

**Trudi Van Dyke**

**“ ‘At Midnight Drain the Stream of Life’: Vampires and the New Woman”**

The correlation between the vampire, a figure that is usually regarded as the subject of social ostracism, and the New Woman, the advent of which was feared by the majority of the British Victorian patriarchy, was a prominent aspect of much mid-to-late Victorian era literature. Supplementary evidence to support the compelling Victorian era literary connection between the vampire and the New Woman can be extrapolated from the unique gender role standards that defined that socially complex era. As Catherine Siemann suggests in her essay, “Darkness Falls on the Endless Summer: Buffy as Gidget for the Fin de Siecle,” the Victorian New Woman’s “personal autonomy, economic independence and sexual self-determination led [her] to be seen as a threat, undermining the social order” (Wilcox and Lavery 124). In transforming New Woman-like literary characters into vampires, their punishment or destruction could be interpreted as a culturally acceptable way to metaphorically control the New Woman, thereby keeping the existing patriarchal domination unblemished and intact. Thus, literature offered the Victorian patriarchy a psychological defense against this perceived cultural “threat;” unsurprisingly, male authors were the ones responsible for a good portion of these texts. While New Woman-like vampires are featured in many Victorian works, including Charles Baudelaire’s “The Vampire” (1857) and Julian Osgood Field’s “A Kiss of Judas” (1894), perhaps none capture, in metaphoric form, the anxiety about, and the alleged viciousness toward, the New Woman better than Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

The New-Woman-like vampires in *Carmilla* and *Dracula* embody the most notorious traits associated with the Victorian New Woman, alleged sexual aggression or deviancy, and a quest for autonomy that signaled the usurpation of male power. In order to reinforce as loudly and clearly as possible the patriarchal message that in Victorian society, New Women were to be regarded as social pariahs, the ultimate destruction of these literary characters had to be performed in the most savage manner feasible, the brutality of which is almost beyond belief. In *Carmilla*, prior to her slaughter, the male characters, representative of the Victorian patriarchy, dehumanize the vampire Carmilla, by no longer referring to her by name; Carmilla is simply reduced to being referred to as “the vampire” and “the body.” Dehumanization eliminates Carmilla’s individuality, metaphorically suggesting that her fate is the destiny that awaits all New Women.

Carmilla’s execution is described as follows:

The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head were next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire. (Le Fanu 336)

Carmilla’s execution-style slaying appears to herald the termination of the New Woman. However, as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, written a quarter of a century after Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* demonstrates, the legacy survives, and the hunger to reinforce patriarchal power

by quelling the New Woman's assumed sexual aggression or deviancy as well as her independence only intensifies.

A scene in *Dracula* featuring the execution of the New Woman-like vampire character Lucy emulates the dehumanization of Carmilla prior to her slaying. Lucy's destruction, expressed in symbolic sexual terms, is performed, appropriately enough, by Arthur, the man who would have been her husband, had she lived. However, due to the brutality and savage nature of the execution, Lucy's slaying is more comparable to a rape than a honeymoon, as indicated by this excerpt:

[Arthur] 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, [...] And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth seemed to champ and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. (Stoker 185)

Analogous to *Carmilla*, although the threatening New Woman appears to be obliterated in *Dracula*, the novel also implies that the New Woman and what she represents will endure. Count Dracula, the one responsible for creating these New Woman vampire characters in the novel, taunts the male characters with a crucial revelation, claiming, "My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side" (Stoker 263). Indeed, Dracula's promised threat comes true. The New Woman does resurface,

biting back in a revamped, contemporary, and above all culturally acceptable form. This New Woman emerges in 1997, exactly a century after the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in the television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

What a difference a century makes. As the examples described previously attest, New Woman-like characters in Victorian literature were damned to a vampiric existence that often led to violent destruction. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, on the other hand, features a stellar cast of female characters, many of whom possess the traits of autonomy and aggression for which the Victorian era New Woman was condemned. In addition, because some of the show's characters battle evil instead of solely comprising evil, they are regarded as heroes, offering significant evidence of the transitional nature of the New Woman characters. The extent of the evolutionary progress of the New Woman from vampire to vampire slayer is further magnified when one considers that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was created by a man, Josh Whedon. The premise behind Whedon's series was first unveiled in a campy, 1992 film also called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which ironically, given the later success of the series, was, according to Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery in *Fighting the Forces: What's At Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a flop (xxi). As Whedon enthuses about his creation,

“This movie was my response to all the horror movies I have ever seen where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead.” (qtd. in Early 12)

Admittedly, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ending its seven-season run in 2003, Whedon's creation has indeed “kick[ed] butt” as it were, the “butt” of the competition, its

detractors, and most importantly, the Victorian patriarchal conception of the New Woman as evil incarnate, cloaked in the form of the vampire.

