

**The R/Evolution of the Victorian *Femme fatale***

By:

Adriana E. Dorado Sánchez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO

MAYAGÜEZ CAMPUS

2016

Approved by:

---

Nandita Batra, PhD  
President, Graduate Committee

---

Date

---

Jose Irizarry, PhD  
Member, Graduate Committee

---

Date

---

Nancy V. Vicente, PhD  
Member, Graduate Committee

---

Date

---

Rosita Rivera, PhD  
Director of the English Department

---

Date

---

Ivette Cruzado, PhD  
Graduate Studies Representative

---

Date

## Abstract

The focus of this thesis is to examine the construction of *femme fatale* representations of nineteenth century England, particularly in mid- Victorian to fin-de-siècle art and literature, thus tracing radical and significant social and historical changes of the century and how these affect the *femme fatale* construction, image, and interpretation. There was great emphasis on the discourse of sexuality during this period, particularly the questions revolving feminine sexuality and which gender would prevail in the competition for power. However, Thackeray, Le Fanu, and Wilde reflect personal critiques of the patriarchal system through their *femmes fatales*, Becky Sharp, Carmilla, and Salomé. Patriarchal ideologies about gender identity and norms are exposed to be but mechanisms for normalizing an individual according to their sex. Viewed under a feminist scope, gender represents a set of behavior rules imposed by patriarchal institutions that determine the course of how society works, which are all subverted by the *femme fatale*; therefore provoking chaos and proving gendered norm inadequacies. Therefore the image of the *femme fatale* becomes an ideological figure resulting from the social changes of particular moments during the nineteenth century when the patriarchal infrastructure felt threatened, therefore transforming women's sexuality into a destructive, menacing force. However, a closer analysis on of the power dynamics of sex and sexuality will reveal how being under the male gaze for so long becomes a *femme fatale*'s advantage, as she exploits her feminine sexuality in order to achieve her evil goals, developing survival skills and a cold heart; while simultaneously emphasizing how gender is but a performance utilized to be accepted or rejected in society.

## Resumen

El enfoque de esta tesis es examinar la construcción de la *femme fatale* en la Inglaterra del siglo XIX, particularmente su representación en el arte y la literatura en la última mitad del periodo Victoriano, trazando así los cambios socio-históricos significativos y radicales que afectaron la imagen e interpretación de la *femme fatale*. Este periodo fue marcado por un gran énfasis en el tema de la sexualidad, particularmente la sexualidad femenina, y por la interrogante sobre cuál de los dos géneros saldría victorioso en su competencia por el poder. Los autores Thackeray, Le Fanu, y Wilde expresan sus críticas personales al sistema patriarcal a través de sus *femmes fatales*: Becky Sharp, Carmilla, y Salomé. Las ideologías patriarcales sobre la identidad de género y sus normativas son meramente mecanismos para tipificar a un individuo de acuerdo a su sexo. Examinado a través de un lente feminista, el género representa un conjunto de reglas de conducta impuestas por las instituciones patriarcales que determinan cómo funciona la sociedad. Dichas reglas son manipuladas y desafiadas por la *femme fatale*, exponiendo, por ende, las ineficiencias de las normas de género y provocando caos en la sociedad. En un breve periodo de tiempo, la imagen de la *femme fatale* se convierte en una figura ideológica, la cual resulta en cambios sociales en el siglo XIX poniendo la infraestructura patriarcal en peligro, y transformando la sexualidad de la mujer en una fuente de poder destructiva. Sin embargo, una examen minucioso de la dinámica del sexo y la sexualidad revelan cómo el estar bajo el enfoque de la mirada masculina se convierte en una ventaja para la *femme fatale*, ya que ella manipula su sexualidad femenina para lograr sus metas malvadas, desarrollando un corazón frío y talentos para poder sobrevivir, enfatizando simultáneamente que el género es sólo un mecanismo utilizado para ser aceptado o rechazado en la sociedad.

## **Acknowledgements**

For about four years I have attempted to complete my master's degree while maintaining up to three employments at a time, working seven days a week. The industry that I worked in was one I very much enjoyed, yet had nothing to do with the ambitions my previous degree had dictated and no input in my professional life... I have dealt with and overcome many obstacles that many individuals have gone through, and some that very few from: car accidents, fractured ribs, broken car windows and broken hearts, falling in love and moving out, moving back, falling asleep on the train and waking up in Paris, missed flights and missed opportunities, house robberies and stolen laptops, and even a stolen car. Throughout this adventure of life, the accumulated years, this thesis would have never been possible if it were not for the patience and persistent guidance of my esteemed mentor, Professor Nandita Batra. I am infinitely thankful for her understanding and for never giving up on me despite how long it has taken me; she never lost faith in me, without her confidence in me I would have not found it within myself. I would also like to thank the most important person in my life, Sonia Sanchez my mother. I am ever grateful for her patience, devotion, and motivation throughout my life. I dedicate all my hard work between jobs and studying to her in hopes to make her proud of my accomplishments. She has always wanted nothing but the best for me and motivated me to pursue my dreams and live up to my potential. These two women have inspired me to be the best I could be. I would also like to thank Tatiana, Angelica, and Cassandra for allowing me to invade their apartments for hours and days while I did research and wrote this thesis. And Fernando, for admiring me more than I deserve and for providing me with a significant portion of my bibliography. Simply and humbly said, this is dedicated to those who never gave up on me... it has not been easy... it took me a while, but I finally blossomed.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Resumen .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
Chapter I: Introduction .....	1
Chapter II: Methodology .....	12
Chapter III: Dangers of an Unperceived Threat- Becky Sharp .....	21
Chapter IV: Carmilla- A Different Kind of Monster .....	73
Chapter V: Androgynous Lust in Salomé .....	108
Chapter VI: Conclusion .....	142
Works Cited and Consulted .....	149

## Chapter I - Introduction

During the nineteenth century, and for many centuries before it, women in Occidental culture had been traditionally confined in a struggling realm of unequal gender power; a realm that was limited to a woman living in a man's world. However, massive recent improvements in women's social, political, and/or economic positions have provoked stress points in the historical continuum because of the destabilization of previously clearly demarcated sex roles and other boundaries, thereby provoking a negative response from the dominant ideological network through its institutions and cultural productions. Such patriarchal ideologies are reflected through artistic cultural creations thus revealing significant insight into specific time periods, places, and societies. Importantly as Linda Nochlin has noted, the "function of ideology is to veil the overt power relations obtaining in a society at a particular moment in history by making them appear to be part of the natural, eternal order of things" (2). This is precisely because these cultural creations (and more specifically representations of women) are founded upon or serve to reproduce accepted yet unquestioned assumptions held by society such as for example that of men's (supposed) power and superiority over women, as well as implications of social class hierarchy. The focus of this thesis is to examine the construction of representations of the *femme fatale* of nineteenth century England, particularly in Victorian art and literature, thus tracing radical and significant social and historical changes of the century and how these affect the *femme fatale* construction, image, and interpretation. The term "woman" in itself entails confusion, complexities, and contradictions, especially in creative representations, because woman is intricately associated with sex, power, and mystery thus affording her with a fascination in the construction of femininity in the literary and artistic spheres that transcends centuries.

It would be difficult to separate notions of women, sexuality, and art. Throughout literary and artistic history, the construction and/or nature of a female is typically characterized by her sexuality in the productions of male artists and writers, thus her body becomes the object of intrigue, repressed desires, and representation. Nochlin determines, a woman's body "is not in function of her sexuality but of the sexuality of those who have access to the [image]" (143), in other words of the creator and the spectator/reader. The bonds between gender, sexuality, and power are interesting as complex. Typically power can be thought of as the dominant between a struggle of the sexes, as in men have power over women, or between social classes, as in upper class dominates lower and middle classes; but how does sexuality fit in? Do men have power over female sexuality in the household and in their artistic creations, and does upper class society have control or a major influence over lower and middle class sexuality? Sexuality, women, power all combine in the social (sexual) chaos of the Victorian period proving its moral hypocrisy, as the period is generally attributed with sexual Puritanism, repression, "double standards" and censorship which ironically serves to increase the activity of sexual discourse. There was not just a male artist fixation with women's sexuality; it was a predominating obsession of sex within society as a whole where everything came to revolve around sex.

Most of the tensions related with sexuality thus revolved around the gender power struggle. Which gender would control the other's sexuality? Which would have the ultimate power over the other? Essentially, women seemed to be lacking a strong defense in this context since the expression of their sexualities were not independent from that of the males' as well as the fact that they were monitored by morality complexes of Christian and Victorian ideologies. Furthermore, Patricia Mayayo classifies art, as literature can be classified as well, as "a fundamental tool in the creation and diffusion of determined feminine stereotypes" (138). This

implies that the artistic imagination also aids in regulating expected (sexual) roles of the ideal woman like that of the wife, mother, virgin, daughter and roles that should be avoided like that of the prostitute, witch, fatal woman, etc. These options limit women's options in exploring their own sexual identity and transform a woman's body to a conduit for patriarchal succession as spectatorship and visual elements become an increased cultural activity.

Thus female representation is already charged with meaning (by artist and context), and leads to the creation of further meaning in addition to personal interpretation taking precedence over what is seen. Audrey Jaffe classifies the art of viewing (possible) through literature as a "persistent regime of perception in Western culture – one in which appeals to the eye play a significant role in the production and circulation of ideology" (327). In other words the role of visual and literary evocation unconsciously plays a crucial role in defining and reinforcing cultural dominant values. Female sexuality is typically portrayed in Victorian art and literature as destructive and fatal (especially towards the end of the century) which although in a fictitious or fantasy setting, is misinterpreted as "truth," which was also a new found obsession for Victorians; the quest for truth, not only about sex but about the depth of human consciousness as well. These creations reveal significant relations to the historical and social context particularly patriarchal fears of losing social power and authority.

What control can a man have over a woman with opportunities of social, sexual, and economic power? Fears of losing dominion, of metaphoric castration, of being overwhelmed by untamed female sexuality, of losing their identity contribute to the overall anxiety men were facing when women started gaining control of their lives and sexuality and to their overall ambivalent attitudes towards women and themselves; they need women but resent their power, they desire women but are disgusted by them. The attitudes, influences, and consequences of the



age's profound social changes are translated into cultural productions, more specifically into our area of interest: art and literature. The image of the *femme fatale* becomes an ideological figure resulting from the social changes of particular moments during the nineteenth century when the patriarchal infrastructure felt threatened, therefore transforming women's sexuality into a destructive, menacing force. Gender roles are the accepted social models of behavior that are imposed on people in function or relation to their sex thus creating the association of men and masculinity, female and femininity, and the development of individual identity . This establishes a strict and clear code of expected behavior ultimately leading to masculinity as not only different from femininity, but also superior and femininity accordingly submissive. However the rationalization of sex/uality into aesthetic, erotic, and psychological processes and feminist ideologies allowing women to make decisions regarding their bodies (such as separating sex from procreation, etc.) both contradict theories that classify all women the same, thus the unpredictability of women's identity and behavior provide an opportunity for the artistic creation of *femmes fatales*, yet put into question these exaggerated representations of women as accepted notions of female sexuality. Certainly gender implies certain characteristics and behaviors and is a product of a social construction, which implies that gender can be redefined according to contextual needs. Nevertheless, can one redefine a gendered identity that does not constitute a reaffirmation of dominant stereotypes?

The developed interest of this thesis will be an examination of *femme fatale* representations in nineteenth-century England, with a prime focus on three Victorian pieces of literature and art: the novel *Vanity Fair* (1848) by William M. Thackeray, the novella *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu, and the play *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, with their corresponding illustrations by Thackeray himself, D.H Friston (1872) and Aubrey Beardsley respectively. The

question regarding woman literally asks, what *is* woman? What is the obsession with the construction and representation of women's bodies in art? Women have been objectified in a male gaze (in the actual and the aesthetic world) and to understand male *femme fatale* creations it is necessary to understand how female identity is constructed in society and how it transcends into creative productivity of interpreted female nature. How or when did it become acceptable for women, or more specifically women's bodies which is sexuality's prime tool, to become objects of representation for men by men? Certainly, ideologies have a crucial role.

### **The *femme fatale* motif**

The *femme fatale* image, as previously indicated, is the menacing female construction by the masculine imagination reflecting male anxieties particularly about the rise of female sexual autonomy and resulting in the loss of male sexual dominance, therefore promoting (a misguided) interpretation of feminine nature and female sexuality. Commonly associated with the *femme fatale* is transgressive, unconventional, or overt sexuality that ultimately facilitates her for an easy seduction and consequent destruction of her male (and sometimes female) victim. This leads to further questions transitioning from a focus of women's identity construction to that of the construction of sexuality. The nineteenth century was the peak of the sex taboo, when sex or sexuality were not to be spoken of or acknowledged socially, yet when the latter were also being developed as an object of study to be able to formulate the uniform truth of sex, because as Foucault formulated, "sexuality was a domain susceptible to pathological processes" (68). Sexuality can manifest itself through a physical, psychological, and/or behavioral representation which in turn is again problematic as sexuality can be interpreted as deriving from the woman's body or from her social construction, or put under the frame of a reaction or impulse (physical) or response to instinct (mental and physical) stressing the unanswered questions of woman

nature. Thus through *femme fatale* images notions of feminine sexuality become synonyms to feminine evil within the sexist cultural productions of the Victorian Period precisely because a *femme fatale* cannot be separated from her sexuality used in her destructive schemes. Evil connotations attributed to female sexuality emphasize both the fear she creates and is a product of.

Despite the innovating changes in the mindset of Victorians towards attributing sexual subjectivity to women, nineteenth-century *femmes fatales* all share common physical and behavioral characteristics in their portrayal: absorbing and seductive, attractive, proud, mysterious, perverse oh so perverse, androgynous, destructive, and even idol like, thus demonstrating, as Patrick Bade observes, that “no matter where the artists and authors found their subjects, these women all bear the unmistakable stamp of the artist’s own period and a marked family resemblance to one and other” (8). Thus the *femme fatale* results as a symptom of this period and to study her and her significations is to explore the cultural mood and anxieties of the moment. This leads to the following questions: do writers and artists accurately measure the climate of the times, or do they offer their own personal critiques of society rather than following the vast opinion of the nineteenth-century male populace? If female sexuality was greatly feared, then where is the fine line between glorifying the liberation of female sexual repression to that of the representation becoming yet another promotion of dominating patriarchal ideologies? Linda Nochlin argues, “controlling both sex and art, [the male artist] and his fantasies conditioned the world of erotic imagination. Thus there seems to be no conceivable outlet for the expression of women’s viewpoint in nineteenth century art, even in the realm of pure fantasy” (139). Furthermore, although the *femme fatale* is clearly a portrayal of the alleged danger of feminine sexuality the links and implications to masculinity are also explored, particularly because male

victims are feminized and she becomes masculinized despite the attempt to fortify her as a representation of femininity. This thesis will conclude with an exploration of the way the *femme fatale*, whether through narrative structure or visual composition, subverts and disrupts the traditional authority of the masculine role. Bade makes reference to Jung's theory of the anima: "it is when man undervalues feminine qualities and mistreats women that the darker aspect of the anima manifests itself and he is plagued by fears of evil women" (23). With this in mind, it is important to question whether the creators of the *femme fatale* are responding to the social changes of a troubled age, or whether personal bias creates such pleasurable fear of women's sexuality. What do their *femmes fatales* reflect about their attitude towards women and overall society?

The complex forces between power, women, sexuality, what is the "truth" and artistic/cultural productions (I believe) are all embodied and overlap within the construction of the *femme fatale*. It is this weaving of threads that makeup such a (fabricated) figure and its possible acceptance. Foucault explains that "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms... Power as a pure limit set on freedom is the general form of its acceptability" (86). Power in a metaphoric sense induces subordination, but how and where power originates or manifests itself will always be a point of conflict as well as its interpretation. Through art, truth about power is "masked" as the creation can be based on reality and received as a representation of the truth or the natural or it can be enhanced with fictional elements and fantasy which are mechanisms of cultural projection. *Femmes fatales* thus promote the concept that women are indeed powerful; they have power in their sexuality, in their representation, construction, execution of their desires, and domain in art and literature as well as in reality and in the lives of the men who

create them. The reactions and interpretations of *femmes fatales* also exhibit the powerful influences of social changes and the nature of the mechanisms of control over sexuality, ultimately creating a paradox as well: does society have power over women, or do women have the power to mold society? Technically male artists attribute women with power in their works, so does this imply that essentially they are the ones that are promoting ideologies of female sexuality themselves, but who are they influenced by, women or society?

There is a broad spectrum of *femme fatale* imagery in literary and artistic works from the Victorian period. The *femme fatale* image was not of course invented in the nineteenth century, dating back to Biblical times and classical Greek narratives and beyond, but it was certainly re-conceptualized as it was charged with innumerable increasing sexual male anxieties. The *femmes fatales* that will be analyzed are literary representations with a visual companion from different time frames during the Victorian period, which will therefore highlight the shift and mutations of literary form and meaning. Carol Christ and John Jordan identify “formal similarities between fiction and painting which cut across medium and genre and constitute a common nineteenth century style....uniting pictorialism with narrative to create richly detailed scenes in paintings and in the illustrated novels” (xxii). Thus images do not simply reinforce the text, rather the relation between the text and image provides additional depth of character for the *femme fatale* by multiplying interpretive meanings in the attempts to contain or monitor female corruption and disease. Notable changes during the nineteenth century only became more and more radical as the century progressed, therefore altering the destructiveness and intensity of the nature of the *femme fatale*’s perversity and motives.

The framework of this analysis will be on the development of the *femme fatale* figure at specific moments of British literary and social history in hopes of finding the relationship

between the formal and historical constructions of the *femme fatale*. In the beginning of the nineteenth century artists drew upon a wide variety of historical and literary sources as inspiration for their *femmes fatales*, consequently the Victorian femme fatal follows the example of the supernatural fatal woman of the Romantic era (for example, Keats' belle dame sans merci or Lamia) therefore transforming traditional themes. As Bade suggests, "the choice of subjects from distant places or historical periods enabled artists and writers to cast about their heroines an aura of mysterious remoteness and also provided an excuse for exotic and picturesque trappings" (8). However towards the mid-century the artistic focus revolved around their present times rather than a fantasy world. The notable increase in prostitution and syphilis corrupted mainstream conceptions of domesticity and femininity, reversing the representation of the tragic woman to a fatal one. William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and the illustrations by Thackeray himself of Becky Sharp demonstrate a new perception of a *femme fatale* as a social parasite using snares and traps to manipulate men. In the transition between mid and late century, the *femme fatale* gained psychoanalytic complexity being associated with loss of identity and death while having suggestions of primitive power and oneness with nature. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and its illustrations by D. H. Friston published in an artistic magazine *The Dark Blue* will be used as further examples, culminating with a fin de siècle representation of the notorious *femme fatale*, Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Beardsley's illustrations of the play. By the end of the century *femmes fatales* became a masochistic delight and were represented as purely sexual beings of perverse eroticism with frightening intensity. Their beauty no longer mystified as much as terrified.

Women constitute a fascinating image, opportunity for visual pleasure while simultaneously representing a threatening presence. The works of fiction chosen do not provide a single or fixed image of the *femme fatale* that is generalized across narratives and time or of the

agency that these *femme fatales* exhibit. In fact the female figures presented in these works of art and literature do not guarantee that these works have to do with women at all and in reality have a lot more to do with the projection of masculine anxieties and fantasies. Image and text collaborate to add metaphoric commentary by the creators of social changes as well as alerting spectators or readers of alternative story lines offered by the counter representation. Instead, these works offer varying images and manifestations of how these characters negotiate the space of male-centered narratives. This thesis aims to explore the implications of the intricate relationship between power, context, cultural production, femininity, sexuality, and the *femme fatale* image by illustrating significant historical and ideological shifts during the Victorian period and their effects on the male creative minds in their corresponding time frames and different creations of *femmes fatales*. The main focus questions to be addressed are the following: Are cultural productions of *femmes fatales* a result of the social changes of a troubled age or of personal critiques of their creators? How does the *femme fatale*, whether through narrative structure or visual composition, subvert and disrupt the traditional authority of the masculine role? What is the source of the ambivalent attitudes towards female sexuality, between glorifying the liberation of female sexual repression to that of the representation/ obsession becoming a masochistic delight for the creators and/or society/spectators? And how or where is (influential) (sexual) power truly manifested and promoted: man over woman, woman over man, artist over society, society over art?

The next chapter will explain the thematic framework of the research. I will be combining Foucauldian theories to understand the artists and their context, Bram Dijkstra's perspectives of nineteenth-century cultural productions, with a feminist approach to fortify conclusions of female and male (sexual) identity and patriarchal critiques. The following

chapters after the discussion of the methodology used for this thesis will be a detailed analysis of our three leading Victorian *femme fatales*: Chapter Three, *Vanity Fair*'s Rebecca Sharp, Chapter Four, the vampire Carmilla, and Chapter Five, Wilde's Princess Salomé. Each chapter explores the historical contextualization of when the work was produced, highlighting significant ideologies and socio-historical changes that raise the obsession with sex, sexuality, and women. These chapters address gender matters by exploring the construction of masculinity and femininity and the development of sex/uality as a rational object of study and power relations. The chapters culminate by outlining the ideological implications of representations of the *femme fatale*, defining and characterizing her nature, motives, methods of seduction, and overall success in art and literature. Thus the incarnation of the *femme fatale* will be explored in literary and artistic representations chronologically from mid-century to fin-de-siècle works. The final chapter will analyze the discussion from the previous chapters, comparing the differences and similarities of the interpretation and threads that make up the *femme fatale* structure, leading to implications of femininity and masculinity. Conclusions about the significant relationships between authors, context, and product will be made in order to understand the *femme fatale*'s relevance within the matrix and definition of power structures and female agency within a fictional representation.



## Chapter II - Methodology

In order to answer the previously proposed research questions it is necessary to include methodologies that interrogate assumptions held by patriarchal ideologies and their mechanisms of signification, particularly the historical construction of gender and how patriarchal institutions affect or determine sexual identity. The following methodologies used seek to interpret the allegorical cultural meanings embodied within a work of literature and its context, reception, and historical specificity, which are: New Historicism, Cultural/ Critical Theory, and Feminism. These methodologies combined aid in exposing the foundational categories of gender and desire as “effects of a specific formation of power” (Butler viii) maintained to keep social order and gender hierarchy and its link to the *femme fatale* motif.

### New Historicism

New Historicism analyzes how the prevailing ideas and assumptions of a particular historical era shape the framework of literature, thus New Historian seeks to make a connection between a historical context and what a literary work is representing. However it is important to keep in mind that history is a collection of discourses, similar to literary texts, therefore what is being represented by both can no way represent the ‘truth’ of the past, but according to Rivkin and Ryan, acquires relevance by studying “the relations between texts both literary and historical [to] discover how they trace certain patterns and negotiate various kinds of cultural meaning” (506). Michael Delahoyde defines New Historicism as “concerning [itself] with the concept [of] power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves [particularly by focusing] on [the] historically specific model of authority reflected in a given work.”<sup>1</sup> Rivkin and

---

<sup>1</sup><http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/new.crit.html>

Ryan clarify however that “all texts might be called interventions, in that they do not merely reflect but have effects on the cultural situation they represent” (506), which is why Foucault’s postmodernist analysis on sexuality and Week’s studies of the Victorian historical background, aid the theoretical framework of this thesis; particularly because our focus of interest is the ideologically constructed *femme fatale* in literature and art and how she affected the continuum of the Victorian period’s society and consequently how she is represented. (Furthermore these theories tend to overlap with feminist theories as well.)

Foucault believes that modern rationality is a coercive force and colonizing in nature, therefore he concentrates on the domination of the individual through social institutions, discourses, and practices that lead to the subsequent repression of the social and psychic existence of individuals. Sex in a biological sense is capable of controlling the cultural and social matrix, for example an increase in sexual activity led to high birth rates or death rates as well when related to dangerous venereal diseases. Thus sex became an object of study in which it was simultaneously being (de)constructed and (especially) regulated according to contextual demands within rationalist and scientific frames of reference. Foucauldian theory suggests that sex manifests its power through sexuality because it “embodies the truth of sex and its pleasures” (Foucault 68) therefore making it susceptible to individualized expressions/responses as well as becoming accessible for administration and control. Jeffrey Weeks argues that sexuality (similar to gender) “is not an unproblematic given...but an historical unity which has been shaped and determined by a multiplicity of forces, and which has undergone complex historical transformations” (ix). Both these perspectives lead to the understanding of sexuality’s grand influence in the domains of desire and acquiring power, and the fear and consequent need for

patriarchal institutions to control female sexuality in order to demonstrate actual power in society instead of losing authority to women.

