International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 4, Issue 1, 2022
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

The Gothic Femme Fatale in Charles Dickens's Great Expectations and Bram Stoker's Dracula

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DOI: http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v4i1.784

Received:
12/11/2021

Accepted:
25/12/2021

Keywords:
Gothic, femme fatale, vampire, witch, Lilith
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Abstract

Since its emergence in the eighteenth century, the Gothic genre has functioned as a literary means for many writers to represent fears and anxieties including those related to gender ideology. The femme fatale is seen as a moral threat to the Victorian society. The first theoretical part focuses on the Gothic genre as a literary tool used by Victorian writers to represent the social anxieties of the era, mainly women who go beyond gender norms. This article depends on the analysis of Charles Dickens's Great Expectations and Bram Stoker's Dracula, the Gothic novels in which the female characters embody the Victorian era's cultural fear. This paper focuses on the Gothic genre that is used as the literary tool through which Stoker and Dickens attempt to represent the femme fatale. Both writers depend on various sources that can be traced back to biblical and classical context to represent this female figure. The main goal of this study is to examine the different and common ways in which the Gothic femme fatale is represented in their novels.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first half of the nineteenth century gave birth to the urban Gothic sub-genre, a literary form that built a range of cultural anxieties related to the era's established system including gender ideology (Peel, 2012). Taking notice of the gothic tradition in the eighteenth-century novel, gender was literally represented by the castle in which female characters were imprisoned within its walls (Berglund, 1993). While in traditional Gothic novels, the castle represented themes related to gender issues including female imprisonment and isolation within this space, the urban Gothic offered an alternative place to the castle where the Gothic could voice the anxieties related to the Victorian era. In his novels, Dickens makes a departure from earlier gothic elements by abandoning the conventional gothic setting, particularly the medieval castle and the unexplained supernatural elements in order to represent the era's main issues (Miller, 2005). Laura Helen Marks (2015) assumed that in the nineteenth century, Britain went through social transformations, mainly in relation to "gender, sexuality, empire, and social class," the transformations that were represented in the Victorian literary works (p. 252).

The Gothic genre provided the nineteenth-century literary works with the framework through which they could reflect Victorian anxieties such as gender transgression, poverty and "degeneration" (Peel, 2012). Both Dickens and Stoker used the Gothic genre to represent the fear related to gender transgression, the fear that exemplified the transfiguration of the protagonists from the domestic 'angel in the house' into transgressive women. During the mid-

nineteenth-century England, the first British feminist movement emerged as one of the political and social transformations that the Victorian era went through (Hedgecock, 2008).

2. The Gothic Genre

The term 'Gothic' referred to 'Goths,' the Germanic tribes that invaded Europe and constituted a threat to the Roman Empire (Abrams and Harpham, 2009). In the eighteenth century, the term 'Gothic' became associated with wild places from medieval sources such as the medieval castle, the gothic place characterized by gloomy atmosphere and its "hidden passageways" (Botting, 1996, p. 2-3). The Gothic castle was the fundamental attribute of the Gothic genre as its dark and gloomy passages played the main role in the creation of the dark atmosphere related to the medieval context: the context that was far from the contemporary setting of its readers.

In the nineteenth century, Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens and Bram Stoker attempted to 'domesticate' the Gothic genre, by focusing on the modern setting and main issues of the era (Chaplin, 2013). They combine realism with Gothic elements in order to deal with the Victorian anxieties such as 'fallen woman' and crime to represent the horrific atmosphere of the modern world (Chaplin, 2013). It is important to note that the city became the main setting of the Gothic novel. With the changing of the setting from rural England to industrialized London, Victorian novels created a horrific world that reflected the era's social transformations, including "sexual and social shocks" (Priestman, 2003, p. 34). The new urban setting, the city, disassociated women from nature and rural areas and locates them within this modern place where they became disconnected from life of purity and connected with urban problems like prostitution and crime (Ridenhour, 2003). This genre was mainly used to fabricate a horrific image of the modern world because of the "negative aspects of city life," such as crime, 'degeneration, and prostitution, the main themes that were represented as 'grotesque' and 'viscious' (Moudrov, 2010, p. 136). Because of urbanization and industrialization, women were encouraged to move into cities to look for employment and go beyond financial difficulties (Ridenhour, 2013).