Out of all the New Woman heroes on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, arguably Buffy is the paradigm. Although Buffy is a New Woman of the 1990s, she is somewhat radical even for this time period. Buffy does not allow men to control her in any capacity whatsoever. Yet due to her distinct sexual deviancy of falling for vampires, she, in exceptional cases, falls prey to their seductive attempts of submission. As Buffy's encounter with Dracula effectively illustrates, although her resolve in resisting temptation has been severely tested at times, she always enjoys a victory, albeit often a bittersweet one, in the end. Additionally, Buffy never, under any circumstances, needs a man to rescue her. In most instances, although petite and fragile-looking, Buffy has been the one to save men from danger. These qualities obviously help to differentiate her from other primetime female counterparts, such as the women of *Friends*, and even those on the arguably, at least from a feminist perspective, revolutionary series *Sex and the City*. Buffy's radicalness is so pronounced, the only way she will play the part of a submissive woman or damsel in distress is when she is under a spell. In one memorable episode of the series, Buffy wears an enchanted princess costume which causes her to unwittingly perform the part for which she is dressed, uttering such anti-feminist lines as, "It's not our place to fight – surely some man will protect us" ("Halloween," 2006). However, unlike the New Women in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, Buffy escapes patriarchal punishment; even though she defies convention, proclaiming, "I don't take orders. I do things my way" ("What's My Line?", part 2, 2010). Wielding a phallic symbol, the stake, the same weapon which destroyed the New Woman in Victorian vampire literature, and

performing a duty which is, in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, strictly male, Buffy illustrates that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the New Woman is perceived as not only much less of a threat to patriarchy, but potentially the savior of humankind.

Therefore, the series completely reverses the Victorian era's patriarchal conception of New Woman as vampire, and embraces the concept of New Woman as culturally lauded warrior hero.

Buffy is regarded as a hero, despite the fact that she embodies the alleged sexual aggression and deviancy of the Victorian New Woman. Although Buffy has several human sexual partners throughout the course of the series, it is vampires who arouse her passion the most, making her relationships akin to a supernatural version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Buffy has had two vampire lovers, Angel and Spike, but it is Angel, a vampire cursed with a soul, who is the love of her life. However, Angel's and Buffy's passion for one another has dire consequences. Unbeknownst to the couple, when Angel experiences a "moment of true happiness," the curse will be lifted and he will turn evil again. When Angel and Buffy have sexual intercourse and Angel experiences an orgasm, he becomes Angelus, his evil alter ego once more.

As Gina Wisker argues in "Vampires and School Girls: High School Jinks on the Hellmouth," the consequences of Buffy's and Angel's sexual act overturns the traditional role of the woman in Victorian vampire literature. Wisker asserts, "Ironically, the man loses his soul through sex, rather than the woman, which would be the norm in conventional vampire fictions" (6). Recalling Arthur's slaying of Lucy in *Dracula*, Buffy must put a stake through the heart of the man/vampire that she loves. However, whereas Lucy remains a vampire throughout her quasi-rape by Arthur, Angel does not. At the

moment Buffy is about to slay Angelus, Angel's soul is restored through an act of witchcraft, courtesy of Willow. But it is too late. In order to save the world from being sucked into the hellmouth, which is gaping behind Angel, Buffy has to slay him, and she does. Because she is a hero, Buffy sacrifices the man she loves to save humanity, unlike Arthur who only kills a vampire. In addition, Buffy performs the slaying quickly, and with much more gentleness and compassion than Arthur or any of the other male characters exhibit towards the New Woman in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*; therefore Buffy succeeds in passing what for most of us would be the ultimate test of courage.

Unsurprisingly, considering her valor, Buffy is praised and respected by males and females alike, both on the show and in the audience. Buffy has died twice throughout the course of the series, once for a second, and later, for a number of months, until she is revived by a witch's incantation. At the time of her longer death, her tombstone even read, "She saved the world. A lot" ("The Gift," 5022). In mourning her passing, Giles, the show's primary knowledge provider, offers this brief, heart-felt eulogy: "She's a hero you see, she's not like the rest of us" ("The Gift," 5022). In the context of traditional quest mythology, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be read as a quest myth in which the hero, after many trials and tribulations, gifts society with a boon. And indeed *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* benefits society, not only by slaying the derogatory Victorian image of the New Woman, but also by instituting the acceptance of an egalitarian culture where women are every bit as powerful and aggressive as men. Additionally, egalitarianism is further embraced by the series' depiction of its male characters; the males are not always the saviors, some of them, just like the Victorian New Woman, are depicted as evil as well. Nevertheless, in " 'Killing Us Softly' ? : A

Feminist Search for the ‘Real’ Buffy,” Sheryl Vint both observes and questions the potential of the type of feminism that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* promotes in restructuring the attitudes of *both* males and females about the issue. However, as Whedon defensively asserts, “If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of the situation without their knowing that’s what’s happening, it’s better than selling them on feminism” (qtd. in Vint 4). And while there may still be detractors who challenge the series’ approach to feminism, with such sincere intention on Whedon’s part, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be perceived as a pro-feminist response to the literal destruction of the Victorian era New Woman. Therefore, the innovative television series impressively challenges long established gender role standards, marking a return of the repressed and effectively allowing the feminine, ironically, given its extended and unjust association with vampirism, the opportunity to bite back. What a difference a century makes.



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