Nineteenth-century England, specifically the Victorian period after 1837, is saturated with different focuses on sex/uality: biological, religious, erotic, political, ethical, medical, psychoanalytic, pedagogical, artistic, economical, cinematic, photographic, and literary/textual. It was inevitable for sex and sexuality to pervade the social consciousness, especially when attributed with such power capable of structuring ideologies within society and becoming an object of such intensive study. The previously mentioned intensive and innumerable studies of sexuality were quite influential and would alter the course of history as they competed for defining acceptable notions of sexual behavior within the context of changing class, gender, and power relations by evading the accustomed moral barriers in their analysis of the true dynamics of sex, having objectified it to rational terms. Therefore according to Foucault power operates not through repression of sex, but by the discursive production of sexuality that pervaded social consciousness. However Victorian ideologies were regulated primarily by Christian culture which imprisoned individuals by normalizing discourses such as linking (social) morality with sexuality, in other words deciding when and where sex was allowed, appropriate, or desirable; also by attributing major importance revolving holy matrimony and the private domestic life of families. According to Weeks the Victorian family was the prime source of regulating sexual behavior, functioning as “an ideological state apparatus, the scene of the operation of ideological processes whereby the reproduction of existing social relations of productions is secured” (25). Foucault and Weeks reveal how the reproduction of existing social norms is manipulated to conform to society’s expectations and social needs by individual’s consciously or unconsciously internalizing society’s placed values, which is precisely what *femme fatales* challenge.

When sex became “the explanation to everything” (Foucault 78) sexuality consequently became “endowed with the greatest instrumentality” (Foucault 103), provoking great anxiety revolving around it and the need for its censorship precisely because sexuality revolves around a sexual body. This allows the body to become subjected to normalizing powers that define and control sexuality under the scientific will to knowledge which produced perversions and sexual categorizations of different sorts as methods of social control. Specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering sex, sexuality, and the feminine body were formed, thus gaining “effectiveness in the order of power, as well as productivity in the order of knowledge” (Foucault 104). Sexuality is what initiates desire, and according to Foucault the moment there is desire, power (and vanity) is (are) immediately present (81). Therefore sexuality can certainly be synonymous to a source of power, thus a cause of anxiety for both genders however quite differently which is what the *femme fatale* explores by her use of said asset and the aftermath of her charms on her male victims. Typically manhood is viewed as in control of the household and of female sexuality and female sexuality in turn becomes responsive to male initiative, thus domesticating women which is an acceptable degree of power indeed. However, femininity keeps the race existent as well as being capable of terminating it (via diseases which were solely blamed on women) thus becomes feared by men (which is another form of power of women over them). Female anxiety could derive from guilt resulting from the response of their sexual nature and consciousness because of the morality control and repression whereas male anxiety can be in the pressure of trying to live up to manhood’s expectations. Nonetheless, sex/uality will always remain in the realm of the pleasurable precisely because as Foucault terms it, “sex is balanced by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” (83). In other words, pleasure can be derived from two extremes: from avoiding sex and doing what is correct, respected, and

honorable thus conforming or to a perverse pleasure of indulging in the prohibited and exploring the flesh; both revolving around either the acceptance or denial of desire's fulfillment.

Keeping in mind that "there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives [although not necessarily resulting] from the choice or decision of an individual," (Foucault 95) the objectives of each *femme fatale* is analyzed as well as what brought the fatal lady to her particular aims and the way she deploys her sexuality as means to obtaining power, particularly over men. Adding to this train of thought Weeks postulates that "sex is the essence of our individual being which asserts itself against the demands of culture" (12). Thus sexuality becomes a supreme act of self-expression, "a continent of knowledge, with its own rules of exploration and its own geographers" (Weeks 12). The three *femmes fatales* studied in this thesis all indulge in unconventional feminine sexual expression and desires, therefore defying patriarchal gender ideologies and implying the cultural critique of their makers regarding social practices of the Victorian period.

### **Gender Studies/ Feminism**

It is essential to point out that the Victorians were living under a matriarchal sovereign thus creating a mandatory shift of ideologies from accustomed male dominion to accepting a female in the highest office and subsequent rule by her. Despite being part of a constitutional monarchy which limited her political powers, Queen Victoria prevailed in expanding the monarchy's symbolic power and ideological influence while contributing to the nation's industrial expansion and economic progress. Although promoted as a devoted wife, the maternal ideal of the middle class domestic sphere, and extremely conservative, a woman with such power was considered as threatening. However, as Margaret Homans explains, "paradoxically, the more

privatized and ordinary her family life appears, the more effective it is as an instrument of ideological rule. The more she appears as a bending yielding wifely-figure, the more her subjects grant her the power to model their lives” (177). Even if her power was not sexually oriented her greatest asset was her femininity, used to inspire influence after fortifying the British Empire and afforded her a long sovereignty. Furthermore, between Queen Victoria’s rule and the rise of the promotion of sex through: scientific research (by creating definitions to the possibilities of corporal exploration and expression and the categorization of sexual identities), medical research (by the production of birth control methods and treatments for sexually transmitted diseases), media (by growing demands for pornography), and the increase in sexualized professions as in prostitution and nude modeling, all contributed to altering the social status of women. Since more options were being afforded to women the oppression over their bodies/sexuality was appearing less, and whether accepted or not by society as a whole the decision became hers to be reduced to the domestic sphere or transition into the public one.

Feminist theory attempts to uncover connections between the ideology of the social order and the experiences of women, therefore focusing on the treatment of feminine subject matter in figurative art, in other words how the feminine is being represented. Women are not all the same... although feminism does try to unite women; women cannot be limited to a category. As French feminist Hélène Cixous highlights, “there is no general woman, no one typical woman. What strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes--any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another” (347). Confirming this, Weeks explains “biological sexuality is the necessary precondition for human sexuality. But biological sexuality is only a precondition, a set of potentialities, which is never unmediated by human reality” (11). Thus

(sexual) identity is not constituted by innateness due to biological unification: in other words it cannot be derived solely from female bodily experiences, like that of reproduction, menstruation, framed sexuality, or even the object of interest in the spectator's gaze. It is however a social construct in a continuous process of defining and redefining; a state of being heavily influenced by social reality and capable of creating sexual subjectivity.

The stability of presupposed gender hierarchy within the terms of desire has been maintained by the configuration of power constructs between genders. The deployment of sexuality, or in other words how an individual expresses his or her sexuality, became an object of discursive administration and regulation because it was considered "a dense transfer point for relations of power between men and women" (Foucault 103). However all the theories previously mentioned serve to indicate that gendered sexual identity is constructed by institutions, practices, and discourses, making gender a cultural product or definition that does not necessarily exist. Despite the fact that all bodies are gendered since their birth into social existence, gender is not exactly what one is, rather than what an individual does. Judith Butler elaborates this idea with her theory of performativity, describing gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Repeated behaviors allow social expectations/confinements to endure unnoticed, unquestioned because they are perceived as natural or legit. Gender or its construction can therefore be affected by contextual factors and/or individual symbolic experiences/interactions, becoming a performance that either conforms to the social (or personal) expectations of the corresponding time period (which for women in Victorian society the social expectation/ function meant modesty and heterosexual procreation) or that responds according to their own personal desires and needs,

disregarding social expectations. When the latter form of behaving was adopted, discordant consequences among gender roles arose; society was stirred when sex became the topic, even further stirred when gender became involved.

The problematic issue that arises when analyzing a representation of a woman is not in evaluating whether what is being represented as female sexuality is true or false, positive or negative, rather it is that any feminine construction or image implies a meaning or interpretation to the term itself. Butler determines that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Therefore if feminine identity is conceived as a cultural construct then art and literature become a product of the manifestation of common assumptions about gender through chosen thematic choices. The *femmes fatales* discussed satirize the patriarchal ideologies of gender through their way of manipulating the system by adopting their social norms and using these against the same patriarchal institutions that imposed said ideologies. Their identities and ways of acting confirm Butler’s theory that gender is but a performance, using the accepted notions of feminine behavior only as a strategy to survive in society in order to execute their morally questionable schemes that simultaneously challenge social order unnoticed. Furthermore, the fatal lady’s feminized sexuality and performative skills also reveal discrepancies about different stereotyped aspects of masculinity, suggesting that all bodies are subject to social categorizations and pressures.

If power operates upon binary thinking about gender (the masculine man and the feminine woman assigned in opposing social functions) then the stability of the power dynamics of heterosexual ideology becomes threatened when women begin to revert gender roles. While Foucault implied that the assigned regulatory practices on sex maintained gender norms, Butler



elaborates this argument by specifying that the “heterosexualization of desire” is an outcome of the normative relations between sex, gender, and sexual desire: “The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (17). A *femme fatale* can be considered as one of those identities that should not or cannot exist because gender is solely a performance not necessarily revolving around her body, therefore persecuted for not abiding to the rules of behavior of a proper feminine woman. The image of the *femme fatale* could be viewed as being a collective attempt by artists warning men and women about the dangers of indulging in sexual pleasures that derived from the norm, sexual deviances for example desires of sexual autonomy, homosexual desires, androgynous lust, etc. However, by the end of this thesis it will be made clear whether the *femmes fatales* discussed are considered evil due to their gender (being women who succeed in what they want), due to circumstances and trials that make them become morally suspect or even evil, or but an artistic reflection of flawed humanity, where men and women were equally susceptible to similar identity struggles.

### Chapter III: Dangers of an Unperceived Threat- Becky Sharp

By the late 1840s when *Vanity Fair* was published, Victorian society was plagued with overcrowding in London, prostitution, underpaid wage-labor, and inequality within the new social class system. In *The Rise and Fall of the Femme fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* Heather Braun identifies Thackeray as “a master of comic realism, known for his unabashed critiques of social extravagance, hypocrisy, and ‘unnatural’ scandal [as well as his] intrigue with clashes between the real and ideal” (54). Thus among Thackeray’s goals for his novel and its illustrations is to create awareness of the frailty of human nature and the superficiality of society’s values, each of which, ironically, is the result of the other. They are mutually dependent on the same factors as well as having the same outcome: an increased attention to appearances. Miss Rebecca “Becky” Sharp is quite controversial as she easily sparks debates amongst readers over an accurate judgment of her character. The ambivalent attitude both readers and characters in the novel experience is due to the inconsistency between what she appears to be and the outcomes of her actions, making her agreeable image questionable. She portrays an apparent innocence and harmlessness however because her true nature and that of her intentions are never clear: she can be viewed as an infinite paradox to decipher, weakening the validity of all judgment that falls upon her. Her powerful mystique can therefore be considered one of her most dangerous assets because although characters may inwardly perceive they should not trust her, what she projects leaves no obvious reason why not to, thus they ultimately make the mistake of doing so. There can be no denial that Becky is morally questionable, but if each individual is a product of their environment, then what is actually morally questionable is the society she lives in, which ultimately influences her actions and attitudes, as ours influences us. In an attempt to justify her actions (as the narrator does a number of times throughout the novel’s plot

development) it can be argued that she was simply trying to survive in this corrupting atmosphere from a disadvantaged standpoint. According to Arnold Kettle, “the only two courses [that] are open to her [are between] the passive one of acquiescence to subjugation or the active one of independent rebellion” (20). Nonetheless (and despite the narrator’s frequent defense of her) her method of acquiring social mobility and wealth was to “succeed” in life by coldly overtaking her “targets” systematically without a single wave of regret.

As previously observed, if an individual’s environment creates them as a person (and this also applies vice versa as well) who a person is can also determine their environment and their relation to it, particularly factors like gender, the social class born into, and fortune maintained. By these standards Becky is at a triple loss by being a woman, born into a low social class since her father was a bankrupt painter and her mother an Opera dancer (both professions considered disreputable and morally corrupted), and left with no significant fortune after their demise. Carol Christ and John Jordan claim that “an analysis of vision gives crucial insight into the way the Victorians constructed experience, making the eye the preeminent organ of truth” (xx). Thus Victorian society’s own emphasis on taking the appearance of an individual as confirmation of their moral integrity and abiding that they follow patriarchal ideologies because of said image portrayed eventually backfires. Becky not only recognizes her position, she also knows what is expected of her and how to use her image and its corresponding expectations as an aid in her quest for power. Indeed Becky can be admired for her perseverance, her wit and charm, courage and intelligence, but she is mostly feared because of the manipulative, hypocritical liar she is.

Whether Becky is likeable or not or “good” and “evil” are irrelevant to the fact that she is an attractive fatality to everyone around her, and not surprisingly especially to men. Many of the above-mentioned traits Becky possesses characterize those of the increasing ideologically

constructed *femme fatale* of mid-century Victorian novels. This construction reveals as Braun explains “crucial shifts in thinking about gender, sexuality, class, power, and literary genre” (2), particularly anxieties of their corresponding mutability. Although feminism as an organized movement was established later in the century, *Vanity Fair* was published within the social conditions when middle-class women had begun organizing movements protesting society’s treatment of women which would spark future feminist rebellion or need for mobilization. Similar to early feminist activists who advocated for women’s equality in voting and working rights, birth control, etc. the *femme fatale* attacks dominant Victorian ideologies in order to redefine gender roles and is consequently received ambiguously by society. Braun elaborates that “the fatal woman character in mid-century sensation novels marks a disruption of stable social hierarchies, though her social mobility proves far less threatening than her ability to expose the inadequacies of current gender systems” (6). Becky can be held accountable for the mentioned charges of disrupting social realities by struggling against and overcoming major adversities. Becky is able to rise against the conventional restraints on women imposed by patriarchal culture as a *femme fatale* figure. Thus the *femme fatale* became a literary and artistic motif that reflected the progressively socially evolving climate of the Victorian period which was consequently affecting aesthetic, cultural, and scientific practices.

Becky subverts patriarchal constructions of domesticity and can therefore arguably characterize both an activist of social reform and a *femme fatale* figure; yet the truth of the matter is that she can only be one or the other. Furthermore besides describing her lack of remorse for her behavior, through his narration Thackeray also challenges the Victorians’ objective perception of reality through the novel’s illustrations. Judith L. Fisher notes that “Thackeray’s most successful illustrations, aesthetically and interpretively, do not ‘illustrate’ the text at all.

The nature of the dialogue between text and image [is] varied. The illustrations add metaphorical comment, extend the story, alert the reader to significant patterns, and supply visual types for the characters” (61). Furthermore, these illustrations do not simply “reinforce” the text as they actually contradict it by creating alternative story lines to multiply interpretive meanings of what is being said. In addition, at times when the discursive analysis lacks specifications of the ambiguity of situations, the image is what hints facts to the readers and becomes instrumental to the author’s vision and reader’s perception. Being a product of these artistic manipulations (of textual description verse illustrative ‘reality’) Kettle remarks that “[Becky] is the embodiment of certain forces which come together in a particular social situation to create a peculiar kind of vital energy” (24). This chapter’s objective is to trace the ways in which Thackeray’s pictorial and verbal representation of Becky success in social mobility exposes social and gender inadequacies in ways that distinguish and differentiate her from characterizing New Woman ideologies, thus demonstrating that she is an unperceived *femme fatale* who uses her image as a tool to (fatally) manipulate the fate of her unknowing characters. This portrait of the *femme fatale* becomes the predecessor to campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts and the emergence of the New Woman. This legislation intended to protect members of the British armed forces from sexually transmitted diseases ended up galvanizing a major Victorian feminist movement in which working- and middle-class women worked together for a common cause.<sup>2</sup> These movements illustrate more empowering subject positions of women during the latter part of the nineteenth century. (The following chapters will describe how the status of women dictated the configuration of the image of the *femme fatale*, both in literary and visual terms.)

---

<sup>2</sup><http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/contagious.html>

Lynda Nead's book *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* characterizes nineteenth-century England as a context with an increasing urban industrial economy and an emerging powerful dominant middle class. This consequently raised the need for the ruling classes to secure their power via definitions of sexual norms and moral behavior, thus regulating both gender and class identities. She adds that "class coherence was established through the formation of shared notions of morality and respectability, domestic ideology and the production of clearly demarcated gender roles were central features in the process of class definition" (5). Further describing Becky's disadvantaged position (for someone whose mission is social mobility), within this 'process of class definition' besides that of lacking money and choice of surroundings, Peter Capuano in his article "At the Hands of Becky Sharp: (In) Visible Manipulation and *Vanity Fair*" observes that "she is trying to win a husband and a life beyond governing without the aid of a family, --the most important criterion in the arrangement of Victorian marriages. Under these circumstances Becky has few verbal options and even fewer physical ones with which to display romantic interests" (169). Kathryn Hughes indicates that the 1851 Census revealed that 25,000 women earned their living by teaching and caring for other women's children as governesses.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the profession indicated admirable qualities in a woman, it also implied being hired by an upper class socialite. Miss Sharp is fully aware that being a governess will get her nowhere near the luxurious future to which she aspires, particularly because of the low income and lack of opportunity to meet single wealthy men. Therefore not only does she "take advantage" of the education given her at Chiswick Mall, she characterizes the designated domestic ideal constructed by patriarchy for her gender by exploiting the only asset she is thus attributed, her sexuality. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault

---

<sup>3</sup><https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-figure-of-the-governess>

theorizes that “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself, [therefore] its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (86). For a woman to have fortune and status, as previously suggested, she must either be born into them benefitting from family members or the family name, or acquire them through marriage. This consequently implied that if a woman desired to change her social position, specifically escalate in the social hierarchy, she would have to be a suitable candidate for marriage, which was the position Becky found herself in. Becky chooses to use her sexuality (which is her source of power) in a discreet manner (as not to offend the existing moral codes) in order to establish herself and be accepted within her wanted social realm.

According to Patricia Mayayo in her book *Historias de mujeres, Historias del arte*, “the social and sexual relations of women have been framed within a patriarchal culture and their identities have been defined according to the roles or images sanctioned by the dominating ideology” (109).<sup>4</sup> A bride-to-be in Victorian society needed to demonstrate respectable femininity, which was composed of social and biologically linked standards based on women’s body and her moral purity, self-sacrifice, and fulfillment of domestic duties. These standards reduced women through their relationship to men within the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers<sup>5</sup>. Besides domesticated roles, economic and educational limitations (as women were not admitted into the working or academic spheres) contributed to the established dependency of women on men, consequently making marriage appear as the only viable option for a woman’s

---

<sup>4</sup>My translation of Spanish text: “las relaciones sociales y sexuales de las mujeres han forjado dentro del marco de la cultura patriarcal y sus identidades han sido definidas de acuerdo con los roles e imágenes sancionados por la ideología dominante.”

<sup>5</sup>George Elgar Hick’s triptych *Woman’s Mission* perfectly illustrates the Victorian concept of the respectable feminine ideal, defining a woman by her domestic roles and duties: *Guide to Childhood*, *Companion of Manhood*, and *Comfort of Old Age*. The desired image of the “fairer sex” as pure and submissive is also conveyed in Coventry Patmore’s popular poem “The Angel in the House.”

progress and her overall survival. Elaine Showalter demonstrates that “as women sought opportunities for self-development outside of marriage, medicine and science warned that such ambitions would lead to sickness, freakishness, sterility, and radical degeneration” (39). In other words, these institutions sought assiduously to sway society into accepting representations of women as either domestic or fallen in order to protect conventional codes, firstly by imposing regulations on women’s sexual conduct and secondly by defining women by their reproductive functions and domestic skills. However, the rethinking of the biological basis of gender roles and definitions of sexuality began to interrogate domesticity myths, consequently making women’s sexuality the subject of speculation.

During this period the traditional boundaries inside and outside domestic spheres that defined and constructed gender were undergoing transformation. Emerging novels, such as *Vanity Fair*, expressed ambivalent attitudes towards independent women because of the increased competition in marking social class and gender superiority. Therefore the mid-century *femme fatale* mirrors social anxieties over the behavior that conflicted with the prudish and often unrealistic ideological standards of Victorian life, which constructed morality around sexuality meant to keep a woman in her assigned gender and social class role. In his book *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* Jeffrey Weeks asserts that these social definitions “point to the importance of categorization along lines of gender; the construction, in other words, of categories of masculinity and femininity building on obvious biological differences, but reinforcing through ideology and various social practices” (5). Rigid cultural gender barriers both in cultural institutions and in social discourse resulted in the production of manifold sexualities all meant to enforce restrictions over women’s bodies and their pleasures. Notwithstanding, early women’s movements rejected the objectification of the male gaze over



women's bodies by attacking the institution of marriage by seeking economic alternatives for women such as employment and exposure into public spheres. These movements, which included both women and men (including John Stuart Mill, an early liberal feminist who was arrested for distributing birth control pamphlets in 1832) insisted on a woman's right to have control over her body, for example by developing sexual relations or bearing children outside of marriage or by choosing to remain single to pursue higher education. They defied the family sphere by their union and political strikes as well as publications of essays, letters, and pamphlets and maintaining what was deemed as unconventional life styles. Overall their critique and questioning derived from "the denial of female property rights, the legal power of the husband over wife and children, and custody and taxation questions" (Weeks 161). In other words their concerns dealt with practical matters of equality and although Becky was liberal in her perception of how to live her life defying social stereotypes attributed to her gender, she was not as aggressive in demonstrating her ideals. On the contrary, instead of declaring and exerting sexual liberation Becky clung to the very institution feminist social reformers so passionately opposed: marriage. In a *femme fatale* like way she depended on that sexualized male gaze a feminist would shrink from, and utilized this gaze to further her attractions. Becky as a woman was in control of her decisions, her actions, and her body, fearless of anyone or anything opposing her, and she took advantage of the power structures that maintained hierarchies and social order. In other words, like the *femme fatale*, she does not take society's conduct rules seriously unless she has something to gain, as she does when acting the part of the domesticated woman. In this way as Braun continues in her analysis of the author, Thackeray demonstrates "attention to the performative skills of his most alluring female characters, highlight[ing] the *femme fatale*'s art of securing affection and sustaining power over men who long to rescue them"

(57), while drawing attention to the generic principles of society and the facility which they can be exposed and manipulated as well. A good education and respectable manners made Becky Sharp's particular type of *femme fatale*'s disguise a domestic ideal complete, enabling her with opportunities to plot away her schemes.

Becky subverts bourgeois ideologies of feminine inoffensiveness by using the home as fertile ground of seduction and actually manipulating the expected image as a disguise for her own personal agenda concealing her actual seductive intentions. In "The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in *Vanity Fair*" Lisa Jadwin classifies this as a mimetic survival strategy of "paragons of virtue" and further describes this as a strategy deployed by ambitious women when, "deliberately enlisting the acquiescent, self-minimizing discourse [of the Angel in the House] to camouflage their disbelieving defiance and to achieve power denied them by the masculine declarative discourses they are forbidden to use" (664). With the importance attributed to appearance and reputation, a woman of virtue was viewed as the only acceptable wife for a man to secure his status in society. Thus by using the above described camouflage, Becky was able to invade (ironically by invitation) aristocratic homes and strengthen her chances of marrying a wealthy man by her feminine charms. Strategic psychological and behavioral seduction were key components for her social mobility and control, and economic progress, making her sexuality a significant source of power, not only to succeed in her self-oriented schemes but in exposing the contradicting desires men felt in relation to womanhood. This indicates that sexuality was not a *femme fatale*'s sole advantage to threaten her male victims in mid-nineteenth-century literature, although it certainly was the nucleus and main source. She combines her sexuality with knowledge about domestic ideology and her objective is to undermine that ideology, pointing to bourgeois double standards, for it was these same families that preached moral purity while

desperately hiding their own duplicitous infidelities in the garments of respectability. The whole structure of society more generally, rather than any particular individual, tends to be the *femme fatale*'s/ Becky's main target.