3. An Overview of Victorian Femme Fatale and the New Women in Victorian Gothic

The character of the "femme fatale" was one of the new female figures that dominated the Victorian novels. The appearance of such frightful female figures constituted the binary opposition between domestic women and frightful seducers "whose physical attractiveness and class ambiguity" contribute to their representations as beautiful and horrific at the same time (Braun, 2012, p. 6). This figure was highlghy relied on in Victorian art and literature as a consequence of the main transformations such as the Industrial Revolution (Hedgecock, 2008). She "is a literary signpost of the changing roles of women in the nineteenth century" (Hedgecock, 2008, p. 2).

Many critics refered to Victorian writers' use of this literary figure, drawing on the connection established between the biblical or classical context and the modern context. Hedgecock, for instance, argued that the representations of the femme fatale in the Victorian era shared similarities with the seductive women in Jewish mythologies or other ancient sources. Hedgecock (2008) further attempted to demonstrate that Victorian writers built the bridges between the classical and ancient world, assuming that this dangerous figure existed in ancient sources from "biblical Lilith" and Shakespeare' Cleopatra to Stoker's villainous characters and Dickens's Estella (p. 2). In fact, this transgressive figure appeared in the nineteenth-century literary works, including poetry or novels, as a response to the era's main transformations, particularly women's empowerment and increasing drive for independence (Hedgecock, 2008). In sensation or Gothic novels, this woman operated as a specific threat or "danger to men" (Hedgecock, 3, 2008). Stoker and other gothic writers relied on this gothic device to represent the threat produced by changes in women's situation, the changes that contributed to

their transformations from obedient and submissive women into powerful women (Williams, 2009).

When vampires were females, they are "apt representation[s] of the "femme fatale" in a modern or 'new' recreation of the mythological figures such as Lilith, Eve, and the Sirens (Miller, 2005). The Victorian femme fatale was inherited from classical sources, revealing the threat of sexuality and immorality (Williams, 2009). It was used as a gothic literary tool to depict "the Other," and the "the sexual threat that could undermine Western culture itself" (Williams, 2008, p 21). In other words, it was deeply relied on by gothic writers to represent those who went beyond the norms. It produced a sense of anxieties in a society characterized by male supremacy. Vampires belonged to the 'supernatural' world, the barbaric and 'distant land' (Williams, 2009).

4. Analyses of the Novels

4.1. The Femme Fatale: as a 'Witch' in Great Expectations

In *Great Expectations*, this new female identity appears when Dickens's first-person narrator depicts Estella's "dark hair", which displays her sexuality: "Estella's face in the fire with her pretty hair fluttering in the wind" (Dickens, 1994, p. 40). In a description of Estella's appearance provided by the perceiver, the reader is told how the hellish woman haunts his eyes. The passage is highly visual, presenting Estella with certain fatal qualities. Her 'dark hair' suggests dark and fallen sexuality (Ofek, 2009). She is "a witch-like" woman whose hair is expressive of her free and spoiled sexuality (Ofek, 2009). Dickens uses images of darkness that adds to the imagery of hell. This image calls to mind Rossetti's depiction of Lilith's hair that signifies 'open' sexuality (Ofek, 2009).

The kiss immediately connects her to the dangerous figure of the femme fatale. Pip finds that it is "against reason, against promise" (Dickens, 1994, p. 55). Estella is "irresistible" (Dickens, 1994, p. 55) when she attempts to "kiss" him. The 'kiss' destroys the world of purity and innocence. The appearance of Estella and her sexual body destabilizes the Victorian mind based on the sexually passive woman. She employs her sexual body to seduce the child in order to victimize him. Miss Havisham helps her to be a sexual woman and 'a man-hater': She is "the sexy woman," whose body becomes a hellish means through which she can achieve her aim (Campbell, 2009, p. 202).

