recurring theme of controlling the feminine is a steeple in stories that focus more on the heroine's journey than her male counterparts. As the Victorian woman sought a new role in her society towards the later 19th Century, this bled into the heroines featured in later Victorian works, especially those fitting into the Gothic horror genre. The role of the Gothic heroine underwent a similar evolution to present her as someone capable of an active role in her circumstances, and more often than not, a participant with a vital role in resolving the main conflict of the story rather than a damsel, reliant on her male cohort to save her.

Two specific examples of interest in these late Victorian Gothic horror tales of interest find themselves on the cusp of this changing heroine.. In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" which, on the surface, features the traditional heroine. Gilman's narrator remains nameless throughout her story and is confined by her physician husband to a room in their summer estate as a 'rest cure' for her mental illness. As the story progresses, the heroine succumbs to madness at the hands of the yellow wallpaper of her room and seeks a way out, not only for herself but for the other woman she's convinced is trapped inside. In Beth Brunk Chavez's article "If These Walls Could Talk: Female Agency and Structural Inhabitants in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Paintings of Remedios Varo," she connects the narrator's struggle to a common theme in the art of Spanish surrealist artist Remedios Varo. Here, she argues that "in a number of Varo's paintings, wall inhabitants threaten, observe, or (re)present the main figure in her paintings, like "The Yellow Wallpaper" also feature women who physically break through walls." (71) Her connection between Remedios Varo's art and Gilman's heroine provides a glimpse into the idea of 'freeing'

women from the conventional path expected of them and this article bridges the gap between the traditional Gothic heroine and examples that, later, would shed this reputation as damsels in distress more explicitly. Gilman's short story ends with the heroine telling her husband that she "got out despite [him]" and this line completes her arc from a helpless woman trapped to a woman free to dictate how she navigates her circumstances, setting the tone for Gothic novels to shift towards a more empowered heroine reflective of the "New Woman" as the 20th Century dawned.

Five years after the first publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper", Bram Stoker published his magnum opus, a pillar of Gothic horror, *Dracula.* In *Dracula*, his female characters Mina and Lucy have a profound impact on the story in their own right. Although there is an argument for their agency in the story because it is centered around the men trying to 'free' them from Dracula's influence, it is nonetheless important to examine how both women actively progress the story. Though Lucy ends up succumbing to Dracula's vampiric curse, in the end, Mina's active role in the quest to destroy Dracula spares her the same fate. Her psychic connection to Dracula is the key to his destruction, and uniquely hers. In Alison Case's article, "Tasting the Original Apple: Gender and the Struggle for Narrative Authority in 'Dracula.', she argues that "Within the dynamic of the novel's narration, the New Womanly Mina, with her "man's brain" and "woman's heart" (248), becomes the site of complex negotiations between traditional femininity and intellectual agency." (224) Stoker uses the connection Mina has with Dracula as this symbolic connection between how the "New Woman" ideal, popular in the late 19th Century, allows women to see themselves as people capable of so much more than marriage and motherhood, and ushers in a new way of celebrating inherent feminine strength/ Mina's arc is as much about saving herself as it is about saving her loved ones and she succeeds in both

endeavors. Like the heroine of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Mina frees herself from Dracula’s influence and, though aided by her male counterparts, she is the one who ultimately sees to it that she can live her life free of Dracula’s influence and succeeds where Lucy succumbs.

As the late 19th Century saw major societal change, especially when it came to the roles of women outside the home, the media reflected the changing attitudes. Gothic fiction in particular took to this change with authors evolving their heroines from damsels in distress to fully fleshed characters in their own right with a major impact on the story. With female leads like the narrator in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, female agency is more subtle, but the narrator paved the way for more direct examples of Gothic leading ladies who chose their outcome through active and integral participation in the events of her story. In Mina Harker, Stoker gave his audience a modern heroine. Mina was someone who proved herself capable and intelligent enough to earn her title of ‘heroine’ in her own right as she fought alongside the men to rid herself, and the world at large, of Dracula’s influence. By focusing a portion of *Dracula* on a story arc heavily reliant on its female protagonist, Stoker merged the role of Gothic heroine into the aligning views of the times, which set the stage for a more rounded and active expectation from female characters in mainstream stories into the 20th and 21st Centuries.

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