Though dangerous, Miss Sharp fits into conventional stereotypes about the domestic woman who is seemingly passive and meek. Rebecca is remarkably enchanting and easily gains favor, encapsulating the hypocrisy present in the society that made her who she is. From an early age at Miss Pinkerton's academy she recognizes the superficiality of social codes and of those who follow them and the extent to which the manipulation of expected behavior could take her. Thus considering herself "a thousand times cleverer and more charming" than the rest of the girls with established wealth and status, "she determined at any rate to get free from the prison in which she found herself, and now began to act for herself, and for the first time to make connected plans for the future" (Thackeray 19). Victorian society was dominated by men, representing authority and order (clearly understood through the paternal figures of the different families, Sedley, Osborne, Crawley, etc.); therefore to change her position from a penniless orphan to a wealthy respectable woman in this male-dominated society she must first captivate and impress the men (and sometimes women) by convincing them of her likeability and worthiness. A well-kept reputation was indispensable; however being physically attractive was not a lesser notion in the consideration for a wife, especially when dealing with the vanity of men in the social classes to which she aspired. The narrator comments on this in the following passage:

It is the pretty face which creates sympathy in the hearts of men...  
A woman may possess the wisdom and chastity of Minerva, and we give no heed to her, if she has a plain face. What folly will not a pair of bright eyes make pardonable? What dullness may not red lips and sweet accents render pleasant? (491)

Thus the purity of a woman alone cannot compete with the ‘pretty face’ of her opponent. The narrator makes no significant commentary on Becky’s appearance when he introduces her, other than a brief description of her small and slight body frame and of her pale skin and sandy-haired hair color. Therefore, while sarcastically playing on conventional beliefs that small statured women cannot possibly be threatening, Thackeray describes her as a rather frail woman, attractive, but not beautiful, in order to satirize domestic ideology and to increase the obscurities of sexual difference that prompt fears and anxieties among Victorians. However, he does emphasize her eyes which were “habitually cast down: when they looked up they were very large, odd, and attractive” (16). What is curious about this observation is the use of the term ‘habitually’ (versus naturally) as a way to characterize the alteration of her facial expressions and use of her eyes.

A timeless saying indicates that the eyes are the windows to the soul and with the many years of exercised dominant patriarchal ideologies a woman’s glance normally revealed submissiveness (like that of Amelia’s images). The repeated referral to Becky’s eyes is no coincidence: not only to their potential (as in what they are able to provoke), but what they reveal as well. The shine of Becky’s eyes was different because it was calculated with responses already predicted rather than symptoms of genuine reactions as revealed by the continuity of the combination of text (descriptions) and illustration of her. She is consistently visually portrayed throughout the chapters as a sharp-featured woman with slanted eyebrows, narrow eyes, and aquiline features which enhance her hostile representation. Capuano notes that “her gestures fulfill social obligation yet contain sublimated aggression. [With these subtle gestures] Victorian hierarchies can be contested, destabilized, and even inverted” (167). Her lifestyle before she joined Chiswick Mall, living with her drunk-artist father and opera-dancer mother, granted her

far more experiences in dealing with men than she is credited for, as “many a tradesman had she coaxed and wheedled into good humour” (17). This description of Becky is validated with the untitled illustration [Figure 1] of four smiling men who are clearly in a state of blind gratification, surrounding her as she entertains them with a malicious facial expression that could hardly be considered attractive.



[Figure 1]

Nonetheless, she expresses equal satisfaction from the attention she is receiving from these men as she found conversation with them “a thousand times more agreeable than the talk of such of her own sex” (19) and is holding two female dolls/puppets, most likely parodying her schoolmistress or classmates, making a spectacle of what she considered the foolishness of those whom she despised. Thus the illustrations of Becky again and again expose her knowing expressions and sly smiles which undercut her “innocence” and the justifications the narrator offers for her actions. Being able to recognize opportune moments for seduction Becky began

practicing the art of manipulation while in school. One of her early targets (the success of which led to the first of several marriage proposals Becky would eventually receive) was the Reverend Mr. Crisp, who was “shot dead by a glance of her eyes, which was fired all the way across Chiswick Church from the school-pew to the reading-desk” (16). Possessing beauty facilitated a woman’s welcome into the social sphere. Thus a woman with self-awareness of her beauty was more powerful because she knows how to exploit beauty to make herself desirable and more importantly, to be welcomed while the depth of her actual threat remained hidden. The narrator himself acknowledges the possible threat of a self-aware woman, “let us be thankful that the darlings are like the beasts of the field, and don't know their own power. They would overcome us entirely if they did” (34). The beauty of a woman and the docility of her frame were misinterpreted by society as proof of virtue. Nead observes that “characteristics of ideal femininity were believed to develop naturally during a woman’s normal biological development [including] inherent weakness and delicacy, [thus] physical frailty was a sign of respectable femininity”(29). Furthermore, as Nead points out, “through the operations of science and culture a specific historical construction of femininity was made to seem natural and universal, the way things inevitably are”(27) consequently leading to unquestioned notions of female identity through scientific validation, despite the many contradictions this conclusion implies. However these (face’s beauty and body’s docility) are actually the sources of a woman’s physical sexuality. Compared to the image of classic beauties, whose ambitious endeavors are sometimes made easier by their physical attributes, the frailty of Becky Sharp therefore causes powerful men and women to underestimate her threat.

By applying cultural ideals of delicately built women to gain trust among men and women, Becky enchants and manipulates potential male suitors. Becky’s meek and virginal

appearance was reinforced by her calculated verbal and physical behavior. For example, using stories of her childhood struggles to victimize herself, blaming poverty for her naivety in tendencies and products unknown to her (such as her confusion about the Indian spicy dish), premeditated poses of her docile frame and physical contact (giving gentle squeezes of hands) and the dramatized gestures of feminine emotions like timidity and fear (strategically avoiding eye contact), all work together to put herself in situations where she could invoke male sympathy, creating sexual tension, and consequently sexual desire. Becky demonstrates that she is talented in manipulating human relations and emotions by provoking the characters to feel mystified and amused by her. Once accepted in the domestic domain by this projected reputation the narrator indicates that “naturally Rebecca’s duty [was] to make herself ... agreeable to her benefactors and to gain their confidence to the utmost of her power” (Thackeray 105). Becky Sharp as *femme fatale* encourages attention from male suitors as a necessary measure toward economic independence by absorbing Victorian ideology concerning domestic women, thus reaping the benefits that come from upward social mobility. In other words, Becky despises the bourgeois class system and like the *femme fatale*, must therefore maintain appearances by enhancing her charms, along with an outward appearance of respect and obedience towards the people on whom she would be dependent while proving herself to be interested in and useful to them. Because of her success in manipulating ideological gender roles in undetected ways and having a confident personality alongside her attractiveness, Becky personified an uncommon and dangerous combination.

Becky’s enduring pursuit of marriage was nothing more than a necessary stepping stone for her social success. Thackeray presents marriage as a kind of business transaction encouraged by the *femme fatale*, in which happiness and love are irrelevant in such an arrangement. Thus the

*femme fatale* more closely resembles the traits of a hypocritical moral society, suggesting that social success requires such a hypocritical disguise. The ambitious Becky Sharp embodies all the traits of self-interest (vanity, capriciousness, deception, self-indulgence), therefore performing domestic duties solely for the sake of appearances, in order to increase her socioeconomic position and to advance her self-interests. If Plan A, to marry Jos Sedley, did not work out (which it did not) she would have a Plan B, and Plan C, all as precisely prepared contingencies. Despite her numerous marriage proposals, she was careful (although not wise) in choosing a husband and emotional attachments were never an issue for her. Whether Becky had sexual desires of her own is uncertain as her behavior was never overtly or directly sexually explicit. However this does not imply that she was ignorant of the effects of her feminine sexuality as highlighted by her knowledge of men's weakness for displays of women's sexuality. She displays her lack of sexual ignorance by the exploitation of her delicate woman's frame and appearance/behavior of virtue. This is made evident by her experimentation with physical seduction as well as the gained knowledge of the effects of sexual repression on a man which resulted in a blind, obsessive desire to conquer the woman who possesses the sexuality that taunts him. Sexuality can manifest itself through a physical, psychological, and/or behavioral representation. This in turn is also problematic, as sexuality can be interpreted as deriving from the woman's body or from her social construction, or it can be placed under the frame of a reaction of impulse (physical), or response to instinct (mental and physical); thus stressing the unanswered questions of woman's nature and the susceptibility and consequent reaction of masculinity at threat. Her tactic of playing hard to get not only resulted in making her the object of desire for many of the male characters in the novel because of the prolonged air of mystery that surrounds her where men were concerned (Who is she really? What does she want? Can she



be conquered?), it also revealed her own indifference towards these advances (because she truly desired no one yet pretended to as benefitted her), and exposed the flawed concepts of masculine ideals, respectability, and courtship held by society.

Her seduction of Jos was completely methodical: firstly gaining the trust of his beloved sister who provided her with valuable information about Jos (and vice versa) and provided Jos with information about Becky, and later gaining the family's trust by flattering them with her affection for Amelia and her 'attraction' towards Jos; and secondly by encouraging him by laughing at his boring jokes "with cordiality and perseverance," and acting impressed by his stories from India, yet not displaying any evident imprudence to compromise her morality and intentions at the time. Instead of using the tactics of coquetry, she deployed modesty, a sweet timidity that greatly attracted Jos. She was the perfect model of a wife that his family would expect, despite her lack of financial agency which neither he nor his father cared about (as long as she was not black). Jos had his own wealth and did not mind the attributed heroic feeling he would acquire when saving this poor little governess (and his family) during an economic crisis. Deceiving the Sedley family came naturally to Becky, however the reader aided by the consistent representation of her facial features in the illustrations can already come to perceive Becky's hypocrisy. The illustration "Mr. Joseph Entangled" [Figure 2] is quite a literal image as it is symbolic. In this sketch Becky is again looked upon with complacency by Jos, Amelia, and even George. They appear comfortable, trusting, and pleased while Becky bears that recurring grin which sparks distrust among readers as she entangles Jos' hands with green silk. This entanglement Jos finds his fingers in actually foreshadows Jos' current and future predicaments with Becky as their source and represents his inability to escape from Becky's snares as she fatally weaves his fate. As previously noted, she took her time to get to know him, his

personality, his likes and dislikes (this behavior already hinting at her parasitical tendencies), thus being able to please and flatter him. Had not George and other circumstantial events intervened in her affairs she very well might have had Jos as her husband as everyone else supposed as well.



[Figure 2] “Mr. Joseph Entangled”

In “The Aristocrat in the Mirror: Male Vanity and Bourgeois Desire in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*” Sarah Rose Cole determines that “the Victorian bourgeoisie driven not by utilitarian calculation or domestic ideology, but by the desire for aristocratic status ... [made] the male characters [develop an obsession] with aristocratic concepts of gentility [and became] flagrantly vain” (138). George's remarks about Becky and Jos' reactions to them greatly exemplify Jos' vanity and the emphasis on social/class reputation. Firstly, Jos is constantly described as fat and indulgent (for he cared more about good living than losing weight), overly (if not ridiculously) dressed (in tight and colorful clothing), putting on false projections of

masculinity (growing a moustache) and gentility only to revert to his more ambiguously gendered self (fashion obsessed, vain, extremely shy, constantly blushing), when these expectations of masculinity had to be proven (thus shaving his moustache so as not to be confused as a military officer and drafted into war). On the night of the supposed proposal Jos was truly at his worst behavior, assuming airs of power, overeating and overdrinking Champagne and rack punch, while attracting negative attention to himself and his party. This gave George the perfect opportunity to ridicule him by mocking his absurd behavior and questioning his aspirations and decisions. With these few but direct words by George, the course of Becky's immediate future was completely altered:

Who's this little school-girl that is ogling and making love to him? Hang it, the family's low enough already, without *her*. A governess is all very well, but I'd rather have a lady for my sister-in-law. I'm a liberal man; but I've proper pride, and know my own station: let her know hers. And I'll take down that great hectoring Nabob, and prevent him from being made a greater fool than he is. That's why I told him to look out, lest she brought an action against him. (71)

Although this speech was not delivered to Jos directly, it provides the clue as to why Jos changed his mind about marrying Becky despite his admitted adoration for her. Although both men are from middle class standings their relationship to society were different in nature. The Sedleys were slowly falling into debt unable to adapt themselves to modern changes in culture while the Osbornes embraced the shrewd demands of the evolving culture, thus embracing the consequent moral destruction as well. George presents himself as a gentleman, the image Jos fancies himself to be, therefore if George thought it improper for Becky and Jos to marry because Jos' respectability would be affected, then his opinion was passed as fact and respected and followed by Jos. This ultimately leads to Jos' shameful escape to Cheltenham the very next day rather than

making a proposal. The discrepancy between Jos' personal values of wanting to help Becky and George's, or rather society's values of wanting to eliminate Becky is made evident by Jos' behavior and the Sedleys' approval of her immediate departure. With a "pale face and burning eyes" Becky "cried her little heart out" (74), a natural reaction expected by all, however one that cannot be attributed to sentimental heartbreak, but rather considered as an impassioned reaction due to disappointment, rage, and resentment. She played her role of innocent victim superbly as she left the Sedley household to her new position as governess in the Crawley household, provoking much tenderness from everyone in the house except the servants who mistrusted her. In fact, the narrator describes her behavior as "so affecting that [Mr. Sedley] was going to write her a cheque for twenty pounds more; but he restrained his feelings: the carriage was in waiting to take him to dinner" (75). In other words, as moved as he was for 'poor' Becky, his appetite was more important to him, and the brief moment of compassion was ultimately as empty as his stomach.

George Osborne was the first to cast a stone at Becky. Going back to the powerful influences of a person's environment, George was raised excessively spoiled, giving himself airs of superiority and a high demand to act and appear as such. The narrator comments that "Osborne's reputation was prodigious amongst the young men of the regiment... There were other people besides Amelia who worshipped him" (Thackeray 143). George advises Jos to refrain from involving himself with Becky because of the impact it might have on Jos' validation in society, however this was a selfish observation as he did not want his own reputation to be tainted since George would be part of the Sedley family as well through his union with Amelia. Ironically, he does not follow his own advice, as his marriage to Amelia led to the loss of his share of Mr. Osborne's inheritance. Was it his love for Amelia that made him sacrifice the

stability of the relationship with his father and the economic advantages that came with it, or was it self-love that led him to make an honorable decision? His fellow soldiers knew all about the exchange of letters between George and a mysterious woman, and when Dobbin exposed his engagement to Amelia he felt dismayed and angry. However, as Jos' admiration for George led to his decision making, similarly George's respect for Dobbin persuaded him into action. In George's case it was to prove himself a man of his word as well as help him recognize Amelia's worth and his own fondness for her after their tête-à-tête. Meanwhile Jos was persuaded to do the opposite, to go back on his word and detach himself from Becky. The influential role he had on Jos is now being exercised on him by Dobbin, a character of true dignity. It is clear that George was not acting upon genuine motives:

When I'm married I'll reform; I will upon my honour, now. And—  
I say—Bob—don't be angry with me, and I'll give you a hundred  
next month, when I know my father will stand something handsome;  
and I'll ask Heavytop for leave, and I'll go to town, and see Amelia  
to-morrow—there now, will *that* satisfy you? (145)

Dobbin's approval in many ways validated George's opinion about himself. Mr. Osborne's reaction to George's intentions of elopement with Amelia, however, somewhat tantalized his motives. Yet his vanity intervened again, as it discouraged him from the decision to "marry that mulatto woman Miss Swartz" because he "did not like the colour," despite being strongly pressured to marry her by his father. George's airs of vain superiority go as far as telling his father to "ask the black that sweeps opposite Fleet Market, sir. I'm not going to marry a Hottentot Venus" (Thackeray 259). The disinheritance threatened by Mr. Osborne is defied by George as a symbolic act of resentment for the challenge to his capability to make his own decisions as well as an overestimation of his father's affections for him. Like father like son, Mr.

Osborne's high regard for maintaining an elevated status in society makes him proclaim that he will not allow "beggar-marriages in his family," and he completely rejects George as his son. Even though George lost his financial support, he praised himself for his generosity in "making a tremendous sacrifice in marrying this young creature" and gained a wife who was hopelessly devoted to him, thus increasing his narcissism and easing his discomfort.

This analysis of George's character and behavior further exemplifies masculine vanity (morally degrading Jos to secure his own name), society's corrupted values (Mr. Osborne's preference of wealthy Miss Swartz] over quality of character [Amelia] and loyalty [Mr. Sedley]) and the superficiality of marriage (both Amelia and George married out of self-centered principles). This analysis also provides reasons as to why George would become an easy target for Becky; despite his lack of knowledge of the situation and apparent 'vantage' he previously demonstrated. In order for Becky to manipulate George she would have to adopt a similar seduction strategy as she used with Jos, as both suffered from similar conditions of vanity. However George's vanity was more insufferable and insatiable, thus making Becky shift her approach. Jos' character was well intentioned and good natured. His vanity was essentially self-delusional, for he broke no hearts and harmed no one but himself. George's character was equally false as Becky's, and she saw right through his endless arrogant airs, and understood the source of his extreme vanity: extreme insecurity. George's social status was not as he projected it to be. He believed himself a true gentleman being handsome and born into money and luxury, though he lacked noble blood, therefore his appearance and what he projected was of ultimate importance so that he could superficially prove to others that he was in fact a "gentleman." Interestingly, aristocracy by right of birth was no longer the only acceptable consideration for a

gentleman. According to David Cody,<sup>6</sup> “new industrial and mercantile elites, in the face of opposition from the aristocracy, inevitably attempted to have themselves designated as gentlemen as a natural consequence of their growing wealth and influence. Other Victorians were [also] recognized as gentlemen by virtue of their [occupations](#).” This provoked in George a constant mental strain which characterized his way of behaving and thinking, especially because the concept of a gentleman was one of the many altering cultural ideological standards (including the concept of ideal femininity) due to the above mentioned changes. The more he adorned his outer self, the emptier he was on the inside, lacking genuine emotions (love, guilt) and negated the integrity of his ambitions (husband, military officer). Since George is readily attracted to fame and fortune, once Becky obtains popularity among the bourgeois circle she captures both his attention and lust. Seeing Becky among genteel people such as General Tufto causes George to reevaluate Becky (giving Becky opportunity to reevaluate him as well), to accept her (since everyone else that mattered in society did as well, never considering her character), and ultimately desire her (mostly because he could not have her lawfully, both of them being married at the time).

Becky knew enough about George through Amelia’s ceaseless adoration as well as her intuitive perception, thus upon their introduction she detected his flawed personality because of his stance of assumed social superiority. Vanity blinded his character as much as it motivated him in his actions. In fact, Cole describes this behavior as a representation of Thackeray’s concept of “snobbism: [the] showy gentility of an insecure bourgeoisie that wanted to get into the aristocracy” (139). Extending this argument, she adds that George is “continually defined by

---

<sup>6</sup>Source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/history/gentleman.html>

his failures to see [and] his inability to look beyond his own inflated self-image in order to understand social realities” (159). His desire for Amelia, his wife, and his desire for Becky, his wife’s childhood friend, varied greatly in motives; however both were manifestations fueled by his own delusional vanity. His dilemma was whether to make the honorable decision of being a faithful husband to Amelia, or to validate himself sexually by conquering Becky, both courses of action completely neglecting the women’s opinion and overall motives for compliancy in the matter into consideration (for that matter). Therefore, Becky’s use of the ‘camouflage’ of an innocent delicate creature, which had worked with Jos, would not captivate George; for he was quickly becoming bored with Amelia’s passivity. On the contrary, for a person as vain as George an aggressive woman is what sparks his curiosity. The narrator emphasizes the difference between Amelia’s timidity and Becky’s outspokenness and the effects they have on George during their unforeseen encounters during Amelia and George’s honeymoon:

In their little drives and dinners, Becky, of course, quite Outshone poor Emmy, who remained very mute and timid while [Becky and Rawdon] rattled away together... Rebecca’s wit, spirits, and accomplishments troubled her with a rueful disquiet. They were only a week married, and here was George already suffering *ennui*, and eager for others’ society! (296-97)

Having already acquired George’s attention by her increasing popularity, Becky shifts from a methodical seduction to a circumstantial and psychological one by challenging the concept he had of himself and his attractiveness by acting uninterested in his flirtation, and unaffected by his charms, as well as patronizing and “utterly routing” him whenever possible. George was accustomed to obedience and flattery from women; “he saw [Amelia] as a slave before him in that simple yielding faithful creature and his soul within him thrilled him secretly somehow at the knowledge of his power” (Thackeray 236). Therefore Becky’s challenge by her lack of



submission wounded his ego, deepened his insecurities, and caused the development of an obsession for the acceptance he had denied her initially, while feigning modesty and decency for her lack of attention toward him. Yet she simultaneously and carefully fueled his vanity so as not to discourage him completely by her exercising the already practiced strategy of bringing and lighting a cigar for him (conscious of the effect of this maneuver), giving him “knowing” glances, flattering his good looks a number of times, and not denying him a dance. George is easily fooled by Becky’s false attentions and appearance, in contrast to the reader who is now able to see through the narrator’s praise of her when he describes her with “the neatest and freshest white frock imaginable, and with bare shoulders and a little necklace, and a light-blue sash, she looked the image of youthful innocence and girlish happiness” (296), and can already recognize Becky’s malicious gestures and implications of her smiles as evident by the illustrations of Figure 3 and Figure 4, “A Family Party at Brighton.” Despite the narrator’s claims that “she watched over him kindly” as he played cards [Figure 3], readers understand that far from kindly looking upon him she was offering a killing glance which exemplified her sly calculations. Thus Becky is “betrayed” by the illustration of her and George on the balcony [Figure 4], in which Amelia’s timidity is represented as she remains “neglected and watchful” with a false smile intending to hide her despair and remorse, while Becky’s smile emphasizes the irony of the narrator’s descriptions of her kindness and anticipates the destructiveness of her flirtation with George.



[Figure 3]



[Figure 4 "A Family Party At Brighton"]

Becky's dexterity prompts a desire that men find difficult to resist but that polite women cannot detect. Furthermore, the *femme fatale*'s body signifies power, a figurative manifestation of the novel's central mystery that signals suppressed desire of the male protagonist. By controlling the desire of men and suppressing her true identity, the *femme fatale* clandestinely uses her sexuality to disrupt binary oppositions between dominant and subordinate groups, thus disempowering her male victim. Becky's aggressiveness, as deflating as it is for George, "generates within him a lustful desire to pursue her sexually" (Capuano 176); however this sexual pursuit serves as yet another much needed self-validation for him. Sexuality is what initiates desire, and according to Foucault the moment there is desire, power (and vanity) is (are) immediately present (81). George's attraction to Becky is rooted in his need to prove himself by dominating her sexually because she rejected the distinguished and most prized assets of his personal success: the exploitation of his masculine role (and thus implied masculine sexuality) and his social reputation. The changes of requisites to qualify as a gentleman make George more susceptible to Becky's snares as morality was no longer as influential a component as wealth had become. This is yet another factor that could be superficially validated and accepted by appearances, therefore granting him alternatives in exploring his own sexuality. For George, the ultimate proof of sexual dominance and vanity's reward would be her agreement to elope with him and give into an unrealistic passion despite their marriages to other people. Ironically, it is precisely because of his 'wealth' that Becky begins to distract him, so that Rawdon (a character discussed later) can win George's money by gambling. Her sexual rejection of him was independent of whether or not he fulfilled masculine standards of vanity as much as it was dependent on the size of his wallet, which he was carelessly losing in the hope of impressing her.

Becky's seductions thus far are different in motivation and approach yet equally satisfying because despite their apparent failure, Becky, a true adventurer, thrives in the excitement of the development of her lures and occasional successful conquests. Bram Dijkstra draws attention to "a notion fostered by nineteenth century culture, both in the social realm and in the realm of sexual relationships, that the only pleasure which was truly meaningful was the pleasure of having power over others, of controlling the lives of others" (116). This is an accurate description of the essence of Becky's motivations and means of seductions, despite the fact that it delineates a masculine notion, further proving her rejection of gender biased stereotypes. Her ambitions were influenced by her many talents, as her talents were fortified by her ambitions, and although she suffered from several blunders and unfortunate coincidences, these served as life lessons and acquired wisdom. Braun correctly claims that "Becky does not merely repeat what she sees but can reflect upon it and, in turn, increase her hopes for an uncertain future... [She] uses her practical knowledge of idealistic errors to achieve social and economic [success]" (58-59). Becky strove for power and social recognition, however her "control" of people, or rather her manipulation of them, was unperceived by society, which she rather preferred as she trusted and cared for no one.