The reference to her lips that "parted as she were panting" and allusion to "Mackbeth" scene dramatize and augment her fatal qualities (Dickens, 1994, p. 165). Dickens refers to her face surrounded by "fiery air" similar to the Shakespearean female faces that "rise out of the Witches' cauldron" (Gager, 1996). She is reduced to a ghost or ghoul and compared to other spectral forms such as spirit. Pip says: Her "eyes glaring at me, a very specter" (Dickens, 1994, p. 85). The femme fatale was a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties promoted by shifts in the understanding of gender differences. At the turn of the nineteenth century, this figure appears as "an ethereal and often supernatural presence in Gothic ballads and novels" (Braun, 2012, p. 239). The 'spectral' device exhibits the threat of transgressive and sexual women in Victorian society. As Whelan (2010) points out, Victorian literary works portray the spectral as "a threat to the middle-class conception of order, either as a criminal or as an unstable element" (p. 78) within the context of domestic ideology.

Similarly, Estella, as many critics assume, is transformed into 'a machine-like' figure; her depiction belongs neither to the world of human nor of inhuman. She is described by Pip as a 'heartless' figure. She is a machine-like woman stripped of human attributes as she is biologically woman, but emotionally inhuman (Johnson, 2009). Estella embodies the Victorian femininity that mirrors the new urban identity born out industrialization and mechanization. According to Ayres (1998), Estella is "the archetype of 'woman' bred to be desired but able to

have no desire herself" (p. 90). She appears as a machine, a contrast to Biddy, the rural woman who feels and loves. Estella's mechanized description comes hand in hand with the emotions she exhibits towards every character in the novel. Dickens (1994) refers to the cause behind her ambiguous nature: "It is *my* nature…. Formed within me" (p.100).

4.2.The Femme Fatale as Vampires in Dracula: "The Blood Suckers"

Both Dickens and Stoker work on the realistic attributes of the nineteenth-century Gothic. As Miller maintains: Stoker transports the "Gothic villain" from the distant and medieval context of earlier Gothic to the modern world, producing "a threat that is immediate" (Miller, 2005, p. 31). Dickens also 'domesticates' the Gothic genre, highlighting its realistic taste and bringing it closer to the modern context (Miller, 2005). In *Dracula*, Stoker, like Dickens, depends on contemporary settings as he moves away from the traditional place of the medieval castle to the modern setting, mainly the nineteenth-century city. In other words, as Miller assumes, his Gothic locates his novels in between the past and the present. He imports the traditional attributes of the Gothic to represent the threat of urban England (Miller, 2005).

Stoker's novel, like Dickens's, is a gothic literary work that depends on the supernatural to represent the femme fatale. Stoker relies on the vampire myth to represent women who go beyond gender norms including the femme fatale. By the end of the nineteenth century, the trope of the vampire becomes associated with the modern context, "closer to home" to represent "independent and sexual women who were thought to be potential Lamia and Lilith" (LeBlanc, 1997, p. 252).

Stoker's Gothic novel is preceded by other literary works such as Dickens's novels that are filled with vampires used to represent "female personality" (Bloom, 2006, 29). Both writers attempt to make the vampire trope familiar as it is used to "illustrate its proximity with the human world" (Leblanc, 1997, p. 366). In this respect, as Leblanc assumes, this trope is no longer used to depict aristocratic villains. In other words, the modern vampire is present in Victorian novels to depict the characters or villains who represent the Victorian world.

Stoker's femme fatale differs from Dickens's. The former is represented as a vampire that has "sexual" intercourse attributes linked with "the nightly supernatural assault tradition" (Leblanc, 1997, p. 363). In *Dracula*, this literary figure borrows one of the gothic qualities of vampirism, "sucubus" or "incubus" that produce the threat of "nocturnal attacks (sexual intercourse upon the sleeper)" (Leblanc 363). Lucy and Mina are represented as the femme fatale who express their "sexual appetite" (Halberstam 100).

Stoker and Dickens use the figure of the femme fatale in their Gothic novels, the figures that perform the role of gothic villains. However, in *Dracula*, the male villain is the primary source of vampirism described by Halberstam (1995) as "multiple figure" who metamorphoses domestic women into 'seductresses' (p.100). Both novels are attempts to 'gothicize' transgressive women who appeared in the nineteenth century: the 'New Women' who embody the image of female vampires and weaken the patriarchal order and social expectations (Leblanc, 1997).

In *Dracula*, the femme fatale displays many of the conventional attributes of vampirism. Stoker relies on the 'Folkloric' attribute of the Gothic as a response to transformations in gender norms (Leblanc, 1997). The femme fatale is depicted as "the female literary vampire," the gothic trope used to 'demonize' women who transgress social norms (Miller, 2005, p 18). However, Dickens's supernatural world, to which his women belong, is more realistic than Stoker. Unlike Estella, Stoker's femme fatale has more vampiric traits: "bloodsuckers" (Senf, 1988). Stoker depends on the vampire legend in order to represent anxieties related to women who transgress social norms. He uses the myth of vampire to represent the familiar world.

In Dickens's and Stoker's novels, as in most Victorian novels, the femme fatale occupies "a supernatural presence" (Braun, 2012, p. 239). In both cases, this female figure is represented through the use of supernatural elements. However, Dickens in *Great Expectations* familiarizes the Gothic femme fatale as she is no longer the pure vampire in Dracula's. He 'domesticates' the supernatural elements of the Gothic genre by going beyond the ghost of the dead (Miller, 2005). The femme fatale in this novel is a human vampire, a human body that is transfigured by the process of 'defamilarization' into vampiric or witch-like women (Miller, 2005). At the end of the nineteenth century, the vampire motif was revisited by Stoker, bringing it closer to the modern world (Wynne, 2013). Stoker's villains are represented as "real" vampires, "bloodsuckers" who consume the other characters' blood (Senf, 1988). Dickens's depiction of the Victorian femme fatale is not the one who consumes blood, relying on the realistic and fantastic features that characterize the Victorian Gothic. Consequently, in shifting the supernatural elements of earlier Gothic novels away from the ghosts of the dead or phantoms, Dickens tends to oscillate between the Gothic genre and realism (Miller, 2005). The vampires or witches in both novels are the images used by both writers to represent the Gothic femme fatale, yet in Dickens's novel, vampirism represents human beings themselves.

Stoker uses the motif of vampire to describe the femme fatale and to stress on Victorian fears of sexuality. In *Dracula*, Jonathan is haunted by three vampires in Dracula's castle. The look at these women makes him "uneasy," and produces "deadly fear" (Stoker, 2009, p. 51). They arouse male sexuality: his "burning desire" for "those red lips" (Stoker, 2009, p. 51). Lucy is transfigured into a vampire that reinforces her gothic sexuality and desires. She is reduced into a witch-like woman who haunts and seduces men. Her image is associated with the red color as a sign of beauty. She is depicted as seductive and frightful at the same time: "Her lips were slightly parted" (Stoker, 2009, p. 140). The "vampiric kiss" (Stoker, 2009, p. 120) refers to the threat of sexuality. She is the gothic woman who uses her beauty to destroy men. The rebellious Lucy visits men in the night, haunting their consciousness and imagination and arousing their sexuality (Craft, 2004). She is "destructive [and] fatal" and embodies the fear of "hungering feminine sexuality" represented through vampire imagery (Craft, 2004, p. 275).

In *Dracula*, the femme fatale is depicted as a 'vampire' that embodies supernatural traits: 'bloodsuckers" (Wynne, 2013). She is a vampire "in pursuits of children" (Wynne, 2013, p. 21). As many critics assume, Stoker depends on the Gothic, the supernatural based on vampiric attributes: as vampires stealing and killing children (Wynne, 2013). The male attitude toward Lucy represents the Victorian anxiety toward female sexuality and her uncontrolled behavior. She represents men's fear of women's sexuality, independence and gender transgression. She is transfigured into a vampire or a witch that wanders the earth endlessly, haunting men at night (Wynne, 2013).

Many critic associate Stoker's female vampires with biblical figures. Leblanc (1997) refers to Stoker's allusion to the biblical context (p. 252). Lilith, for instance, after her flight from the Garden of Eden, she becomes the mother of demons, of 'sucubus' and 'incubus': A sucubus is an evil spirit or witch that haunts men in their sleep, obliging them to have sex (LeBlanc, 1997, p. 252). In a same way, Lucy is a sucubus-like spirit sucking men's blood at night, offering readers the typical mixutre of vampirism and sexuality (LeBlanc, 1997). As such, she is like Lilith or Lamia, the first women on earth, haunting men in the darkness of the night (LeBlanc, 1997). She becomes the witch of the night that haunts men's imagination. Stoker depends on the vampire motif to introduce the threat of sexuality. He (2009) represents Lucy's eyes as hellish, "full of hell-fire" (p. 140). She uses her vampiric power to corrupt and to seduce the male victim, contributing to his tragic fate.