To Becky, her manipulation of people exemplified her growing lethal agency because she would use these people as puppets for her orchestrated and long term goals, thus providing with her with ultimate satisfaction and endless pleasure. She recognized the delicacy between the social realm and simple transgressions that provoked sexual tension which aided her in her seductions. The *femme fatale* characteristically conceals secret desires from respectable society. Becky partakes in this "masking" persistently throughout the novel as a woman who leads a double life in order to escape her past and embark upon a better future. Her motive for seducing

Jos was because she needed a profitable marriage in order to gain economic leverage and even though her seduction of him was completely strategic and hypocritical, it could almost be sympathized with, as this was not an uncommon act among women in search of social mobility. Regardless of her lack of feelings for Jos she was willing to satisfy him and make him happy; even if it was just a temporary, superficial phase. She uses the stereotypes of feminine weakness, meekness and purity to manipulate her appearance and conduct to gain and validate the Sedley family's approval. However it must be noted that Jos fled before Becky's sweetness could be proved otherwise. Her motive for seducing George was not as significant as gaining matrimony, as it was to simply maintain a comfortable lifestyle through George's economic defeats and to gain personal satisfaction in the form of vengeance because of George's earlier interference in her personal life. For "her woman's instinct had told her that it was George who had interrupted the success of her first love-passage, and she esteemed him accordingly" (Thackeray 174). Taking different characteristics of Becky's personality, for example her cleverness (particularly in schemes and conversations), her greed (proved by her delight in material manifestations of wealth), her insensitivity and ambitious and resentful nature all validate any reason to believe that she would be capable of devising a revengeful plot.

By experimenting with George's vanity in aiding and deflating it, her seduction was not so free of moral corruption as the previous one, for it had more psychological depth and consequences; while the former was excusable depending on whether her actions are seen from a sympathetic or unsympathetic perspective. The loss of George's inheritance led to the illogical squandering of his remaining money to keep up appearances (of which Becky was the cause and effect) and his inclination for gambling (also indicative of his vanity), along with his corresponding negation of losing and demands for retaliation ended up in a further decrease of

wealth and dignity for him. George somewhat withholds his reputation, although almost penniless, through his military position and enduring marriage; both of which were fraudulent as they were meant to symbolize rank and his consideration of others (nation and wife), yet were selfishly acquired and maintained by George to secure his honor in society. Becky is clearly a resentful person, an early example of this being when she threw Johnson's dictionary, given to her as a gift by the school she utterly detested, out the carriage window. This action reveals her need for freedom of self as well as resentment for the institutions that oppress her. The previous tensions between her and George had not been forgotten, and Becky would therefore relentlessly continue her seductive scheme until his downfall is complete by returning the favor of souring his actual marriage at Amelia's expense.

Jealousy on Amelia's behalf was already brewing from the awkward previous encounters of the couple with Becky. However, as dutifully as could be expected of a Victorian wife, Amelia chose to ignore the reality of the situation and "did not say much or plague [George] with her jealousy, but merely became unhappy and pined over it miserably in secret" (Thackeray 354). By emphasizing the harmful effects of restraint and passivity on women in his characterization and illustrations of Amelia Sedley, Thackeray sheds light on the complicated roles that women played in the 1840s. Her love for George makes her imperceptive as she blinds herself to his faults and negligence, making her a neurotic woman destined to unhappiness. Kettle argues that "it is Thackeray's merit that he shows us Amelia as she is, a parasite, gaining life through submission that is not even an honest submission, exploiting her weakness, deceiving even herself" (22).



[Figure 5]

In his visual depictions of Amelia, for example in Figure 5, she is presented with yielding eyes in contrast to Becky's defiant smirks. Her simplicity reflects her sadness as her sadness exemplifies her subordination and excessive devotion to George. Lacking personal ambitions besides being a completely domesticated spouse, her time and life pass unperceived by her (as the image demonstrates) in silent agony awaiting George's fulfillment of her idealizations. Jadwin describes this as the consequence of "Victorian 'femininity' [which] required women to impersonate passivity and helplessness, and by definition prevented them from voicing discontent" (667). The hostility and tensions between Amelia and Becky are heightened at the ball in Brussels when Becky made it obvious that she was George's object of desire.

She does this knowing it would psychologically destroy Amelia and possibly taint her idealization of George while assuredly weakening the stability of their marriage:

Becky was just lecturing Mrs. Osborne upon the follies which her husband was committing. 'For God's sake, stop him from gambling, my dear,' she said, 'or he will ruin himself. He and Rawdon are playing at cards every night; and you know he is very poor, and Rawdon will win every shilling from him if he does not take care. Why don't you prevent him, you little, careless creature? Why don't you come to us of an evening, instead of moping at home with that Captain Dobbin? I dare say he is *très aimable*; but how could one love a man with feet of such size? Your husband's feet are darlings – here he comes. – Where have you been, wretch? Here is Emmy crying her eyes out for you. Are you coming to fetch me for the quadrille?' And she left her bouquet and shawl by Amelia's side, and tripped off with George to dance. Women only know how to wound so. Our poor Emmy, who had never hated, never sneered all her life, was powerless in the hands of her remorseless little enemy. (Thackeray 357)

Becky's behavior in this particular incident can be considered as an example of one of her most perfectly executed manipulation of events. Seemingly innocently she was dancing with George, an act that could and would not be judged by the ball's guests who adored her, yet she was consciously aware of the dance's implications to Amelia, especially after her negative comments about George's character prior to the dance. Becky tosses her belongings (her bouquet and shawl) to Amelia while she metaphorically vice versa uses Amelia's (George). In a matter of a brief moment she exemplified George's indiscretions of excessive gambling, losing money, irresponsibility, and insults and degrades him as poor and a wretch, and most importantly proves George's lack of consideration for his wife, as she points out Amelia's affliction and tears for him which he chooses to ignore in order to dance with Becky.

Expanding on Becky's heartless behavior was her direct criticism of Amelia's valor, integrity, and dignity. George, intoxicated by his burning desire for Becky, danced with her and



extended that cordiality to a plea to elope through a note. Although neither the reader nor Amelia knows the contents of that note until many chapters later, George's character reaches its downfall as he revealed his weaknesses to Becky. What George valued most in life were himself and his appearance, and he destroyed his image of honor in the eyes of Becky, who cared not for him and saw him for what he was; and Amelia, for although Amelia did not openly recognize George's flaws, she certainly felt their effects by the agonies in her heart and spirit. What can be appreciated here are the differences of mental capacities between these two female characters; while Becky thrives in confidence and robust mental health (evident by her ability to surpass the gravest of hardships), Amelia is ruined in mental defeat remaining ever fearful despite achieving her heart's desire which was her marriage to George. Braun highlights the position between female extremes and "the fatal heroine's reliance on her foil, the *femme attrappée*, [Amelia] a double who unites rather than disrupts the fragmented male through love and selfless understanding" (56). Furthermore, George is called off to war in a conflicted state of mind, "heart-stained and shame-stricken," with no money, no dignity, and no respect from either of the women he desired differently. Clinging to his last resort of gentility he went to war hopeful to return as a valiant patriot and perhaps to reestablish his status and his reputation. However he was denied the opportunity by being killed on the battlefield by a bullet through the heart that was solely devoted to himself. George died never realizing the negative extent of Becky's power over his desire and subsequent destiny, and falling ironically, with his adored face down in the mud.

Becky's motives for and means of seduction of Jos and George have been described as strategies for personal advancement by the examples of her manipulation of traditional gender ideologies, moral codes, and the subsequent assumptions these ideologies create. Becky

challenges men's capability to live up to constructed social masculine expectations and actually proves their (and society's) inadequacies. Yet the fact remains that she was still in search for a wealthy husband to advance her economic prosperity; which is another example of the oppressive form of socioeconomic dependency that increased middle-class women's desire for liberty and equality. Issues of married life emphasized a growing concern with divorce laws, education for women, and professional alternatives that would allow well-educated bourgeois women to earn a living and to maintain their socioeconomic position independent of marriage. However, the *femme fatale* chooses dependency on men which is why the governess trope is to her convenience as it facilitates her plots against the hegemonic power structure.<sup>7</sup> The *femme fatale* seemingly accepts the patronizing attitudes governesses receive, yet refuses to let bourgeois culture treat her as an inferior. Instead she returns the attack by enticing other more prominent aristocrats (as governess), manipulatively gaining their trust, and figuratively contradicting the bourgeois ideal by negating all family value and using the domestic sphere as ground for her seductions.

After detailing Becky's seductions it comes as no surprise that Becky finally seduced her way into a marriage proposal she deemed worthy and accepted. Not anticipating a marriage proposal by the Baronet Sir Pitt who welcomed her into his home as a governess after her failed intentions with Jos, she had already (unknown to him) become his daughter-in-law by secretly marrying his son Captain Rawdon. Searching for economic security Becky marries Rawdon (he being an actual aristocrat, son of a nobleman, a military officer, and the favorite of his extremely

---

<sup>7</sup>The publication of *Vanity Fair* coincides with the establishment of the Governess' Benevolent Institution, which afforded temporary assistance to governesses in distress by granting them annuities and lodging; and the founding of Queen's College, which was the first place of higher education for women. (*The Charities of London* by Samuel Low, Jun., London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, Milton House, Ludgate Hill. 1861.)

wealthy unmarried aunt); yet unfortunately for her after measuring her new husband's assets opposite Sir Pitt's fortune she decides Sir Pitt would have been a more lucrative option. Becky being "a young lady of too much resolution and energy of character to permit herself much useless and unseemly sorrow for the irrevocable past; having devoted only the proper portion of regret [for her rushed marriage], she wisely turned her whole attention towards the future, which was now vastly more important to her" (Thackeray 187); thus as a *femme fatale* she creates new opportunities for herself through her new victim and husband, Rawdon Crawley.

Rawdon is quite the counterpoint of Jos and especially George's characters and motivations for he did not pretend to be anything but himself; their differences again implying the need for Becky to adapt herself and her strategies to Rawdon's character. In her letter to Amelia, Becky initially describes Rawdon as a large dandy, who despite his unruly behavior of cursing, drinking, dueling, and gambling makes his presence, generosity, and authority known, (this of course immediately attracting Becky who was ever watchful for new profitable conquests). She was developing a close relationship with his aunt, Miss Crawley (who adored Rawdon and romanticized his rebelliousness) by keeping her company, amusing her, and making her laugh. Having "won the heart of that good-natured London rake" she was able to satisfy her curiosities about him in similar ways to her methods of acquiring information about Jos through his sister; and came to the welcomed confirmation that Rawdon was not in the least a clever lad thus facilitating Becky's maneuvers and his likelihood of falling for her innocent yet captivating disguise.

Since Rawdon did not have any immediate goals for his future, did not have pretences to abide by, and his wealth was thought to be secured, Becky's approach of seduction could not be limited to the fueling or attacking of male vanity. In contrast to her previous targets, Rawdon did

not have a care or superficial need to be accepted by society and chose to spend his time with disreputable company. Therefore she did not have to go so far as to pretend to be the idealized Victorian version of a lady; she only needed to be the woman Rawdon idealized. Rawdon considered Becky a “neat little filly,” admired her dancing and singing skills, and made no attempt to hide his interest in Becky for as he continuously sought opportunities to see Becky by visiting his sick aunt, “raved about her in uncouth convulsions” (164), “swore out loud that [she] was the best dancer” (122), had written her a number of notes, and he “distinguished her a great number of times, met her in a half-score of walks, [and] hung over her piano twenty times an evening as Miss Sharp sang (130).” He was readily attracted to Becky’s trope of a clever and talented governess, thus Becky’s seduction consisted in carefully presenting herself as a strong, dignified woman.

Becky’s character and spirit distinguished her from the other boring women Rawdon was used to being involved with. He openly declared his interest for Becky making these women look upon Becky with contempt. Becky secretly thrived in their jealousy that Rawdon had chosen her over them, thus kindling her own vanity and elevating Rawdon’s worth in her eyes; however she could not allow Rawdon to think himself at a vantage despite his flattering attentions towards her. She did this by for example (again) appearing unimpressed by him and throwing into the fire a note he furtively placed in her possession, claiming it was a “false note” which certainly mortified him while piquing his interest, and by seemingly innocently flirting with him when alone yet choosing to leave the scene at key moments, thus leaving an air of unfinished business between them. The way Becky disengaged George’s patronizing airs enraged George and shamefully made him flee to prevent further humiliation while Rawdon discreetly observed (and enjoyed), heightened his admiration for her. So did her “impassioned” defense of herself against

any misconception Rawdon might have of her because of her position or heritage, as she exclaimed: “Do you suppose I have no feeling of self-respect because I am poor and friendless?... Do you think because I am a governess I have not as much sense, and feeling and good breeding as you gentlefolks in Hampshire? I’m a Montmorency. Do you suppose a Montmorency is not as good as a Crawley?” (Thackeray 166). The latter was performed exquisitely by Rebecca as she maintained her dignity while simultaneously victimizing herself with a burst of tears after the following expression, “I can endure poverty, but not shame – neglect but not insult; and insult from – from *you*.” Having provoked such an agitation in Miss Sharp, Rawdon felt as culpable as he felt sympathetic, and his admiration for her transitioned into warm affection, in wanting to please and take care of her in any way possible. Thus Becky’s seduction is complete, finally leading to what she has been aspiring to all along.

Without a detailed description of this important event in Becky’s long term goals (besides that of Rawdon’s enchantment with Rebecca and his complete compliance in the matter), she and Rawdon eloped. If marriages are based upon false appearances, where a man chooses a woman according to what society thinks of her and a woman acts accordingly to be accepted, then ultimately neither men nor women can be trusted as they are both motivated by self-interest; thus marriage is represented by Thackeray as a fraud committed and suffered by both genders. Jadwin suggests that *Vanity Fair* “conflates social ... mobility and formal mimesis by attacking the related monological myths of marriage” (671). The ideal bourgeois marriage depicted in a picture frame would showcase the honorable man and the woman as a wife and mother, evident because she is with her husband and children, thus representing the social role of this woman according to her relations with men. Therefore Becky should not be framed in this ideal picture; however in the picture she will be found thus exposing the relativism of patriarchal codes and

medical science as they continuously collaborate in maintaining hegemonic morality by using their authority, power, and influence, thus straining notions of reality by defying the reliability of appearances.

Rawdon in all his unlikelihood was the most suitable candidate for Becky despite the initial pecuniary disappointment, and their marriage, like that of many of the others in the novel, is a presentation of the institution's superficiality, as neither bride nor groom are what they appear to be. Becky pines for something other than romantic love; she longs instead for an escape from these ideals, "seeking fulfillment not in the constancy of marriage but in the haphazard thrill of venturing beyond the Romantic ideals she so adeptly manipulates" (Braun 60). Considering her previous bachelors, Rawdon's character afforded her with an ally for the 'thrills' she sought. Had she married Jos or accepted Sir Pitt's proposal, and had fortune been bestowed upon her feet, her adventurous spirit would have quickly become bored with the monotonous role of a dutiful wife to a respected gentleman. Rawdon's status provided Becky with necessary influential exposure into upper class circles, and luckily for her he had dubious moral standards, as he had been expelled from college, perfected his game and gambling skills to cheat George (and others) to bankruptcy, was inclined to violence, enjoyed and was proud of Becky's success in manipulating society for their mutual benefit (which facilitated Becky's manipulation of him as well since his loose standards allowed him to follow any of Becky's questionable demands), and abused his military title and family name or abused his aunt's trust if need be to avoid paying his dues. Furthermore, the 'misfortune' of Rawdon's loss of Miss Crawley's financial aid simply provided Becky with constant opportunities for scheming which were highlights for her life's motivations.

*Femmes fatales* typically exploit marriage by satirizing common gender conventions which Becky also does by being neither a dutiful wife (although she appeared to be, never allowing Rawdon to perceive her true opinions of him) nor a devoted mother (which she never tried to be or even pretend to for that matter), consequently emasculating Rawdon by inverting their domestic roles. Throughout the development of Rawdon's relationship with Becky, his notable free spirited traits (which were most likely what made him so popular amongst the ladies whether for better or for worse) mellowed down to genuine intentions of wanting to be (and actually becoming) a good husband and a good father; priorities supposed to be held by women. Rawdon adored his wife endlessly, blindly trusting her, admiring everything about her and flaunting her at parties, thriving in the attention she received from the other gentlemen, following her malicious advice, doing as she requested, becoming her pawn, worrying about her future and taking measures to secure her wellbeing when he was not there to provide for her (for example when he was called to battle he leaves all his possessions from his last horse to his most expensive military uniform, and sum of their worth to provide for Becky in case of his death), and giving her opportunities to prove her worth and 'honor' to him. Furthermore, he was similarly devoted to his son and felt paternal pride, dedicated time to play with him, listen to his stories, went on walks together, defended and spoiled him; in sum dedicating Rawdy the time his mother never did, and fomenting a nurturing relationship between father and son. Rawdon's radical change of character was attributed to his "admiration, the delight, the passion, the wonder, the unbound confidence, and frantic adoration with which, by degrees, this big warrior got to regard the little Rebecca" (190). In other words this change within him was inspired by his love for Becky (which puts him at an initial disadvantage); love being another factor meant to be meaningful for a woman, yet was not at all for Becky (who only married Rawdon in hopes of

his aunt's money). Ironically, Becky ended up having to prove herself capable of fulfilling society's standards of women's roles (a preoccupation she did not have to take into consideration during the seductions of her husband) due to the fact that Rawdon became what she made of him as well, a husband and a father. Thus the standard ideologies of masculinity are being challenged by the way Rawdon becomes successfully domesticated while Becky does not.

The more Becky perfected her feminized disguise the more Rawdon's masculinity suffered since he was being made a fool by her falsity. Rawdon "converted himself into a very happy and submissive married man" (208) yet the apparent success of the former specified was devoid of any true meaning, because the happiness Rawdon strove for was absolutely false. However genuine and enriching Rawdon thought Becky and his marriage really were, were not due to the fact that all of Becky's actions had further purposes beyond their apparent simplicity. She pretended to be a dutiful wife by her many apparent considerate actions in the domestic realm; for example she:

Listened with indefatigable complacency to his stories of the stable and the mess; laughed at all his jokes; felt the greatest interest in [his acquaintances]; was alert and happy [when he came home], played and sang for him; made him good drinks, superintended his dinner, warmed his slippers, and steeped his soul in comfort. (208)

The sweet disposition of this façade for her unsuspecting husband was purely false yet necessary; maintained for the sake of his happiness and the marriage's survival. Furthermore, the fact that she had his child was also necessary to maintain the appearance of a dutiful wife that corresponded to society's expectations of what a marriage should be. (In other words, if the need to create a family after marriage was not essential she would have never reproduced.)



Becky was manipulative and thus ab/used her role of wife (and mother) to profit in selfish goals. While Amelia's heart was breaking as her husband departed for the war, Rebecca's heart's distress was "what a fright" she must seem, quickly changing her attire and contemplating how pale the color pink makes her look. Captain Crawley's own heart was silently aching as he left, and no sooner was he gone when Becky's predatory instincts awakened again choosing an already familiar victim. Once again, Jos serves as another opportunity for Becky to save herself from potential ruin and is easily ensnared by Becky's tactic of heightening his vanity by portraying Jos as the source of Rawdon's extreme jealousy and playing the victimizing of her husband's supposedly oppressive nature. As she psychologically fuels his ego with her words, she reassures him with "tender glances of the eyes," while reflecting "if the worst comes to the worst my retreat is secure, and I have a right-hand seat in the barouche" (381). Not lamenting her husband's absence or his potential death at war for a single moment is a clear example of the lack of commitment to her husband, especially when contrasted to Amelia's obsessive devotion to hers.

Whatever unknown scheme Becky was crafting to secure her wellbeing is altered because Rawdon came back alive and well, therefore the masquerade of good wife must continue. However she was quite the contrary to Rawdon's ideal and used her role from being a mere governess to that of a married woman with considerable status and popularity to continue her mission to claim "her place in society." With the acquired title she gained access to a new circle of acquaintances; a new circle of *wealthy* acquaintances composed mostly of bored superficial men who were either single or unhappily married. Even if Rawdon thought their parties were meant for him to win his way for their economic profit, she was really amusing herself with

numberless flirtations and receiving gifts while keeping Rawdon content under her new role as wife.

Rawdon was ironically aware of Becky's falsity yet never suspected to be her victim because of Becky's perfected disguise of social conventions which misled his interpretation of their intimacy. Adding to this the narrator points out, "If people only made prudent marriages, what a stop to the population there would be!" (189). Becky suspended Rawdon in a fantasized (domestic) realm of happiness molded to his own psychological needs (similar to other *femmes fatales* such as Keats' "Lamia" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"). Rawdon clearly had a sour relationship with his father and elder brother, Pitt Crawley, and felt a rivalry with both that revolved around concepts of demonstrated masculinity. Therefore the typical idealized Victorian familial conventions in which prosperity symbolized happiness and wealth symbolized virtue were something he never had thus creating within him repressed desires to seek validation through his own family (Becky and Rawdy). Sir Pitt Crawley was viewed with "hearty contempt" for trying to make a "man" out of his son. In fact their rivalry even extended to which bachelor would succeed in having Becky as their wife; whereas his sibling rivalry was rooted in his unequaled academic and professional success and gaining Miss Crawley's favor and inheritance (all in Pitt's favor), who "sent him to Cambridge (in opposition to his brother at Oxford), and, when the young man was requested by the authorities of the first-named University to quit after a residence of two years, she bought him his commission in the Life Guards Green" (112). Rawdon had an incomplete sense of identity, being neither a good son nor brother, nor nephew for that matter. Imposed gender roles were meant to dictate the way a person thought and should behave, therefore the conception and acceptance of it is necessary within an individual for the construction of their identity. The above listed roles are gender related and

their lack of fulfillment therefore put his masculinity into question. The success of his marriage and parenting become an opportunity to redeem his previous failures and is subsequently attributed with personal significance.

Marriage was one of Rawdon's "honestest actions" of his life, but, as demonstrated, meant nothing to Becky. Nead concludes that "marriage and motherhood are thus defined as both social and medical norms. Deviations from these norms result in disease and in this way social deviancy for women is also defined as medical abnormality" (26). Becky "had never mingled in the society of women" and therefore did not have the typical 'feminine instinct' and "had no soft maternal heart" that women were expected to feel to fulfill their designated duties. Similar to the emerging feminists, her drive was personal ambition and self-fulfillment rather than self-sacrifice, thus she negated traditional family values and medical assumptions by exerting her sexuality in self-expression. Weeks claims that sex is "the essence of our individual being that asserts itself against the demands of culture" (12). The difference between the sexual drives of these types of females depends on the nature of their situation (or station) and the results of their confrontation with patriarchal tradition, which consequently influence their ambitions. Opposing ideals and confrontations concerning marriage and motherhood were received with condemnation by society's influential power structures (i.e.: politicians, doctors, and journalists). Marriage would only be an option if they had already achieved economic independence as it would "render [the marriage] a relation solely of mutual sympathy and affection" (50) because of the lack of "economic supremacy of the man" (Showalter 46). Meanwhile, Becky had a private feud with bourgeois society which ironically accepted her with open arms since she was manifested within the domestic realm; therefore she offers an alternative use for domesticity other than that of genuinely wanting to start a family and fulfill its corresponding roles. Braun

has claimed that since “domesticity no longer offered a haven from aggressive commerce, the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* posed additional threats to masculine power and the social acceptance of gendered spheres of market and home” (53). Therefore the hopes for marriage for a *femme fatale* depended on the exact opposite of feminist ideals, for there was no mutual sympathy or similar economic position but rather a desire and drive for autonomous progress as clearly seen in Becky and at whatever cost.