Lucy is the transgressive woman who refuses the traditional role of the submissive wife and mother. She is the horrific figure that lacks maternal affection. The next period in her life is spent in the following activities: killing children. Lucy is represented as 'a blood-drinker', criminal: the lips that are covered "with fresh blood" (Stoker, 2009, p. 14). The three other women in this novel are the writer's vampires who not only reject conventional roles of wives and mothers, but they also consume children. They are depicted as 'child-destroying' vampires (Schmitt, 1997, p. 144). Lucy, one of them, "feeds upon small children" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 144). Accordingly, this depiction calls to mind the myth of vampire that portrays the vampiric creature as a female figure that is deprived of maternal affection, attacking babies and children (Schmitt, 1997). She displays the threat of sexuality and the horrific side of savage femininity.

At the beginning of the novel, Lucy is represented as a submissive woman, yet she is turned by the male vampire into a witch or spirit that haunts her surrounding. She is vampirized. Stoker (2009) represents her vampirism through animal imagery. He represents how she consumes children like an animal: She is depicted as a "devil" that looks at the child "as a dog growls over a bone" (Stoker p. 14). This imagery is mainly used by the writer to demonstrate the threat of women who go beyond gender norms.

In Victorian literature, science functions as the primary source upon which frightful villains can be represented (Botting, 1996). In the same vein, the femme fatale becomes not only a vampire, but also described in animalistic terms (Halberstam, 1995). Both vampirism and animal imagery are important in the Gothic genre. The discourse of science operates as a fundamental means through which Gothic writers attempt to gothicize racial villainy (Halberstam, 1995). In *Dracula*, her representation as a 'dog' is part of the scientific discourse that influences the Victorian Gothic. In the Victorian era, the Gothic genre shows an interest in the scientific discourses that "provided a vocabulary and objects of fear and anxiety for nineteenth-century Gothic writing" (Botting, 1996, p. 12). It is influenced by "Darwinian models of evolution," the degeneration theory that has an equally powerful impact on the Gothic (Botting, 1996, p. 12). It familiarizes the supernatural elements of earlier gothic as the Victorian 'specter' or ghost moves closer to the modern context of Victorian England. The Victorian Gothic "raises a Darwinian specter regarding questions of evolution and human nature […]" (Davison, 2009, p. 40).

5. Conclusion

This article represents the different ways in which Dickens and Stoker rely on various sources to depict the femme fatale. Dickens's femme fatale can also be related to Stoker's Lucy or Mina to represent the threat of female sexuality and gender transgression. In *Great Expectations* and *Dracula*, they use the Gothic genre by creating frightful female characters that allure the Victorian reader and fit the context of Victorian culture. Consequently, the Gothic becomes firmly associated with this particular era. Both novels are tightly rooted in the social context of the nineteenth-century England, the era that witnesses various transformations because of rapid growth in industrialization and urbanization. Drawing on the supernatural elements such as vampires, ghosts, or witches, they interrogate Victorian norms.

This paper explores how the femme fatale is represented in Charles Dickens's and Bram Stoker's novels. It focuses on the figure of the femme fatale and its gothic representations. Drawing on the Gothic genre, it attempts to demonstrate that Dickens and Stoker, as critics argue, depend on various sources that can be traced back to biblical texts to represent this gothic woman. The Victorian Gothic deals with female vampires. Both authors use the vampire myth in order to represent the femme fatale through which they introduce anxieties and confusion related to women who go beyond social norms.

Dickens does not depend on the traditional materials of the Gothic. His use of the Gothic is more realistic than Stoker's. The identity of vampire differs in both novels. Stoker's is less realistic as it largely depends on 'blood sucking'. In Dickens's novel, the vampire is a human being in contrast to the female characters in *Dracula* that are pure vampires, witches or ghosts. However, the vampire images used in *Dracula* to depict the femme fatale are similar in both context and content to those found *Great Expectations*. In both novels, she is 'half-human' and associated with the supernatural or magic world. The female characters are represented as ghosts, vampires, and demons, the gothic imageries used to depict women who go beyond gender expectations.

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