When returning to a typical family portrait, in the background behind the married couple and child is the British landscape. Therefore within this metaphoric garden, Rawdon’s love for Becky is the root of his own, voluntary downfall, while gender ideologies symbolize the soil within the toxic Victorian environment. (In other words gender ideologies, which are shaped by society, determine the development of Rawdon’s identity and that of his love for Becky.) Becky, never truly loving Rawdon, prevents the plant from blossoming, thus in a more literal manner, does not allow Rawdon to fulfill the gaps within his identity to complete his social roles.

Elizabeth and Edmond Wright describe a man’s love for a woman as a “thoroughly narcissistic phenomenon: in his love for a woman, man loves only himself, his own ideal image ... So he projects, transfers, it on to another, on to the idealized woman” (Žižek et al. 131). Rawdon’s illusion of Becky was but a projection of what he desired for himself, thus his marriage united him to his ideal, becoming “Mrs. Crawley’s husband.” Rawdon clung to Becky’s idealization thus appropriating masochistic tendencies for the fulfillment of his sense of identity. For example, he first chose to ignore any indication or suggestion of Becky’s faults, malicious nature, or questionable reputation either by denial of the implication of her actions therefore being made a fool (for she liked him all the better for being one) or by devaluing his own sense of worth by constantly saying how much more clever she is or not questioning her motives, etc.;

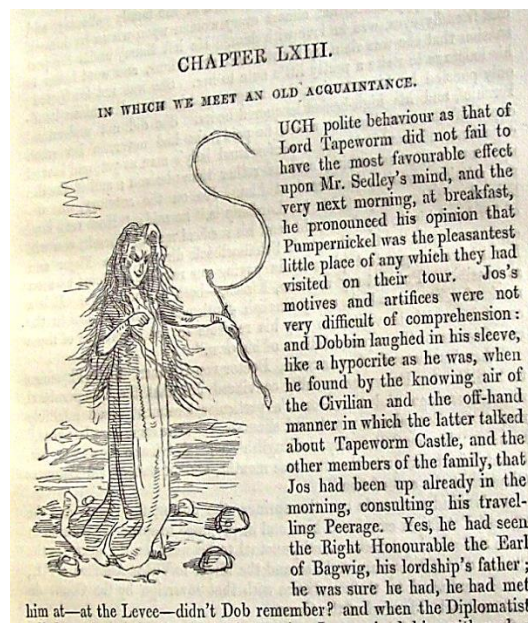
second he allowed Becky to dictate his life, his actions, even his way of thinking, despite the pains and disappointments her choices inflicted on him. For example, “he felt somehow ashamed of [his] paternal softness, and hid it from his wife” (278), who lacked maternal instincts; and his gradual loss of dignity as he was only being used by Becky: “he went on her errands: obeyed her orders without question: drove in the carriage in the ring with her without repining; took her to the opera-box; solaced himself at his club during the performance, and came punctually back to fetch her when due” (278). Furthermore, the gender ideologies of domestic roles became inverted as he tended to her rather than the usual other way around. However his de/illusion finally comes to its end when Rawdon comes to the tragic recognition of his wife’s falsity by seeing with his own eyes another side of Becky’s multi-faceted character.

Rawdon writes to his wife in need of money to bail him out of debtor’s prison. Of course he wrote to his wife first despite having other alternatives to resort to; however Becky chose to answer very late in the evening claiming sickness and therefore he had to depend on another woman who was not his wife but in fact his brother’s (Lady Jane), who in fact immediately assisted him. Despite all their hardships, Rawdon loved Becky for the happiness she bestowed on him. She helped him complete his life goals and he became the man he never knew he wanted to be. He saw Becky as his wife in unconventional equal admiration (rather than imposing sexist attitudes over Becky, Rawdon on the contrary readily recognizes his wife’s superiority), built on supposed trust and companionship to keep each other satisfied. He could have forgiven her many indiscretions as a wife and mother as long as mutual respect was an element within their marriage. Walking in on his wife looking as radiant as the jewels she was wearing, alone in a room with Lord Steyne, his patron, bending over her, was the confirmation Rawdon needed to realize their feelings were not mutual despite Becky’s pleas of innocence. In contrast to

Rawdon's generosity, Becky's coldness to human feelings such as compassion or gratitude is exemplified by her hiding money and jewels from Rawdon when he needed her aid the most. Further exposing Becky's heartlessness was her disregard as wife to Rawdon, preferring to leave him in a prison house to privately entertain Lord Steyne (most likely for other purposes of seduction to continue elevating her social ranking or personal wealth) despite knowing his state of discomfort while imprisoned. Whether Becky was guilty of committing adultery or not is left to speculation as the narrator himself asks "what *had* happened?" However she was undoubtedly guilty of Rawdon's simple accusation: "You might have spared me £100 Becky, I have always shared with you" (677). The possible adultery was not as big of a shock as her refusal to stand by him when he was locked up and the keeping of large sums of money a secret from him. Furthermore the implication of these actions revealed that Becky was not his soul mate, and this realization is what destroys Rawdon. Rather than a husband to Becky, Rawdon was "her upper servant and *maître d'hôtel*." Characteristic in *femme fatale* narratives (again similar to "Lamia" for example), Becky's charade is uncovered and through it Rawdon's (and her eventual) downfall as well. Rawdon was already emotionally tainted by the wounds of his relationship with father and brother, and was unsuccessful in achieving domestic glory through his marriage which was shattered unexpectedly; therefore his downfall was completely psychological. He is heart-broken, left alone, and ultimately dies a failure because despite his efforts, Becky never allowed him to fulfill his goals and/or maturity.

Thus Becky went from living a life of acquired luxury because of her strategic manipulations to being rejected by society and forced to retreat into a Bohemian lifestyle of self-neglect and desperate submission to circumstances that led to her wandering all over Europe to survive. It is important to note chapter LXIII's pictorial capital [Figure 6] which is the image of

a bare footed mad looking woman with long flowing hair and malicious features walking amongst rocks. Joan Stevens describes the narrative function of the pictorial capitals in particular as predictive, "foreshadowing events, offering generalized comment on the action, embodying by means of a traditional reference the basic moral implications of what lies ahead, or, at a shallower level, adding a simple visual dimension to forthcoming words" ("Thackeray's Pictorial Capitals," 116).<sup>8</sup>



[Figure 6]

It is no coincidence that the pictorial capital of this chapter metaphorically illustrates its protagonist as a “fiendish” entity in comparison to the other ladies illustrated in the same chapter and that she is representing the “S” (for siren) with what appears to be a staff or an instrument of sorcery entwined by a Snake (for sin) and yet another Snake forming the capital “S.” It is precisely in this chapter, entitled “In which we meet an old acquaintance,” that Becky is

<sup>8</sup>As quoted by Judith L. Fisher in her article “Image versus Text in the Illustrated Novels of William Makepeace Thackeray” (66) from the book *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*.

reintroduced to the plot of the novel after being absent for several chapters. Without a detailed account of Becky's hardships the narrator sums up her degradation by saying, "The actions of very vain, heartless, pleasure-seeking people are often improper; and what are those of a woman without faith--or love--or character?" (Thackeray 813). In other words the narrator confirms her lack of humanity with another metaphoric comparison between Becky and sirens, who appear "pretty enough ... [yet are but] fiendish marine cannibals, reveling and feasting on their wicked pickled victims" (813). Even though the Bohemian life suited her, and was a lifestyle she liked Becky was ever watchful for opportunities to reestablish her financial and social status, thus it does not come as a surprise that as fate would have it Jos crosses her path in order to save her from her predicament.

Although many years have passed since the first time they met, Jos and Becky remain predictable. Jos is still easily manipulated by the same strategies he has fallen for again and again, and despite her many hardships Becky is no less malicious or conniving nor has her greed for money changed. With an impassioned and not at all accurate version of Becky's character and difficult times, with some sobs, false tears, and flattery, "Jos went away convinced that she was the most virtuous, as she was the most fascinating of women, and revolving in his mind all sorts of benevolent schemes for her welfare" (Thackeray 834) and within a week he became her "sworn slave and frantic admirer." Becky and Jos became inseparable, going everywhere and doing everything together while Becky perfected her performances to stay in his and Amelia's good graces as well, so as to not arouse suspicion of her final and most fatal scheme. Jos was desperately infatuated with her, yet no matter how delusional he was he was equally terrified of Becky despite his defense of her innocence, which might strike the reader as quite odd. Also odd was Jos' sudden decline in health (which of course Becky tended to faithfully) as well as his



sudden and generous life insurance (which of course fitted Becky's best interest). Lacking the courage to abandon Becky despite his family's wishes, Jos only lasted three more months before he died. The chain of events was quite mysterious and was declared as "the blackest case" the Insurance Company ever witnessed, yet was convenient for only one person. Marriage was no longer an option for Becky to regain the prosperity and wealth she once had, besides the fact that she was already married she would never have been able endure being Jos' wife for long. However, she could bear being the 'administratrix' of his life insurance, especially since his infirmities were (coincidentally) increasing. After Jos' death Becky became the sole benefactress of his life insurance as Colonel Dobbin (Amelia's long-time admirer and now husband) rejected his share of the legacy, leading to much speculation of Becky's involvement with the case and little evidence to prove anything against her. Although the whole matter is carelessly given by the narrator with again few, if any, details of it, the corresponding illustration reveals more than the narration. The illustration titled, "Becky's Second Appearance in the Character of Clytemnestra" [Figure 7] represents Jos' pathetic pleas to Dobbin for aid in his distress, his fear if Becky were to find out, and his acknowledgement of the terrible deeds Becky is capable of doing while simultaneously defending and praising her. What is most significant of this illustration is the image of Becky lurking in the darkness hiding behind the curtain, unperceived by the men yet well aware of Jos' intentions, with her infamous calculated malevolent grin holding an indistinguishable (yet likely deadly) object in her hand close to her bosom. If the text does nothing to imply Becky is guilty of murder, this illustration suggests otherwise, as does the title of the illustration, referring to a well-known *femme fatale* who was indeed a murderer.<sup>9</sup> Personifying evil in both text and image Becky gradually develops into the archetypal

---

<sup>9</sup>Sister of Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra was the wife of King Agamemnon, stabbing him to death upon his return from the Trojan War in order to take control of Mycenae with her lover.

*femme fatale* figure that disrupts conventional notions of gender image and behavior. Victorian ideology implies that a woman can only gain agency through marriage and later maternity giving her a certain social purpose.



[Figure 7 Becky's Second Appearance in the Character of Clytemnestra]]

However, like the *femme fatale*, Becky gains agency by threatening male dominance once becoming the object of their sexual desire. As Arnold Kettle determines of Becky, “She will not submit to perpetual slavery and humiliation within the governess trade. And so she uses consciously and systematically all the men’s weapons plus her one natural material asset, her sex, to storm the men’s world” (20). The three male characters discussed thus far involuntarily come across Becky’s path yet voluntarily choose to remain entangled in her web of lies (at least until deception or death reroute their fates). Despite their differences in social rank and

psychological afflictions (such as narcissism, self-consciousness, delusions, masochism, etc.) they all similarly allow Becky to become the factor that dictates their fatal fate because of their weakness for her sexual seductions. Foucault explains that the Victorians fanatically debated the issue of sexuality and use the codification of sexual behavior as a strategy by which to exercise power in society. To maintain order, the codification of sexuality seemed a likely solution to reinforce social roles and prohibitions against rebellious, discontented bourgeois women. Becky is an unmistakable individual, yet she is every woman of spirit rebelling against the humiliations forced on her by certain social assumptions (Kettle 25). However sexual tension is inevitably present between the sexually repressed male protagonists and the sexually experienced *femme fatale*, and is often threatening to the male protagonists who lack knowledge about the power of erotic desire. In the blind pursuit of their ideal in Becky, she gains control over their lives since their every thought, motive, and action revolved around their conquest of her.

The reason for the excessive hypocrisy within Victorian society was the imposed need for an individual to fulfill the expected roles in order to be accepted and belong to a particular social group. This led to a dependence on appearances for the determination of a person's identity, and every character in the novel can exemplify why this was not only absurd, but unreliable as well, as an image and its corresponding behavior can easily be imitated. Becky sees the actual standards by which Victorian society lives in contrast to the standards by which this society professes to live; thus she is able to judge as well as exploit it in her own terms. Žižek argues that "the male dread of woman thus reveals itself as the dread of feminine inconsistency ... [which] confronted them with an inconsistent multitude of masks" (Žižek et al. 139). Constantly observing the society she is settled in, a *femme fatale* recognizes how the weaknesses of an individual reflect the weaknesses of the mechanisms of society. Therefore Becky detects vanity

as the said weakness of Victorian men and women, where the fundamental laws of money and class become the source of this society's personal weaknesses. Vanity, whether manifested through narcissism, or through masochistic pleasures, is a motivating force for all the characters in the novel. However, neither Rawdon, George, nor Jos can endure the societal pressures that correspond to their gender, social class, or mandates of Victorian social institutions, especially when confronted by the *femme fatale* who exploits these ideologies. The decisions that were made by them prompted by vanity (and/or Becky's) sake eventually led to their ruin. Becky manipulates their vanity by simultaneously manipulating her image, using the corresponding implications of psychological traumas or delusions of each, which she combines with physical and emotional seductions, not only to succeed in her personal goals but to destroy her victims (socially or literally) as well.

This chapter has analyzed the behavior of Becky as a *femme fatale*, the effects she has on the people that surround her, and the implication of the illustrations to her role as *femme fatale*. There are questions that arise when considering the *femme fatale* figure as a signifier of societal hardships and anxieties, especially the hardships experienced by fictional dominant male figures ruled by precarious circumstances that jeopardize their authority and power. The question that needs to be addressed is the following: what kind of power and authority is being jeopardized, by whom and how? The importance of maintaining appearances, or furthermore and the need to live up to social (particularly gender and class) expectations are what Becky attacks by proving the inadequacies of these expectations and society. This attack on gender inequality and supposed male superiority is one shared by feminists and *femmes fatales*. What drastically differentiates the attacks on the gender-biased ideologies between these figures is the motive behind these signs of rebellion and their way of demonstrating her indifference toward the dominant

bourgeois ideology. The *femme fatale* does so by treating social codes, domestic ideals, and respectable manners as role-playing devices that allow *her* greater power within the class system, while the feminist chooses to avoid the domestic atmosphere that would impose patriarchal social codes by pursuing alternative yet genuine lifestyles for self-betterment. Furthermore, any success a feminist figure acquires is due to her inexhaustible efforts to advocate positive changes for society and women in general, whereas the *femme fatale* meets her needs at the expense of other characters as made clear by the outcome of Joseph Sedley, George Osborne, and Rawdon Crawley.

The hegemonic power structures that once held little Becky captive now aid her quest for social mobility. The inability of these male characters to overcome, or in some cases even recognize, the challenges she imposed on their social roles demonstrates their loss of power. Becky can hardly be portrayed as a victim of the oppressive Victorian society, as society in turn becomes victimized by her. She plays with her victims for personal gain, using them and eventually discarding them. Through their emasculation Becky provokes their degradation in society and the eventual life's ruin of all three men.<sup>10</sup> Becky has made it evident that nothing can detain her ambitions, neither the implications of adultery, nor rumors of her murderous schemes or being abandoned by her husband nor even becoming a mother. Therefore the morally suspect actions dictating her character and the fact that she is never held responsible for any of her wrongdoings proves the extent of her fatality, making Miss Rebecca Sharp unmistakably a *femme fatale* surviving within a corrupt society.

---

<sup>10</sup> She provokes their life's ruin literally and indirectly. George's social life was already affected before his actual death as Becky had metaphorically ruined his reputation, exposing its previous dignity. She also metaphorically ruined Rawdon's by deflating his life ambitions. Because of her he was given a posting that was little more than an exile as Governor of Coventry Island, where he eventually died.

## Chapter IV: A Different Kind of Monster: Carmilla

The previous chapter demonstrated Becky Sharp as an unperceived *femme fatale* lurking within the domestic sphere she satirizes raising havoc, problems, and misfortune upon those whom she encountered. Thackeray adapts the siren from Greek mythology to refer to Becky with, as both appear “pretty enough ... [yet] when they sink into their native element [they] are but no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, reveling and feasting on their wicked pickled victims” (813). The graphic description of these beautiful but dangerous creatures<sup>11</sup> is a quite appropriate comparison to Becky despite her human condition. Barbara Creed begins her article “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection” with the following argument: “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject... [Most frequently when] constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogentric ideology ... related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration” (67). Therefore the ‘monstrous-feminine’ becomes feared by patriarchs because the origin of her monstrosity cannot be distinguished between the nature of her feminine being or from circumstances that require (re)actions considered behaviorally questionable due to her feminine body; can femininity and monstrosity be differentiated or are they one and the same? Becky Sharp disrupts social gender conventions yet to consider her a monstrous feminine would be based on her monstrous actions, making the allusion a metaphoric example of feminine monstrosity.

A mere two and a half decades after the publication of *Vanity Fair*, Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” was published in 1872 in the British monthly, literary and artistic magazine *The Dark*

---

<sup>11</sup> According to Greek mythology, the sirens were cursed feminine beings who lured sailors to their doom by their seductive melodies with the purpose of having them drowned by shipwreck to feed on them.

*Blue*. The magazine, originated in Oxford by John Christian Freun, had a varied public of readers, ranging from conservatives to admirers of aesthetic decadence of daring sexuality, and an audience that was not limited to male readership. Freun expressed the magazine's mandate as a necessary component to promote diversity of thought as well as to unite the fragmented society in his speech on the journal's anniversary:

Common sense seemed to indicate that a periodical that would appeal to the whole English-speaking public, and hence influence their mode of thought, must naturally admit of a certain amount of discussion, or even diversity of opinion, in its pages. . . . Should, therefore, the editor receive on questions of the day, or even on literary topics, articles of value in themselves, it is but common honesty to admit them to a place by the side of articles contributed by members of the University, who were giving the general tone to the publication. (iv)

The magazine was affiliated with various movements during its publication including Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Pre-Raphaelitism. Thus similar to the subjectivity of the construction of fear was the subjectivity of the experience of art, and the acceptance of this subjective experience was trying to be promoted by the magazine. This vision notably aids in Le Fanu's adaptation of representing the monstrous-feminine in a literal sense by linking his *femme fatale* to the vampire motif. Jerrold E. Hogle describes vampire fiction as literature that "helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural throughout the history of Western culture" (4). Both *femme fatale* and vampire themes persist in British culture, throughout the nineteenth century from medieval fantasy and Romantic adaptations in the beginning of the century towards more sexually aggressive ones by mid-to late century. The progressive changes of the images bear great significance in relation to the cultural changes of the period. Analyzing artistic and literary trends that were linked to the historical position of

women at the time, Carol A. Senf points out that the “growing awareness of women’s power and influence may explain the increasing popularity of fatal women [as] feminists began to petition for additional rights for women. Concerned with women’s power and influence, writers ... responded by creating powerful women characters, the vampire being one of the most powerful negative images” (154). Within the debates about the social position of women was exposing myths of female sexuality within domestic ideologies. Therefore, the publication of the magazine secured a circulation of different ideas about concepts of female nature/desire which were being explored by writers and artists.

Another cultural change as Kathleen Costello-Sullivan adds, was that the Victorian foundation was crumbling and the popularity of the vampire in Gothic literature signaled the “Victorian uncertainty” (xviii) regarding the patriarchal society that had built itself upon the Church and then abandoned the Church for science and reason. However, ‘science and reason’ were also susceptible to patriarchal control. Victorian society was plagued with sexuality as a social concern, especially with the emergence of sexual categorizations including masculinity and femininity and social definitions such as homosexuality. The anxiety associated with the concept of sexuality provoked by an unstable social climate that was manifest within the Victorians’ ideologies of conduct, exercised by the rules and stereotypes that dictated their behavior, and fueled by the influence of patriarchal structures and social systems. An individual’s sexuality evolved into a social and moral marker indicating whether he or she is acceptable (or normal) in society or not. In fact as Jeffrey Weeks has shown, not only was the word homosexuality first coined in 1869 (21), among other sexual identity categorizations that designated sexual behavior began to pervade scientific discourse for example notions of virginity, enacting femininity and masculinity, etc. Therefore, because homosexuality and



lesbianism threatened the patriarchal cultural order (especially the Church) it was not only a forbidden form of sexual expression but subjected to extreme repression of articulation as well. However, using Gothic fiction as influential sources these taboo subjects could be discreetly explored by its re-adaptation. Senf indicates that LeFanu is “the first English writer to break away with the tradition of the literary vampire as a Byronic figure by creating a woman vampire.” She claims that in spite of “convincing arguments of Coleridge’s mysterious Geraldine may not be a vampire, and Keats’s Lamia and belle dame are not vampires in the strictest sense of the word either” (48). More specifically as Conrad Aquilina remarks, Lefanu’s concern was to revive the “taboo subject Coleridge used as a sub-text in ‘Christabel’ – the offense which Queen Victoria found unbelievable– female homosexuality” (6).

Le Fanu’s union of the *femme fatale* and vampire as one revolutionizes these images forever by enhancing/multiplying their metaphoric meaning (including queer sexuality), turning them into a fused archetypal figure. According to her studies on Carl Jung, Ann Belford Ulanov defines an archetype as “the symbolic function to mediate to consciousness the objective reality of the psyche that is not directly accessible to our sensory perception or to our logical reason” (46). Using these motifs as archetypes and motivated by the social changes, writers (including Thackeray and Le Fanu) were able to explore aspects of gender roles consequently exposing society’s well-hidden fear of (specifically) female sexuality. Using a figure pertaining to Gothic literature is fitting due to the broad psychoanalytical metaphors this literature explores which are the examples Angelica Michelis delineates in the following: “the return of the repressed, the unconscious, landscapes as dreamscapes, phallic symbolism, [and] the oedipal spectacle, to name but the most popular.” These psychological metaphors correlate to the creation of the subject, or more specifically to the sexual identity of a person. The impact provoked by a *femme fatale*

vampire led to increasing suspicion of female nature and behavior; thus reinforcing (and questioning) negative stereotypes about the links between female sexuality, evil, and power. Therefore through the allegories of vampirism and the supernatural, subversive social issues of Victorian society and Western culture (in this case specifically that of the unconscious fantasies and hidden desires manifested within lesbianism) are being explored without explicitly exposing them through an acceptable framework. In other words, lesbianism represented in a fictional realm rather than in scientific discourse made the deviant behavior of a female vampire solely preying on other females far more tolerable.

By altering the gender of the vampire from male to female, this folkloric creature becomes completely readapted while maintaining necessary characteristics of the tradition (for example, the inability to enter a household without being invited, exotic and isolated origins, supernatural abilities of changing form, among others). Ulanov explains that “the archetypal form is a potentiality for experiencing, representing, and reacting to the world. It is the preconditioning framework for any kind of psychic awareness” (48). Traditional vampire narratives tended to be limited to the inner thoughts and emotions of the victims rather than of the vampire themselves, making vampires void of any consciousness. Consequently, their mentality remains a mystery, making their emotional detachment and lack of psychological depth intriguing, as well as affording authors with the opportunity to use these undead “empty” creatures to make social statements by shaping their actions based on either creating social awareness of the unacceptable yet existing notions of lesbianism or at least to provoke for the Victorians the shocking experience of a horror story. *Carmilla* is a beautiful vampire who is driven by unconventional (queer) sexuality, and since she does not comply with cultural constructs of female behavior, she is considered a monstrous feminine that eventually must be

punished for her transgressions. (Women who did not accept society's social restrictions and rules, who were made into "monsters" by society). Furthermore, being a vampire makes her monstrous in nature as well, and at once her friendships resemble the deadly schemes of a predator hunting its prey thus making Carmilla a *femme fatale*. Despite this lethal aspect to her persona which is due to her vampiric nature, Carmilla becomes a complex being imitating humanity, which is precisely what complicates readers' perceptions of her. Although being driven by her need to survive and feed at any cost, can one be sympathetic with a being whose "affection" reaches levels of intensity that turn deadly? With a being who is, however, equally scandalizing because of her eccentric sexuality? Therefore within the conflicting and contradicting cultural ideologies, the *femme fatale* arose from the ongoing debates of the true nature of women and the ideologies that controlled their sexual lives.

Illustrating a vampire as a woman therefore represents a double threat, as she has different sources of power; that of the supernatural and that of femininity (the latter being the more powerful of the two as even her supernatural abilities have limitations, while her empowerment attributed to femininity had none). According to Elizabeth Signorotti, the female body was demonized as it was "juxtaposed with notions of the perceived threat of vampirism ... However, the idea of female vampirism also came to be ... associatively linked with the [figurative] notion of moral contagion and especially with the 'contamination' of lesbianism." This chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways Carmilla transgresses cultural norms of sexuality and proper femininity due to her lesbian persona which had to be presented within the vampire trope and molded within the *femme fatale* type. By Victorian standards Carmilla is driven by desires of different sexual perversities including same-sex (lesbian) desire, pedophilic, and sadomasochistic tendencies. Her main objective was to claim a young woman for herself by developing an erotic

relationship in order to feed off her victim's blood (undetected). Carmilla reaches her objectives (although not limited to) by means of physical and psychological seduction using her femininity to enhance eroticism and her supernatural abilities which were conflated with lesbian queerness to aid her seductions. Thus her objectives led to the eventual death of her victims due to her vampiric necessities, consequently and unmistakably denoting her as a literal *femme fatale*. A successful seduction is the consummation of desire for both the seducer and the seduced; however what makes this a seduction is the need for one to be convinced and led by the other, even if it implies the consummation of the same desire. This puts into question what arouses female erotic desires and emphasizes its relation to (and alterations of) strategies of seduction since two women are embarking on a sexual relationship rather than following the traditional heterosexual paradigm. Furthermore, through these acts Carmilla is challenging not only patriarchal institutions and concepts of female sexuality, but stereotypes of female powerlessness and purity as well.

The construction of a powerful female was in turn a deconstruction of the male-female hierarchy through the employment of homoeroticism since the dominant sexual role of the male was shifted to not only a female, but a predatory female vampire, entailing aggressiveness outside the boundaries of traditional femininity. However, Carmilla does comply with the traditional physical requirements of femininity as she is a sensual, tender and affectionate woman with a voice credited with absolute sweetness. Being beautiful to behold she could just as easily seduce men; however she seduces women because she is attracted to them and they to her. Laura's immediate description of Carmilla was as "slender, and wonderfully graceful...her complexion was rich and brilliant; her features were small and beautifully formed; her eyes large, dark, and lustrous" (Fanu 88). She continues her praise of Carmilla's charms in a highly

detailed rendering of Carmilla's hair texture and color and how fond she was of playing with it and letting it loose upon her shoulders. The attraction may be seen as innocent but it could also be seen as part of a sexual gender formation that rivals the patriarchal power structure of the Victorian era. The role men play in a woman's sexuality was no longer an absolute necessity nor indisputable therefore attributing to women a new found source of eroticism. Tamar Heller elaborates that since "homoeroticism excludes men and eludes male control, to figure female sexuality as lesbianism underscores the threat that women's desire poses to male authority – a threat that would become increasingly pronounced as feminist agitation further politicized bonds between women" (79). Carmilla's transgressive powers allow her to gain control over Laura's physical self and her knowledge of passion, thus leaving men out of this intimate connection. Creed elaborates that the monstrous feminine is an example of Kristeva's term "abjection, that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' ... that which 'disturbs identity, system, order.... [consequently being constructed] as a source of horror [which] works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject" (68). This suggests the reason the construction of the monstrous feminine created panic within patriarchal societies, due to their fear of losing domination and relevance in a woman's life in order to reestablish the sense of patriarchal authority. Even more alarming was that the "definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection- particularly in relation to the following religious abominations: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest" (Creed 69). *Femme fatales* became the embodiment of cultural preoccupations and concerns; making the image subsequently reflected onto actual women who did not follow

culturally ideological demand, who therefore received similar hostile treatment and discouragement.

The fusion of homoeroticism and vampirism is essential in highlighting questions regarding femininity, making the seduction of the vampire's chosen innocent victims possible. For *femmes fatales* seduction is key to the success of their main objectives respectively, in this case simultaneously emphasizing the contrast between the lesbian vampire, which represents a dangerous sexual eccentricity and creates a challenge to patriarchal controls, to that of the beautiful but powerless victim who does act upon the expected social norms (or at least before the vampire's intervention). Carmilla chooses as her victims young women who are passive subjects of the patriarchal order. Readers learn from Laura's narration that she was a perfect candidate for Carmilla due to her isolation from society and lack of maternal figures and friendships. She lives in a schloss which she describes as picturesque yet a "very lonely place" within a thick layer of forest nearly twenty miles away from the nearest village overlooking "silent ruins." Laura's mother died in her infancy making her father her sole parent (whom Laura has strong admiration for yet had limited interaction with) and was therefore mostly taken care of and educated by a number of governesses whom she appreciated but had no genuine affection for. Nancy Chodorow asserts that "the care and socialization of girls by women ensures the production of feminine personalities founded on relation and connection, and with a comparatively secure sense of gender identity... [however] the separation from the mother, the breaking dependence, and the establishment and maintenance of a consistently individuated sense of self remain difficult psychological issues for women" (58). Influenced by the works of Louis Althusser, Jeffrey Weeks describes the family as "an ideological state apparatus [that] becomes the scene of the operation of ideological processes whereby the reproduction of existing

social relations of production is secured” (25). In other words indicating that the family and domestic sphere were the primary sites for socialization between children and adults, where children’s education is manipulated by the adults in order to “secure the maintenance of the existing social order economically, ideologically, and sexually” (Weeks 25) within patriarchy. Furthermore, despite having two or three female friends her own age who sometimes visited, she rightfully considered her life “a rather solitary one,” and thus accustomed herself to be “indisposed to talk [herself, making] the talk of others pleasant to [her] listless ears” (Le Fanu 79). Laura was alive without actually living, without any personal convictions or goals therefore becoming an easy prey for Carmilla, powerless to Carmilla’s mysteriousness and significantly susceptible to Carmilla’s psychological attacks. Culturally expected behavior cannot be simply taught. Having no maternal influence or identification to guide her, she lacks an accurate sense of self, and more specifically, lacks the internalization of gender codes meant to be passed down from women to women, generation to generation. Michelis postulates that because Carmilla “only feeds on women, her vampirism is played out on the feminine body whose intactness becomes corrupted in more than one sense; a process that seems to directly correlate to a weakening of the sense of subjectivity itself.” Therefore, Carmilla’s lesbian advancements become a threat to Laura’s underdeveloped heterosexual identity.

Lynda Nead has observed that Victorian women were held respectable when demonstrating “dependency, delicacy and fragility. Independence was [considered] unnatural, [as] it signified boldness and sexual deviancy” (28). Despite the fact that Laura embodies the idealized version of Victorian expectations of how a woman should behave (obedient, respectful, silent, etc.), it is evident that she is struggling to act according to society’s norms or to submit to her own personal curiosities and desires. The context of the novel’s publication was one charged

with social change influenced under feminist principles including the rise of the New Woman; who resisted being classified under domestic affiliations due to gender differences by setting her own goals and making her own decisions over their bodies. New Woman followers advocated greater rights and liberties for women in all areas of life, however many conservative males and females saw this as a threat to traditional societal order. As Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo points out, “while acknowledging male authority, women may direct it to their own interests, and in terms of actual choices and decisions, of who influences whom and how, the power exercised by women may have considerable and systematic effect” (21). This implies that women were not only openly defying domestic social demands but had the ability to undermine and manipulate the social system as well. These social changes marked a profound impact on the lives of women at the time, and especially to men who felt more threatened by the impact of these shifts.

Whether the existence of female sexual desire was acknowledged or not by distinguished medical professionals or social scientists of the century, the very notion of it dictated women’s behavior. Nead argues that medicine played a special role in the definition of deviant and perverse behavior because of its “authority as science and its connotations of truth and objectivity and it was from this particular position that medicine articulated the values and interests of hegemonic morality” (25). Thus medical discourse collaborated with respectable society’s attitudes reaffirming that the only acceptable manifestation of female sexual desire was to be confined within the realm of marriage and motives for procreation, and consequently further imposing the limitation of a woman’s sexual desire to heterosexuality.

Resistance to expectations of gender ideologies is evident by Carmilla’s solely pleasure-seeking lesbian sexuality and by Laura’s submission to her homoerotic desires despite being characterized as the female ideal of virtue. Judd Marmor defines heterosexuality “as a culturally



determined norm and not simply a biologically determined imperative” (14, 15). In other words, sexual orientation and subsequent desires are psychologically developed through interaction in a specific cultural environment and not determined by sexual organs. Laura being raised in solitude, seeing the same older people, confined in castles and forests with no opportunity for true personal or dynamic social development consequently led to her sexual deprivation and eventual repression at the peak of her sexual maturation (being eighteen years old at the time). On the other hand, according to one of Jung’s major attitudes towards homosexuality, it is “a result of psychological immaturity and consequently [is] abnormal and disturbed” (Hopcke 68). Jung elaborates that “female homosexuality is explained either in the same terms as male homosexuality, as a disturbed relationship to mother, or in primarily cultural terms, as a psychological response to changes in gender roles” (Hopcke 74). Adding to this psychoanalytic approach of the construction of identity is Michelis’ perspective that the “relationship with the (phallic) mother has to be repressed or sublimated and is thus re-defined as secondary in relation to the more relevant figure of the father and his function in relation to the construction of identity.” However, despite being subjected to the above listed, Laura has “unresolved dependence on the personal mother” which results in “a mother complex” (Hopcke 72, 69). Therefore both the theories of hetero- and homosexual identity development aid to confirm Laura’s own sexual identity and having knowledge of her mother complex aids in understanding the conflict of her situation. Laura is unconscious of her own personality and is suffering from the demanding cultural idealizations of her gender while adapting to new found feelings of sexual desires that are (finally) being acknowledged by another woman. Carmilla’s hyper-feminine sensuality triggers the homoerotic desires of her sexually curious and repressed victim, subsequently allowing Laura’s stalled “maturity” and personality to develop into having a

lesbian sexuality and therefore contradict that stability of social codes represented by the paternal figure. The transformation from a naïve innocent girl to a sexually conscious woman is briefly illustrated by Carmilla to Laura as “girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes” (Le Fanu 95).

Carmilla’s main objective was to claim a young woman for herself and feed off her blood until her victim would finally die of weakness and poor health. If Laura longs for a friend/companion, Carmilla longed just as much for a female companion/lover, from whom she can take the blood she needs to maintain her fatal destiny. Trapped in a state of isolation, both because of her desires and her undead existence, Carmilla must achieve what she wants cautiously, making friends through means of deception, changing her name in anagrams every place she goes (her other names being Millarca and Mircalla), and lurking in the night to find satisfaction. Her approach to Laura was not only theatrical but accurately pre-determined in a specific place and time. A violent carriage accident was elaborated where she strategically plays the role of the damsel in distress (pretending to be unconscious) in order to acquire sympathy from the spectators of the accident. Carmilla’s “mother,” was a fine looking woman with an air of elegance and consequence, who instantly provoked contradicting sensations within Laura of curiosity and distrust. Ignorant of Laura’s female intuitions and composed as ever in the face of such a calamity, her father is easily fooled by Carmilla’s mother’s dignified appearance and does not question the authenticity of the situation. Furthermore, acknowledging Laura’s state of loneliness her father readily consents to Laura’s absurd request to allow Carmilla, a complete stranger, to stay with them in order to give his Laura the “best consolation for her cruel misfortune” (Le Fanu 81): female companionship.

Regaining consciousness, Carmilla's first words were "where is mamma?" thus ensuring the appearance of an innocent and childish façade while conveniently yet discreetly securing Laura's father's custody of her, gaining Laura's sympathies, and the quick admiration of the governesses. The governesses took care of Carmilla for some time and raved about her beauty and charm in response to Laura's questions in reference to the new stranger in the house. However the truth of the matter was that Carmilla was a lingering mystery and that Laura's curiosities were never to be fully answered. Emphasizing the need for secrecy, Carmilla's mother's instructions to her (which were made known to Laura's father) were to remain silent about who they were, where they came from and where they are travelling to. These are all vital pieces of information for the consideration of allowing someone into a household, yet curiously nothing is questioned. The cultural concept of fragility and sensitivity as natural in a young woman distracts them from their suspicious and strange behavior and she is thus received like a princess into the luxuries and comforts of a royal castle.

Laura's intrigue to meet Carmilla could be considered normal for someone in her position. She herself exclaims, "I was delighted. I was longing to see and talk to her and only waiting till the doctor should give me leave. You, who live in towns, can have no idea how great an event the introduction of a new friend is, in such a solitude as surrounded us" (Le Fanu 84). She emphasizes her solitude as though to justify her curiosity, or as she terms it, justification for her *longings*. Having finally the opportunity to formally greet Carmilla she describes what she sees: "her slender pretty figure enveloped in the soft silk dressing-gown, embroidered with flowers, and lined with thick quilted silk" (Le Fanu 85). The image is one that praises Carmilla's femininity, from her figure to the delicacy of her floral garments. Upon noticing each other there is an indescribable mutual attraction, almost uncanny, that transcends an attraction based on

curiosity to that of an attraction deriving from an unspoken connection between them. As can be expected Carmilla makes the initial attempt to break the silence between them, knowing very well how to captivate Laura by striking up a conversation about their previous encounter twelve years earlier. The fact that Carmilla first introduces herself to Laura when Laura is a girl and crying because she has been left alone in the nursery suggests that Carmilla is an altogether different kind of *femme fatale*, not one who preys upon men to achieve her own aims but rather one whose very nature compels her to seek the embrace of young women; and then their blood. Furthermore, her *femme fatale* nature exposes the problems of distinguishing appearances from the “true” self of an individual, thus highlighting society’s flawed values. Thus the girls are presented in the lights of female bonding, sharing stories of similar memories and dreams, reassuring each other with soft smiles and glances, holding and pressing of their hands, and having similar blushes of excitement. Seemingly innocently enough, Carmilla hastily looks into Laura’s eyes, eager and stimulated, searching for opportunities to enhance her proximity to her. However Carmilla’s sensuous intensity rapidly ignites eroticism, an eroticism Laura is ignorant of yet unable to ignore.

Thus it becomes evident that being invited into Laura’s household for an extended period of time was a necessary precaution for Carmilla to complete her seduction of Laura by fortifying an intimacy between them. Carmilla had her own unique seductive qualities that kept Laura in a magnetic fascination despite the fact that Carmilla’s possessive demands and needs also made her feel uncomfortable. Laura admits, “I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I was conscious of love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (Le Fanu 90). However her indescribable attraction to this seductress as previously noted, was due to their blossoming intimacy, which was rooted in a

connection that not only occurred on a physical level, but also on an emotional one. Laura as narrator affords the reader with a firsthand perspective of the sensual closeness in the private relationship between a vampire and victim and between two women. Weeks indicates that lesbianism was considered a long-lived emotional tie between women, specifically focused on “cuddling, on physical warmth and comforting, of kissing and holding hands between female homosexuals, at the expense of exclusively sexual activity. Deep and passionate declarations of love [also] recur without any signs of sexual expression” (116). These forms of expression facilitate Laura’s discovery of her sexuality because she does not question the motives of the vampire’s instructions and manipulations. Hellen Bailie adds that “through this manifestation of guidance, the heroine realizes her own sexuality and sexual preferences,” which ultimately turn out to be for the same sex.

The transgressive sexuality of lesbian vampires embodies the male fear that women-bonding will exclude and threaten male supremacy as this depends on the subjugation of women. Women turning to each other for emotional and physical fulfillment, assuming the seduction role play and succeeding at it, would imply that women have the potential to overcome and abolish feelings of masculine domination in both the private and public sphere. These friendships implied male impotence and therefore provoked a reaction from the threatened men, as Bram Dijkstra indicates:

The nineteenth-century middle-class male’s rediscovery of feminine sexuality, as well as his discovery of the apparently fearful fact that women could actually ‘awaken’ sexual feelings in each other, was, to a large extent, a metaphoric expression of the nineteenth-century male’s unstated awareness that only by dividing women, by keeping them from working together, they could be kept in a state of economic and social submission. (68)

Carmilla may be seen as a threat to the patriarchal power structure of the Victorian Age because she represents the liberal spirit unleashed in the preceding Romantic Era and depicted in horrific terms by Mary Shelley. Carmilla is not only a seductress but also, evidently, a lesbian, whose sexuality is not anchored by any relationship to family or procreation but staked rather to pleasure, desire, sensual satisfaction, and emotional fulfillment. Dijkstra emphasizes that women who consorted with each other were thought by Victorians to initiate “the duplication of feminine characteristics which could take place among women friends based on their lack of individual differences” (67). Thus the perception of the existence of close friendships among women as an integral source for society’s humane development shifted to one of suspicion that would result in the mutual ambition for sexual liberation. Heller further describes these friendships as a source of anxiety in society due to the fear of the sexual implications that such friendships hinder the entry of a girl into the realm of heterosexuality (87). That Carmilla must lurk and practice subterfuge in order to achieve her aims therefore indicates the social mores of the time in which courtship played a defining role between men and women.

Laura and Carmilla clearly engage in an affair of the heart. However as Tammi Elise Thomas argues, “their affair of the body is never openly acknowledged as sexual. Although the text does not at any point name the physical contact that occurs between the two women as sexual, the narrative is nonetheless highly charged with both sexual desire and, significantly, sexual contact.” Thus with subtle references throughout the narrative an erotic and sensual tension slowly builds between the two characters, eventually altering Laura’s ability to reason.

Foucault explains the dynamics within eroticism with the following:

Truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and soul. (57)

Carmilla passionately declared and demonstrated her love and affection therefore awakening Laura's unspoken desires of unknown pleasures. Thus homoeroticism is represented in various and progressively altering ways, and in most cases enhanced by the lack of their desire's fulfillment or sexual expression/ experience. Their physical intimacy and emotional attachment transcend a "typical" homosocial friendship to a homoerotic relationship as can be observed by their behavior, body language, verbal interactions, and personal expressions. The following lengthy but necessary extract from the text demonstrates this in a number of ways.

She almost whispered "Are you glad I came?"  
"Delighted dear Carmilla," I answered.  
"And you ask for a picture you think like me, to hang in your room," she murmured with a sigh, as she drew her arm closer about my waist, and let her pretty head sink upon my shoulder. She kissed me silently.  
"I am sure, Carmilla, you have been in love; that there is at this moment, an affair of the heart going on."  
"I have been in love with no one, and never shall," she whispered, "unless it should be with you."  
How beautiful she looked in the moonlight. (Le Fanu 98)

Laura and Carmilla reveal codependence, an almost obsessive need to have each other close, showering caresses upon each other and reassuring the other of their affection. Carmilla readily admits she would fall in love with Laura as she kisses her, while Laura readily acknowledges Carmilla's romance and beauty. Despite Laura's lack of sexual experience she recognizes Carmilla's erotic nature by comparing her tendencies to her perception of masculine gallantry and what having a male lover would be like. Unable to resist Carmilla's adorations she feels

embarrassed, or as she describes the sensation, “hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses” (Le Fanu 90). The root of this embarrassment is that she is clearly pleased by the masculine ‘gallantry’ afforded to her by another woman, leading her to ignore society’s conventions of the typical courtship pattern of man courting woman to woman courting woman.

Unique about Carmilla is her method of seduction (and even that of her attacks) which is quite unlike other *femmes fatales*. She preys upon the lonely and isolated and enters their hearts through displays of tenderness, rather than preying on wealthy men through sexually provocative actions (like Becky Sharp). When she bites, she poisons, drawing life from her victims, in whose blood she sleeps inside her coffin yet they feel no immediate pain. Carmilla seduces Laura through affection and sensual caresses rather than through direct violence or force. Le Fanu depicts her in such a way that the guile she uses to manipulate her way into Laura’s life is not born of malice but rather in a stream of self-preservation. She has to feed to live, yet her nurturing, affectionate embraces are real, not affected. This is one perspective that certainly defends the character more than a Victorian reader would have likely done. Nonetheless, Carmilla as a *femme fatale* is not the same sort of seductress that the type usually conjures up because her object is not a man but a woman. Important to note is that because the object of seduction is a woman, thus the method of seduction is gentler, softer, more affectionate, more traditionally feminine--based more on compassion for the suffering of the lonely girl than on the consummation of forbidden pleasure that is usually associated with the *femme fatale* (as will be exemplified by Salomé in the following chapter). Carmilla to Laura is not a forbidden pleasure but rather a friend who brings with her a friendship enchanted by sex. She awakens in Laura such feelings that she has never experienced.



However, the homoeroticism between them is not limited to the physical gratification of their desires but also to the psychological aspect. As they spend more time together, the intensity of their affection increases to a desperate need to love each other, and an even more desperate need to have their love corresponded. Laura constantly implies her offense at Carmilla's secrecy, feeling that it was a barrier to the fulfillment of their devotion to each other. Furthermore this creates mental inflictions that are common symptoms of those suffering from unrequited love, as she begins to feel guilty for questioning Carmilla, begins to lower her perception of herself considering herself unfair, and searches for justifications for her actions (and Carmilla's) and thoughts that she cannot fully understand. Chodorow indicates that Western women express a kind of guilt which "seems to grow out of and to reflect lack of adequate self/other distinctions and a sense of inescapable embeddedness in relationships to others (58). Similarly Carmilla suffers from her inability to make Laura understand the nature of her love as made evident by her strange rambles of love, life, and death. The impossibility of fulfilling her emotional desires of making Laura hers forever because of Laura's human condition is also a source of suffering. She confesses, "I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; I cannot help it" (Le Fanu 89); the irresistible law constructs her split identity, her strength being her lesbian love, her weakness being her vampire curse. Thus their predicaments become more of relationship issues than of friendships, Laura's is recognizing that her love is homosexual in nature, while Carmilla's problem is not related to gender matters at all but to acknowledging the fatal effect of her love.

Carmilla poses a sexual threat because she is not a male seducer (capable of "ruining" a woman) but a female seducer; therefore the danger is perceived ambiguously. A feminist understanding of Carmilla allows the reader to view her differently as she becomes not the

*femme fatale* of the Victorian Age interested primarily in preserving its own sexual mores (rooted in prudery) and patriarchy, but rather a victim of sexual/gender oppression. Carmilla exclaims, “A very cruel love – strange love that would take my life. Love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood” (Le Fanu 101). As E. Michael Jones notes, the vampire genre is one in which “the ‘dangers’ of sexuality (i.e., conception, matrimony) are represented by a ‘lustful’ blood/life-draining inhuman being that spreads death and contagion rather than life through the ‘life-affirming’ act of procreation” (32). Carmilla’s lesbian love is one that ultimately kills her lovers, leaving her empty and alone for eternity. Thus Carmilla must accept her fate and that of her victims, and she does so by viewing the death of her victims as the ultimate consummation of love. Carmilla continues, “Love is always selfish, the more ardent the more selfish. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me, and still come with me, and *hating* me through death and after” (Le Fanu 100). Despite loving her victims she is a threat to them, however not in the same sense as Bram Stoker’s Dracula, who represents the libertine assault on Victorian morals.

Carmilla’s romantic tragedy is inconsequential to her fatality, for her conscience is unaffected, her desires are unsatisfied, and her villainy constant. Indeed Carmilla’s villainy is a threat in that she represents unconventional female sexuality and pleasure. Yet Carmilla and Laura’s relationship was not scandalous only because of its gender queerness: Carmilla indulged in other erotic deviances. Because of her combined femininity and vampirism Carmilla had an insidious ability to dominate Laura. However Laura’s enjoyment of her victimization causes their relationship to be interpreted as a sadomasochistic one. Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s definition of masochism as quoted by Dijkstra is “the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force” (101) and was considered by Victorian science to be a true phenomenon of perversion.

Laura's psychological turmoil has already been described by her paradoxical feelings of fear and disgust yet attraction and pleasure experienced by Carmilla's charming femininity and behavior. She repeatedly describes feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable by Carmilla's 'ardour' yet does nothing to resist Carmilla's doting; never offers a real reason why she would not escape from Carmilla's embraces and would attempt to justify her feelings with excuses blaming her ignorance. Laura would admit that Carmilla's declarations and caresses enraptured her in such a way leaving her defenseless or as she puts it, "her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover when she withdrew her arms" (Le Fanu 90). Ulanov explains that "the psyche develops a social role and assumes a public face when adapting to others" (32) referred to as the persona. Therefore Laura's contradictory emotions are the first signs of her developing sexual identity since her public persona is now notably making her unhappy because she is unable to freely act upon her desires and curiosities in order to maintain said image. Carmilla held Laura in a hypnotic realm of aloofness with subtle hints of pleasure and pain. Thus she willingly remains as the title of chapter six describes in a 'strange agony,' indicating that her embarrassment was one due mostly to social pressures than actually heartfelt.

Despite Laura's degree of participation in her own victimization, Carmilla's vampiric supernatural powers also aid in her physical conquest of Laura. Furthermore, Carmilla disturbed Laura's mental state by her increasingly frequent subliminal nocturnal attacks whether within Laura's dreams or keeping Laura in a paralyzed conscious/unconscious state of being. Within Carmilla's supernatural powers (and indicative of her monstrous status) is the ability to change bodily form which she uses as a mechanism for physical seduction and dominance. This highlights the complexity of her sexuality as will be demonstrated by the following examples

describing her perverted attraction to youth and innocence. Her first seduction of Laura took place when she was but six years old. She appeared to Laura in the form of a 'young lady' upon a night Laura was suffering from separation anxiety, an atmosphere which threatens the distinction between dreams and reality. Carmilla quickly relieves Laura's discomfort by soothing caresses, lying down beside her, and drawing her close while giving her a reassuring smile. This lulled her back to a temporary peaceful sleeping state that was interrupted by "a sensation as if two needles ran into [her] breast very deep at the same moment, and [she] cried out loudly. The lady started back, with her eyes fixed on [her], then slipped down upon the floor, and hid herself under the bed" (Le Fanu 74). Laura felt an immediate 'pleased wonder' for this mysterious lady who afforded her what could be described as maternal affection and security. The homoerotic delight felt by Laura because of this dream therefore became internalized within Laura as guilt. According to Michelis, "Laura's nightmare becomes the very core of herself... The phantasy of the mother is thus productive and destructive of a concept of identity which itself then becomes a constant source and a by-product of anxiety." Thus the memory of this incident tormented the remainder of her adolescence, mostly due to confusion and anxiety rather than trauma, for the experience was one narrated as pleasant and not perceived by her as an assault or attack. Carmilla similarly narrates their 'common dream' however oddly describes Laura as a young lady instead of a six year old child thus affording another interpretation of the seduction. This could be a mere manipulation to convince Laura it was a dream (or dream like vision) that connected them, or it could represent the essence of Laura's true attraction for Carmilla. Carmilla says to Laura upon the first time they witnessed each other's presence, "I saw *you*- a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and large blue eyes, and lips- your lips. Your looks won me" (Le Fanu 86). Either way, Carmilla appearing to Laura in the form of a young lady resulted in a

mutual comfort between them resulting in an ambiguous interpretation of their sexual attraction; as it could be viewed as homosexual (lusting after physical appearance of opposite sex; example lips and beauty), sadomasochistic (delightful, pleasurable yet psychologically and physically afflicting, inability to ignore or terminate relationship), pedophilic (Carmilla, a woman seducing a child), voyeuristic (Carmilla evidently receives pleasure watching her victims during and after her attacks) and incestuous (Carmilla seducing a child by maternal affection).

Carmilla's physical attacks on Laura continue throughout her stay in Laura's household. Her role in these attacks is never recognized as they took place as previously noted during the night within an atmosphere of uncertainty and mental vulnerability; as well as in different forms including that of a monstrous cat that "about four or five feet long," which provoked a familiar stinging pain upon her breast. The more Carmilla sucked the life from Laura increasing her pain and weakness, the more Carmilla expressed devotion and strange adorations, and radiated in beauty. The closer Laura was to death, the more pleurably erotic her "nightmares" became. Laura felt a gradual change within her that can be interpreted as the maturation of her sexual identity which was one that would never be accepted by society. She describes these encounters with strongly suggestive connotations:

There remained on waking a remembrance of having been in a place very nearly dark, and having spoken to people whom I cannot see; and especially of one clear voice, of a female's ... producing always the same sensation of indescribable solemnity and fear. Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was if warm lips kissed me, and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but the there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my senses left me, and I became unconscious. (Le Fanu106)

Their mutual and long awaited sexual satisfaction is fulfilled only when Carmilla appears to Laura as indescribable sensations within Laura's unconscious state, where she endures a thrill derived from struggle and inability to set herself free, and where she reaches an orgasmic ecstasy after a metaphoric rape and expression of fetish sex within her dreams. Dijkstra suggests that artists "creating images of helplessly ecstatic women, were playing directly on their audience's fantasies of aggression and 'invited' rape by depicting women who were extremely vulnerable and naked, usually sprawled flat on their backs in primarily sylvan surroundings, yet who appeared to be in the last throes of an uncontrollable ecstasy" (100). These examples prove the extent of their sexual eccentricity, again emphasizing the masochistic tendencies within their pleasures as well as indicating the only realm where these pleasures are acceptable. This complicates to some extent the active role Laura had within the acceptance of giving into her desires because the consummation of the former is limited to take place in a fantasy realm; inciting her to a behavior that she possibly would not act upon in a conscious state. Foucault elaborates on his discourse on eroticism that "there is formed a knowledge that must remain secret, not because of an element of infamy that might attach to its object, but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged" (57). Furthermore, despite awakening with sensations of horror she *chooses* not to tell anyone, as she admits: "I should have told papa [but did not] for two opposite reasons. I thought he would laugh at my story ... [and] I thought he might fancy I had been attacked by the mysterious complaint which had invaded our neighbourhood" (Le Fanu 103). Signorotti interprets this willing lack of communication with Laura's father as eliminating "male control over social linkage." Laura eagerly begins to anticipate the attacks and therefore

allows their continuance, by not eliminating their possibility by involving a male intruder into their intimate sphere.

Similarly as Laura struggles to express and more importantly comprehend what she is feeling and what is happening to her, the illustrations of the novella provoke in the viewers the same effect of uncertainty. For example the illustration by D. H. Friston (1872) [Figure 1] where the vampire Carmilla is lustfully approaching her sleeping victim, Laura; in a similar way as previously discussed by Dijkstra to the image of “invited rape” on a sleeping woman.. The illustration is untitled, revealing no specificity of the scene portrayed and allowing for ambiguous interpretations. Dijkstra argues that with the rediscovery of feminine sexuality in the 1870s came the identification of female masturbation as a problem yet accepted “voyeuristic form of masculine self-reassurance of noninvolvement in woman’s sexuality” (69) through the visual arts. The artist chose to represent Carmilla in her woman form half-leaning, half-climbing into the bed, reaching toward the chest of her victim which could be Laura herself (or Bertha, the daughter of a family friend who received the fatal outcome of Carmilla’s love). As Laura is the protagonist as well as the narrator of the novella it would be appropriately assumed that she is portrayed as the victim in the illustrations as well. The image exemplifies the homoerotic undertones, the subtle commotion of confusion and mystery, and the unwelcomed yet inevitable tension increasing within the text. Dijkstra elaborates on the topic, “Woman’s indulgence in solitary vices inevitably led to exhaustion and hence to sleep. Victorian [artists] had a veritable field day exploring the autoerotic ramifications of the representation of the sleeping woman” (78). Laura is exposed from the chest up, a prominent bosom on full display, hidden materially only by the form-fitting thin fabric of a nightgown. Her body language signals the aftermath of a chaotic battle with gained tranquility and pleasure derived from numbness. Her head is turned to

the left, her left arm back over the pillow extending behind her head, and her long golden hair flows outward to her right. Only the outline of her parted legs is discernible under the bed's blankets.



[Figure 1]

These physical indications may rightfully be questioned. Is she deep in slumber? Caught in a feverish struggle of (mental or physical) sickness, or in the climax of sexual sensation within an erotic dream? As all three possible explanations are possible causes of the body languor post-sexual ecstasy, an interpretation of the illustration is that it represents Laura, as an object and subject of erotic desire, during an orgasmic experience. Any of these interpretations corroborates Adrienne Antrim Major's assertion that "given the lingering Renaissance link between death and orgasm, *Le Fanu* strongly implies orgasm without penetration. The anxiety of the text focuses on the vexed question of women's sexual pleasure; the text worries that women find pleasure without the presence of a man." This orgasmic experience could very well be the previously



discussed encounter within her dreams, as it could be any other of the undocumented nocturnal encounters with Carmilla, a visual interpretation of Laura's fantasies or dreams, or could even be portraying a post- masturbation scene (since her sexual curiosity was yearning for satisfaction and reaching maturation), all of which include solely Laura and Carmilla.

It is interesting to note that from the waist up Laura is bathed in a kind of ethereal light while Carmilla is completely bathed in shadow, which emphasizes her mysterious essence (or shady dealings). Which sexual desire/drive is Carmilla acting upon? What is she reaching for? Is she reaching for a ravishing embrace? Or to steal life? Whatever her intention may be she is not afforded the opportunity because of the pending interruption of a masculine figure. Therefore despite the many similarities between the illustration and Laura's moment of sexual maturation in the text, to consider each a representation of the other in different media would be misleading because Laura's father never intervened in Carmilla's attacks, or in other words never intervened in Laura's sexual experimentations and growing sickness. This could be interpreted as the need for the patriarchal order to be restored, and thus the masculine figure enters to eliminate Carmilla's influence on Laura. It could also illustrate Laura's source of anxiety and guilt: if her father were to find out the nature of her relationship with Carmilla and consequently put an end to it.

Laura is under clearly traumatic circumstances. She is discovering her lesbian identity while slowly dying. The image becomes a visual example of Laura's subconscious and the sources of her anxieties (her love/perception of Carmilla and her fear/perception of her father) within the setting where all guilt and pleasure is derived from: the bedroom. Therefore this illustration successfully completes the aesthetic task according to Creed's reading of Kristeva's studies on abjection by exposing a world in which "the Other has collapsed – a descent into the

foundations of the symbolic construct – [thus] retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression” (75). Carmilla’s apparent harmlessness portrayed in the illustration is actually Laura’s perception of her, for the reader knows better. Thus within this daydream of Laura made into art Carmilla’s face indicates no evil threat, no perverse desire but in fact reveals fascination and magnetism. Carmilla’s posture reveals a degree of reverence, as she is bent at the waist with one arm stretched out appearing to be making a gesture of obeisance and supplication while simultaneously unable to resist the lure of the beautiful Laura. As Ulanov indicates, “the shadow is the image used by Jung to describe [the] contents in ourselves that we repress because they are unacceptable” (33), therefore since Laura is plagued by the constant fear of her ‘condition’ being discovered she attempts to repress her desire for Carmilla by keeping her in the (pictorial) shadows. (However her state and expression on the bed reveal her excitation during the attacks or upon reflecting on their memory.) Dijkstra concludes that the appeal images like these (of women in autoerotic exhaustion) had as irony “the assumption of the ability of woman to satisfy her own physical needs, thus clearly removing the male from sexual responsibility and allowing him once more to enter into a voyeuristic, passive erotic titillation within a soothing, undemanding context conducive to a state of restful detumescence” (78). However her father appears through the door, charging with his sword ready to enact violence against what is threatening the purity of his daughter: vampirism and the implied lesbianism associated with it. His sword is held waist-high carrying certain phallic connotations underlying the assumption that with his masculinity (heterosexual) order within the chaotic atmosphere would be reestablished. Although not completely accurate the image foreshadows Carmilla’s impending doom.

Carmilla wants and takes that which cannot be named in Victorian society. She is the nocturnal and nightmarish sexually empowered woman whose activities and erotic preferences directly contradict the Victorian belief that a woman's sexual desire (if any) depended on a man. Her success in formulating Laura's sexuality implies the failure of masculine dominance in social conventions such as courtship, seduction, romance, and indirectly to marriage as well. In the male-female paradigm, the *femme fatale* is on an "opposing" team intentionally seeking to "use" the male for her own designs and then to discard him once her work is finished. But with Carmilla, the female-female relationship is actually mutually inclusive. Rather than living a life of isolation Laura benefits to a degree from Carmilla's attention while Carmilla benefits from Laura's blood. The sexual chemistry between the two is more than merely a goal-oriented exercise on the part of Carmilla (i.e., of the typical *femme fatale* type, the woman using sex to achieve an aim). As Judith Butler notes, "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (2). Butler refers to Foucault's perception of the "self-defeating" nature of subjects participating in the power structure's system in order to overthrow the power or to change the power. Butler argues that the "juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as 'the subject' of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics" (2). Thus, the feminist who strives to alter the power structure by acting within that structure can expect to meet the same end as that met by Carmilla. However, if women band together to form their own power structure, the feminist movement becomes a force outside the patriarchal power structure, and in *Carmilla*, this is what happens with Laura and Carmilla. It is an unfortunate fact that the novel adheres to the norms of Victorian society that Carmilla's effect on Laura must be negative in the sense that she sucks the lifeblood from her; however for Victorian sensibilities Carmilla's seduction must be the effect of

an evil purpose and not just a natural inclination. Yet Le Fanu is not insensible to the fact that Laura and Carmilla are “in league” with one another: the relationship is symbiotic. The two derive something that each needs from the other.

Butler’s performative theory is rooted in the gender theory put forward by Simone de Beauvoir that a woman is not what one is born but rather what one becomes (Beauvoir 51). Following the philosophical premises of Nietzsche and the post-moderns who view life as a series of “repetitions” in which one is endlessly striving to “become” what social-historical trends stipulate the “thing” to be (Kundera 4-6), Butler senses an unavoidable obstacle in the act of “becoming.” It is forever constrained by unforgiving terms and categories that keep the act from total consummation. One may spend all one’s life trying to “become” a woman, but it is an elusive identity (Butler, Osborne, Segal 32). Keeping this in mind, Nancy Welter points out that the “group of patriarchal authorities justify their destruction of Carmilla by declaring her to be a monster. [This leads to question] which monstrosity they were attempting to kill — the lesbian or the vampire? Both would have been monstrous in their eyes, and both challenged their authority” (145). The identity that ultimately classifies Carmilla is that of demonic vampire, for she is persecuted and ultimately destroyed as one. But for Laura, Carmilla will always represent something more, something different from what the patriarchs around her see.

Immediately after the erotic (day) dream, or in other words, after the consummation of their love, Carmilla disappears, Laura’s health continues to decline, and Carmilla’s downfall takes place upon the eventual exposure of her identity. Carmilla is linked to the mysterious deaths of the women of the village and identified as a source of ‘demonic’ evil. Throughout the development of the narrative there was an ever occurring conflict between Carmilla and any religious association or practice revealing significant interplay between religion, sexuality,

feminism, and the patriarchal power structure. Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that the Catholic Church and its disposition towards feminist ideology is one that “traditional views of women and sexuality” are still maintained within the patristic nature of the Church, which even today “is still pursuing a global crusade against abortion, birth control, and redefinitions of the family that might include homosexual couples” (184). In other words, the Catholic Church is a fundamental element within the patriarchal ideologies within society that condemn women for breaking away from the virtuous, sexually passive image/conduct. As a *femme fatale* Carmilla represents a new order, transposed on the old Christian order, denoting Catholicism as the ultimate source of women’s repression; therefore she rejects Christianity in all aspects and instead begets vampires like herself, new beings (new women specifically) which have their own code and sexual needs. Signorotti explains that “Carmilla’s inability to accept God as omnipotent extends from her general refusal to include males in her exclusively female kinship system. Instead, she worships the embodiment of the feminine, Mother Nature, and implies the naturalness of her and Laura’s female union.” This particular union would in other words disrupt the order of social progress as it opposes marriage and the expected subsequent act of procreation that leads to motherhood. In this context, as Jones point outs, “Carmilla represents the Victorian fear of sexual revolution and the need to keep sexual transgressions undisclosed, the skeletons buried within the closet” (132). That Carmilla is able to escape her closet indicates that the Victorian Age was having difficulty suppressing the rising urge of female sexuality and its challenge to the patriarchal order.

Although Le Fanu presents Carmilla as a vampire and a *femme fatale*, she is not merely a demon or a terror for Laura, but an individual whose value lies in her ability to fulfill Laura’s void in life, even as she robs Laura of that same life. It is a contradictory role that Carmilla plays,

and one is tempted to classify her according to extremes, either she is all evil, or she is all victim of circumstance. However, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. For a Victorian reader, however, it can be assumed that Carmilla represents the threat not only to the Age's sexual mores but also to its patriarchal power structure. Signorotti indicates that "excluding men from female friendships or from access to women poses more of a threat to male kinship systems than to female. Thus, the female homosocial bonds potentially carry tremendous power to subvert or demolish existing patriarchal kinship structures." However, Carmilla radically breaks sexual boundaries in her homoerotic pursuit of Laura and is consequently depicted as a fatal and destructive woman: a sexual deviant who threatened patriarchy. Thus the agents of the patriarchal order (including her father, medical and Christian representatives, etc.) join forces to viciously execute Carmilla in order to restore heterosexual relations in which men are in control.

Thus the patriarchs decide to execute their revenge on the one who destabilizes their power by a gruesome and bloody ritualistic execution which according to Tamar Heller was similar to a "rape-like surgery performance" (89). The execution reads 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... Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head was next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away.

Following the tradition of vampire fiction, masculinity is empowered as violence is exposed towards the sexually active woman, thus underestimating the vampire's powers. Ironically Laura's last recollection of Carmilla is within a ruined church, a metaphor for the Church which stood on troubled footing, having had to close a number of doors all over the world and being challenged on a number of social doctrines. Indeed, Robert Geary notes that Carmilla is a representation of the Victorian fear of social collapse without its Christian context, "having left

the doctrines of the Church and found the Age of Enlightenment to be too empirical in its science (and the Age of Romance too frightening in its liberty), the Victorian Age strove for balance of a modest kind (22).” The final confrontation in the church suggests that the final showdown for Feminism will be between it and the Church, which, despite updates and new modes of evangelism, still adheres to the Old World ideology that opposes feminist doctrine. Thus, the fear that Victorian Age has of Carmilla is that she is more powerful, ultimately, than the patriarchs who head the era. Their “juridical systems” prohibit the license that Carmilla takes and the lethality of her license is what they condemn: the awakening of female sexuality, of lesbianism, is something that must be suppressed or eradicated fully. Furthermore the fear evolves into the thought that Carmilla’s deviance will spread within the patriarchal realm; vampires will beget vampires, and as researchers have shown, sexuality and gender are norms that are learned, as is the generational acceptance or rejection of homosexuality and lesbianism. Jared Calzo theorizes that the more one is exposed to bisexuality as a norm the more one is compelled to accept it (280). Likewise Jennifer Bonds-Raacke’s findings suggest that cultivation theory supports the notion that the Victorian fear of contagion (from libertinism) is not unfounded for “those recalling a positive portrayal later showed a more positive attitude toward homosexuals and lesbians after exposure to such characters in media” (10).

Both *femmes fatales* discussed so far expose not only society’s fear of an independent woman, but the flawed reasoning behind the laws that dictate hegemony; especially the norms that attempted to control a woman’s sexual identity. Becky was a threat because although she appeared to be domesticated, she was actually ambitious and Carmilla posed a threat because she was a vampire and a lesbian. These fatal women blend within society despite representing what this same society opposes, New Woman ideologies. Rather than using their femininity to succeed

in the established patriarchal demands like marriage and motherhood, their femininity provokes an eroticism that is ultimately characterized as fatal because their victims all become ruined after giving into the temptation of their sexual curiosities. Despite the patriarchs' attempts in redefining their authority over these *femme fatales* and women in general, they are not the ones who are successful, therefore implying who has the actual power in society.

As a vampire it was inevitable that Carmilla had to be executed being a monstrous entity; however murdering her did not restore patriarchal order in the least. Laura's "defenders" succeeded in eliminating the vampiric creature but the extent of her fatal nature and power surpasses death, for her victim will never be dominated by patriarchal ideologies. Will Carmilla the *femme fatale*/feminist prototype emerge victorious from the "ruined church"? The novel suggests that such is the case, as it closes with Laura wondering whether she hears Carmilla approaching down the hall. Signorotti concludes that "Laura has tasted the sweet fruit of self-determination and fulfilling desire and does not wish to return to her pre-Carmilla life." In other words, Laura is forever changed and will forever long for Carmilla to return (or penetrate) her life once again. Laura's relationship with Carmilla endures in her memory and consciousness, her identity is solidified as a lesbian woman as she will continuously regard Carmilla as her lover and other half. Male intervention did not succeed in breaking their intimate bond, which transcended all type of physical merit; and male rationality proved to be quite wrong when applied to female intuition and feeling. Feminine sexuality cannot be controlled by patriarchal demand, thus alluding to the impossibility of defining a woman's sexuality or limiting the former to rules.



## Chapter V: Androgynous Lust in Salomé

Both Carmilla and Becky Sharp maintained a mysterious allure, hid at all costs their motives and desires, and played along with expected social gender norms while secretly subverting them. They were welcomed into the domestic realm (which ironically was the turf for their evil schemes) successfully because of their successful role playing of innocent, charming ladies despite their evil motives and sexual eccentricity. However, this does not imply any limitation to their lethality, for Becky Sharp and Carmilla were quite lethal especially since their victims were unsuspecting, thus providing them with the benefit of surprise having an extended if not leisurely period of time to obtain their goals by maintaining a charade. According to Rosina Neginsky “the nineteenth century was fascinated with the notion of fragile yet strong, intelligent and dominating women who, in stories told about them were always associated with blood and murder” (74). Despite their favorable appearances and behavior, Becky and Carmilla combine the qualities that fascinated Victorian society, innocence and danger, for indeed blood was spilt on their hands.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the development of the plot of these texts, the anxieties and flawed ideologies of patriarchal structures are being challenged by the creators of these *femmes fatales*; specifically when referring to gender stereotypes and concepts of female sexuality. Becky and Carmilla use their femininity to succeed in their respective goals, which not only subverts the patriarchal system indiscreetly but more often than not creates calamity in their surroundings. Elaine Showalter quotes Frank Kermode’s argument that the sense of an ending affects society because “we project our existential anxieties on to history; there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the peculiarity of our imagination, that it chooses

---

<sup>12</sup>Becky’s involvement with Jos’ death cannot be proved according to the narration, however many readers have interpreted the illustrations to allude to the fact that she does. (There also is some gossip the narrator decides to share about the situation.) Carmilla spills literal blood of her victims, Becky takes their lives/blood in the metaphorical sense.

always to be at the end of an era” (2). Thus what was provoking anxiety amongst the Victorians was the fear of the New Woman and the emancipation of women and their outcome on society’s development, particularly since the nineteenth century would soon be coming to an end. Rosina Neginsky points out, there were “increasing numbers of women [that] had begun to enter the workforce and taken on more active roles in society... Not only were men sexually dependent on women... factors such as social recognition and a respected place within society were no longer restricted to men alone” (74). The awareness of the desire of women for social and sexual emancipation from patriarchal society led to society’s questioning of the inconsistency of their desires and consequently to the condemnation of any kind female expression of desire. Those who defy patriarchal socio-sexual codes were either considered inferior or blamed to have manifestations of a perverted mind, especially if they were women; therefore by the end of the century more and more artists came to represent femininity as undeniably destructive and consequently monstrous.

The laws that governed sexual identity and behavior were being broken down by feminism and the increasing awareness of homosexuality, which challenged traditional patriarchal institutions and values such as marriage, work, and family. As Showalter asserts, “[the] gender crisis affected men as well as women, and the fantasies of a pitched battle for sexual supremacy typical of the period often concealed deeper uncertainties and contradictions” (8). Although rejected or criticized by conservative members of society, feminist social reformers were improving women’s legal status by the approval of a series of legislative acts; for example the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882, granting married women ownership of properties. Similarly, despite homosexuality being defined and outlawed by the Labouchère

Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885<sup>13</sup>, making all male homosexual acts private or public illegal, homosexuality endured within a subculture. As Jeffrey Weeks explains, “it seems likely that new forms of legal regulation, whatever their vagaries in application, had the effect of ... creating a new community of knowledge, if not of life and feeling, amongst men with homosexual leanings” (103). As paradoxical as this seems being marginalized as a particular group strengthened homosexual identity, thus forming a subculture empowered to protest and speak on their own behalf. The record of this culture emerges in the decadent art and literature of the *fin de siècle*.

Not surprisingly the late nineteenth century demonstrated an increasing fascination with representing evil women in the aesthetic realm. Bram Dijkstra attributes this trend to the “logical outcome of a cultural environment in which the evolving male was expected to combine an attitude of socioeconomic belligerence with an ideal of personal continence in the service of worldly success” (235). By the 1890s the patriarchal system was not only being attacked by women, but also by avant-garde male artists and sexual radicals who challenged compulsory heterosexuality and its cultural authority. Art and literature were considered among the most effective means to fight this supposed feminine invasion (Neginsky 74). Earlier artistic symbolism had been based on the parallel between beauty and morality (as demonstrated with the Amelia comparisons of her portraits throughout the novel). A beautiful representation (especially of a woman) visually signified the purity and/or chastity of what was being represented. The movement of art for art’s sake radically altered the Victorian perspective of art

---

<sup>13</sup>“Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to, the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.” ( <http://www.banap.net/spip.php?article156>.)

and literature. It dared to break away from the Victorian's set value system and allowed an autonomous interpretation of art and its "purpose," being that there is no purpose to it. If a purpose must be attributed to art, it would be that it is meant to highlight the perception of a given moment, thus rejecting the search for any social or moral expectation in art and embracing the simplicity of beauty. In other words as Oscar Wilde suggests, all art aspires to the condition of music. With this in mind, the concept of femininity was traditionally linked with delicacy, purity, beauty. If art for art's sake's focus is to search for beauty without any responsibility to its subject, to search for beauty within itself, then the stereotype of the representational bond between female beauty and morality must be broken. Dijkstra remarks that the "evolutionary sentiment" of the art-for-art's-sake aesthetic expression was by their construction of the "undeniable visual attractiveness" of a woman by artists to aid in their "explorations into the realm of perfect beauty" (237). Thus the figure of the *femme fatale* became an artistic product of masculine imagination; a projected fantasy reflecting male anxieties about "the woman race" (Neginsky 74), female sexuality, and aesthetic creativity at the fin de siècle. The vision of idealized femininity transitioned to a vision of woman as artifice, affording the female character in question an ornamental function. Therefore she lacks subjectivity and depth, becomes simplified as a *type*, her body objectified as a projection of male fantasies.

Similarly the myth of Salomé, originating in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, entraps the character of Salomé as a symbol of undying lust and eroticism, which is precisely why she conveniently reemerged in the nineteenth century as an object of fascination. Salomé's popularity grew as a *femme fatale* icon, her image becoming a symbol of a beautiful destroyer produced during the nineteenth century in about 2,789 works of art and literature in which

Salomé is the central figure.<sup>14</sup>Megan Becker-Leckrone asserts that the story of Salomé's dance in the Bible is simply a necessary detail to highlight John the Baptist's role as a precursor to Christ's life by clarifying essential pieces of information Salomé's story lacks which gradually become elements presupposed within the narrative. "Salomé is never mentioned by name [in the Gospels] however that she is named by a first-century source nearly contemporary with Matthew and Mark: Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*...which [however lacks] any mention of the dance." In other words both sources complete the information that composes what is known about the myth of Salomé. This indicates why the text is rich in interpretations and a highly exploited motif in aesthetic representation. Furthermore, as Becker-Leckrone elaborates, "Salomé is an essential ingredient in the theme, but is not the agent who activates it."

Oscar Wilde created Salomé with the expected beauty that is due to a princess, however, her beauty is not indicative of the goodness typically afforded one and neither is her fate. According to Herod and Salomé herself,<sup>15</sup>she has the virginal beauty that seems innocent (as previously mentioned, beauty was thought to indicate purity), yet her behavior is that of a provocative woman using her sexuality as the means to achieve desires consumed by lust and eroticism. She is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ambitious, using her seductive charms and her intelligence to liberate herself from the imprisonment of objectification; however achieving this ruthlessly at the cost of several lives. Anthony Pym suggests that the Salomé myth was particularly appropriate for the reconfiguring of the *femme fatale* icon as the missing elements allowed for modern versions "to make problematic the motivational links between characters, the moral and social status of female power, and the

---

<sup>14</sup>Neginsky, 74.

<sup>15</sup>While musing upon the moon Salomé suggests that moon is a pure virgin goddess, in whom she sees herself reflected.

abstract relations between political power (the king) [and] esthetic value (the dance)” (312). Thus the *femme fatale*’s figurative evolution results from the ongoing shifts of thinking regarding gender, increasing female rebellion for social rights, changes in aesthetic standards, and anxieties dealing with the coming of the twentieth century. For the male gaze her body is a manifestation of visual pleasure, therefore Salomé gains power by nourishing male sexual fantasies. However choosing why and when to submit to their fantasies makes her more than just an object of desire (or a blank type) for she is capable of making and fulfilling her own subjective needs. Salomé’s representation consequently serves to explore anxieties revolving around Victorian sexual gender ideologies and explore the fear of what Victorians considered different sexual deviances of modern culture such as incest, masochism, homosexuality/homoeroticism, voyeurism, narcissistic sexual fixation, and necrophilia. Despite the little defense there is for the perversity of Salomé’s actions, she exposes the perverted desires of those that objectify her as well, making her in other words a perverse product of a perverted society.

In her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler reflects on the relationship between sexual acts and gender expression asking the following questions: “how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man?” (xi). These questions raised by Butler are fundamental in attempting to understand representations of sex and gender and their interconnectedness with non-normative sexuality. Lloyd Davis suggests that “virginity is one of the means through which societies generally translate sexuality as a natural and moral fact of life into a commonsense, unquestioned mirage” (4). In other words in order to ensure the value and propriety of socio-sexual codes, ‘virginity’ was viewed as the cultural ideal. While the previously discussed *femmes fatales* maintained the image of purity/virginity, hiding their sexual

desires to be desired, Salomé did the contrary. She embraced her susceptibility of being placed under the male gaze therefore shamelessly exploiting the source of her desirability (her virgin body) to obtain her own desires. This was quite a notable shift from the representations of the *femmes fatales* from earlier in the century, who lurked in darkness and deception. Salomé's seductions are far more scandalous in their explicit allusions of feminine sexuality (despite her apparent virginity/purity) because of her consumption in lust and eroticism, which resulted in the pain and death of those who dare to admire her.

This chapter seeks to delineate the evolution of the *femme fatale* figure by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations through their textual and visual representations of Salomé's unashamed sexuality, developing within a dangerous androgynous character. As Sayeeda Mamoon clarifies in her dissertation, *Flowers of androgyny: The garden of Salomé in fin-de-siècle and literature*, "Despite the emphasis placed by critics on Salomé as the epitome of feminine perversity in fin-de-siècle culture, the representations of the Biblical dancer during that period seem to play more on her androgynous traits." I argue that Salomé's combination of possessing feminine (virginal) beauty while appropriating masculine traits is what makes her an androgynous figure that satirizes concepts of gendered subjectivity as gender becomes implicated rather than deconstructed. Due to the inability of her male victims to resist her, or more importantly be able to act according to his own will (and furthermore in the position to acknowledge their own defeat), they come to experience a profound existential crisis that is inherently linked to his emasculation and consequent (depending on the victim) literal or allegorical destruction. Ironically the more Salomé's feminine body is exploited, the more she assumes masculine roles by not only dictating her wants and needs, but by taking action to pursue these desires, gaining social authority, as well as committing the same mistakes male

characters make. In conjunction, these artists transcend the limitations of gender roles in their hypocritical society while simultaneously empowering the concept of art for art's sake, because Salomé is as beautiful and she is perverse, therefore exposing the Victorian masculine fear of becoming powerless (symbolic castration) by female sexual subjectivity and the threat it poses to patriarchal power structures.

Butler's concept of the "matrix of intelligibility" (the perception of human social and sexual hierarchy) is also useful in understanding how ideas of sexual deviance and perversity are conveyed in representations of gender at the fin de siècle. For it is within this system that "intelligible genders" function, "which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (23). In other words, challenging this matrix can potentially provoke chaos within the established gendered codes of order and consequently categorize such acts as unacceptable. Because of the unstable representation of her gender that arise from her androgynous traits, Salomé's (feminine) desires, and furthermore the desires of the male characters as well, can be interpreted ambiguously. E. Ann Kaplan asserts that "the sexualization and objectification of women is not simply for the purpose of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman poses" (311). On the one hand, one could speak of Salomé as a figure of male fantasy, articulating both a fascination for the sexually aggressive woman, as well as anxieties about feminine domination and sexual empowerment. Amanda Fernbach quotes Freud on explaining fetishistic tendencies, "[the fetishist] both disavows and acknowledges woman's castration and in doing so demonstrates ambivalence towards the alternately phallic/castrated woman" (199). Either way, the patriarchal order is being threatened by the male protagonists' subconscious masculine desires for Salomé, as they develop into different manifestations of



fetishism and become consequent examples of how the traditionally held concepts of virginity, desire, and gendered beauty can easily become perverted.

Authority becomes reinstated into Salomé's grasp as she undermines masculine subjectivity by the combination of her feminine sexual presence and her appropriated aggressive masculine behavior. However it is her body, specifically her feminized beauty that is the source of her manipulation and power over the characters that desire her. Elliot Gilbert argues that both Wilde and Beardsley "through their notable representation of perverse sexuality in their work participate in a devastating fin de siècle attack on the conventions of patriarchal culture even as they express their horror of the threatening female energy which is the instrument of that attack" (133). The *femme fatale* exhibits her sexual dominance and murderous female energy by using her body to manipulate the desiring gaze with irresistible, sensual seductions, therefore attacking patriarchal conventions of female passivity and the hypocrisy of the demand for female prudery as the stereotypes of virginal beauty are compromised by Salomé's behavior. The way men respond to Salomé's use of her sexuality during said seductions reveals their loss of power, made evident as Herod and the Young Syrian are easily made fools of by unwillingly submitting to a course of action that ultimately fulfills Salomé's own desires rather than their own. (In other words Salomé could have her desires fulfilled by the appropriation of masculine traits such as aggressiveness, courting her object of desire, and the demonstration of empowerment when men are metaphorically defeated by granting her desires by manipulating their own. However without her feminine beauty and charm her seductions would have not been successful, because it is her virginal *body* that captivates her victims to begin with while her contradictory *attitude* secures the seduction.) Though she gains power over male characters by nourishing their sexual fantasies, her own interest is only superficially erotic. Heather Marcovitch points out that

“Salomé is trapped in her persona as an object of desire,” therefore only being able to act as one “is afforded no psychic space to develop subjective desire. “However, her capacity to make decisions with articulated motives and her various strategic maneuvers to get what she aims for afford her with more subjectivity than has been admitted. She will not allow herself to be dominated by the men who fall for her charms. On the contrary she manipulates these men, exposing their flaws and hidden desires (ironically by being empowered by their objectification of her). Marcovich notes that Salomé uses “the power gotten from her persona to destroy the very system that imbued her with this power.” Therefore, Salomé becomes a *femme fatale* that is dangerous as an object of desire as well as a dangerous looking subject as she also begins to fetishize the male body.

The play’s opening lines, “How beautiful is the Princess Salomé tonight!” immediately draw attention to her person and her beauty thus positioning her as the object of the masculine gaze of the Young Syrian, the captain of King Herod’s army. As she is being looked upon by the Syrian she is simultaneously being gazed at by Herod, noted to have a “sombre aspect” while looking at the daughter of his brother and his brother’s wife daughter, who is now his stepdaughter as he married his deceased brother’s wife. . While in a trance admiring her beauty the Young Syrian speaks his mind as if to himself despite being engaged in a conversation with his companion, the Page of Herodias; who is himself gazing at the moon and commenting on it. The remark made by the Syrian about her -- “she is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing,” -- is ambiguous for two reasons: firstly because the two characters are looking at two different objects, yet the conversation intertwines without specification if either acknowledges the other’s comment. Secondly, the description can easily be applied to both, leading to the misunderstanding of whether it’s about Salomé or about the moon.

Regardless, the Young Syrian repeats his opening lines, clearly (re)focusing on Salomé. The Page immediately warns him of the possible misfortune that is to come if he continues with his obsessive staring to which the Syrian responds by yet again remarking that she was very beautiful on that moon lit night, which according to the Page was “like a dead woman looking for dead things”. The conversation becomes quite repetitive in the Syrian’s constant observation and subsequent verbal admirations in poetic comparisons of Salomé, and the ignored pleas of warning by the anxious Page. He is completely fascinated by her beauty and not a single gesture or movement Salomé makes goes unnoticed by him, thus becoming startled as he watches her exit the palace halls drawing closer to him.

Three of the play’s major themes are introduced within this opening scene: the worship of beauty, the relation between gazing and desire (and consequent perversion of desire), and the personification of Salomé as the moon or the moon as Salomé. The image of Salomé is presupposed to be of overwhelming beauty, however what exactly makes her beautiful is never specified or described in the least. She is simply described as beautiful by others, and it is widely accepted that it is related to her physical feminine attributes, especially because she is constantly being admired for her image, her feminine characteristics being compared with innocence, fragility, and purity which are synonymous of virginal qualities. Brad Bucknell attributes this assumption to the fact that her representation has traditionally relied upon “the interplay of verbal and visual signifying practices” therefore making her available to the male gaze. He adds that “the insertion of the gaze itself into the discourse [produces] a kind of unconscious revelation of the power, and anxiety of seeing Salomé.” The concept of beauty can therefore be viewed as a subjective interpretation that leads to different manifestations of desire that stimulate the gaze. As previously mentioned, virginity was considered an ideal state for women, which is

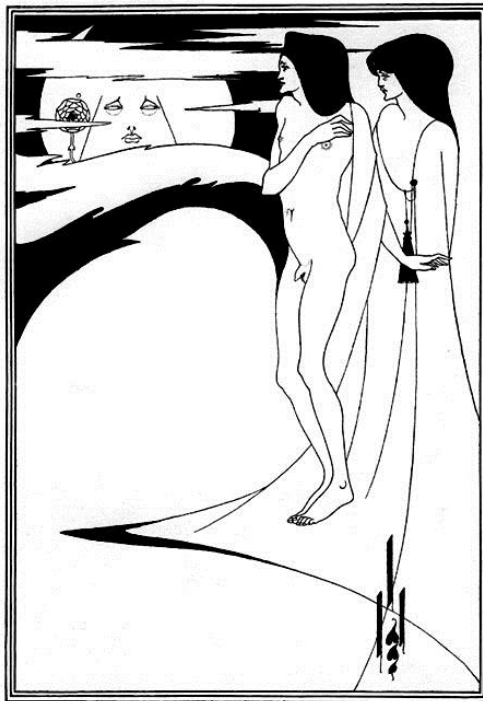
in fact a presupposed natural state in a woman's life. Thus being a virgin implied having virginal traits, which in contrast to actually having the physical state of 'virginity' became a social process which was recognized and represented the construct of valued rules and beliefs. Davis describes virginity as a "cultural motif through which numerous social myths and institutions may jointly seek to fashion a determinate personal identity" (15). While in a more subjective manner virginal is explained as affording "a social identity under the guise of which apparently fixed social myths and institutions may be questioned, revised, or even evaded" (15). Here lies the danger of gazing upon Salomé's beauty. Her beauty becomes, as Davis classifies it, a "seemingly archetypal male desire [which] manifests itself in a physical, intersubjective, and discursive demand for the virginal" (12). Therefore her virginal qualities which presuppose her virginal state make the desire to look at this beautiful virgin's body forbidden because the desire to look develops into a perverse desire to not only engage in the forbidden act of looking but to the desire of possessing the forbidden object as well. In other words, the excess of looking leads to eventual destruction because "it leads to the consumption of the self by its own desire" (Marcovitch). For the Young Syrian, Salomé is a forbidden object of desire because she is royalty, and for the Tetrarch she is his stepdaughter, thus to simply look at her is torture because of the inevitability to have her.

As for the Page of Herodias beauty took form in the Young Syrian, not Salomé. The object of the Page's homoerotic desire was the Syrian made evident by his jealousy of the Syrian's constant gaze and desire for Salomé, his anxiety concerning the Syrian's well-being and various attempts to advise him, the number of gifts usually given to a lover he gave him such as perfumes, silver earrings, and an agate ring, and the amorous admirations of his stories, voice, and simplicity. According to Jason Boyd, the significance of the Page of Herodias' homoerotic

desire for the Syrian is that it “makes visible Wilde’s awareness of the problematic surrounding the public articulation of a love with no name or place, but which nevertheless existed and was struggling for public visibility” (21). The Page as well as Wilde understood the agony of forbidden desire, therefore expresses his negativity with his comments about the moon, being the first character to implicitly link the moon with Salomé. More specifically this association between them as Marcovitch puts it “reveal[s] the various watchers’ desires for Salomé up to a point... [and] point[s] to the way their desires construct their respective states of mind,” which will be an important factor to understand the play’s highly metaphorical language and content. The Page of Herodias seeing the moon as a dead woman can therefore be interpreted to suggest that he associates Salomé with death and foreshadows Salomé’s eventual condemned fate.

Aubrey Beardsley’s first illustration depicts this opening scene titled “The Woman in the Moon” [Figure 1]. It can be concluded that the two male figures are the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias as the scene previously discussed positions them as admiring either the moon or Salomé. Neginsky describes his drawings as not directly illustrating the play but “based on Beardsley’s perception of the spirit of the play” (186), which clearly emphasize androgynous physical traits. Both characters are represented with male genitals, one explicitly and the other symbolically phallic with a hanging ornament of the cloak worn. What makes them androgynous is that one despite having male genitals has female breasts, most likely the Young Syrian because the other (the Page) is in front of him, holding his hand out as if protecting him from the moon or from Salome being the ‘woman in the moon.’ Their facial features are delicate and their long black hair resembles a woman’s hair. Not only are the characters of the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias represented as androgynous, the title of the illustration is misleading to what the moon is actually representing in the illustration which is Wilde himself, not a woman, not

Salomé like in the play. On the right side of the Wilde moon is a plant, which may be observed as a tree or a flower. If in fact it is a flower it would, as Matthew Lewsadder explains, be “evocative of the green carnation that Wilde helped make an emblem of male homoerotic relationships” (522). Both male characters’ admiration of the moon, or in other words of the androgynous caricature of Wilde’s face as the moon (since the moon is commonly associated with femininity), subtly alludes to his homosexuality<sup>16</sup> and lifestyle and their common understanding and accepting of Wilde’s radiance.



[Figure 1: The Woman in the Moon]

When entering the play Salomé’s first words not only confirm her status as object of desire, but also imply her awareness of the situation. Her reaction was that she “will not, cannot stay” or allow herself to be looked at by Herod’s gaze therefore voluntarily leaving the perimeters of his gazing (ironically falling into another realm where she continues to be gazed at

---

<sup>16</sup>The play is suffused with homoerotic allusions that can be traced to the notorious ‘perversity’ of both Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, who translated the play into English (Fernbach200).

with desire). However the different setting immediately made her feel free of oppression and joyful; “how good to see the moon!” she exclaims as she becomes consumed by her admiration for it with which she has an intimate bond and identification with. She reaffirms her chastity through this self-projection upon the moon when saying to the moon that “has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men.” The transferability of Salomé and the moon is because once becoming an object of focalization they acquire a symbolic function, thus consequently gendered. As Bucknell explains, “the icon of the feminine is conflated with a particular woman, and the woman is conflated with the icon of the feminine... Woman as moon, or moon as Woman: one is the icon of the other.” Furthermore Helen Tookey explains that “the moon is Salomé’s goddess, and she represents for her, in a complete reversal of the patriarchal distinction, the sacrality of the female over against the profanity of the male”(27). Seeing her own reflection in the moon Salomé alludes to her virginity and repudiates Herod’s attempts to sexualize her body.

However, when hearing the voice of Iokanaan her repudiation of the masculine gaze suddenly reverses into soliciting it. It is Iokanaan’s voice rather than his image (which is another metaphysical example of beauty, for example Salomé’s image stimulates the visual senses, Iokanaan’s voice stimulates the auditory senses, and therefore an object of admiration) that startles and catches Salomé’s interest/ obsessive curiosities. She develops a fascination for the Prophet that Herod fears and has prohibited all types of interaction with, therefore she begins to attempt to convince the Young Syrian to bring the profit to her. Upon establishing Iokannan as the object of her gaze and subsequent desire Salomé immediately changes her way of expressing herself and acting, from demonstrating stereotyped feminine sensibilities such as appreciation for natural beauty and loathing of the materialistic values the men of the court consumed in,

admiring virginal qualities that prohibit masculine control and the loss of identity, to becoming less romantic and more demanding and assertive in her decisions. She assumes masculine authority by making her own decisions, for example when she is asked to return to the banquet from which she fled and where Herod is awaiting her return, she pointedly refuses “I will not return.” When denied the opportunity to speak with the prophet she first says “I desire to speak with him” to declaring “I will speak with him,” completely confident of her potential power. Herod’s strict orders must therefore be broken. Since speaking with the other soldiers was useless her gaze finally falls upon the Syrian, a moment which is recognized by the Page as signing his death sentence; for no good can come from being the object of Salomé’s desire, however brief it may be. To convince the Young Syrian whom she has been ignoring the whole night would be no easy task.

Again readers and viewers of the play can recognize the similar instant switch of personae within Salomé and her behavior which proves that the gender role she assumes depended on the situation she is in. As Marcovitch has noted, “Salomé’s persona is therefore malleable; the image she projects shifts according to the desires of those who encounter her. “Having the need to be charming, Salomé returns to her hyper-feminine self and deploys a seduction using both body and verbal language. She structures her language with presupposed flattery mingled with authority when creating hypothetical scenes that may please the Syrian. She calls him by his name, forming questions by providing the answer for him: “Thou wilt do this thing for me, wilt thou not, Narraboth? Thou wilt do this thing for me,” repeating this answer a number of times as if placing a command, “Thou wilt do this thing for me.” She questions his courage and in doing so challenges his masculinity when saying “Often I have heard the Tetrarch talk of him. I think he is afraid of him, the Tetrarch. Art thou, *even* thou, also afraid of him,



Narraboth?" (My italics.) She tries to convince him by flattering him with a little green flower when she passes by him. This gesture once again alludes to the possible homosexual significance previously discussed; a gesture that Boyd observes as possessing "a coded significance identifying Salomé's sexuality as perversely, and clandestinely male" (21). The Syrian's refusal to please her in turn made her behavior become slightly more sexually aggressive than previously. The paradox is, slightly more sexually aggressive exploiting her femininity and status as a forbidden desire, yet assuming masculine defensiveness by losing power and being provoked. Although there is limited to no stage direction, other than a single smile Salomé gives to the Syrian, one can easily visualize the provocative proximity with which she speaks to the Syrian, the type of sly, reassuring smile given, the way she confidently looks at him as she imposes the decision for him using reverse psychology, claiming he himself knows he will do this for her. In a somewhat passionate manner, Salomé exclaims "I will look at thee Narraboth, it may be I will smile at thee. Look at me, Narraboth, look at me. Ah! Thou knowest that thou wilt do what I ask of thee. Thou knowest it ... I know that thou wilt do this thing." If a flower was inefficient then certainly to engage in the sensuous tension of looking at each other, to be the one who provokes a smile in his idealized beauty would convince him. Matthew Lewsadder suggests that "within a patriarchal system that denies her the means to pursue her desires, she can obtain agency by exploiting male desire for her" (522). As she persuades him to look at her, manipulating his desiring gaze knowing it is the sight of her that grants her power, the Young Syrian Narraboth makes the decision both he and Salomé (and even the reader/audience) knew he would take: the forbidden Prophet is called for.

Iokanaan immediately begins his rants of condemning those he claims have sinned against his Lord, explicitly insinuating Herod and Herodias for their incestuous union. "Ah but

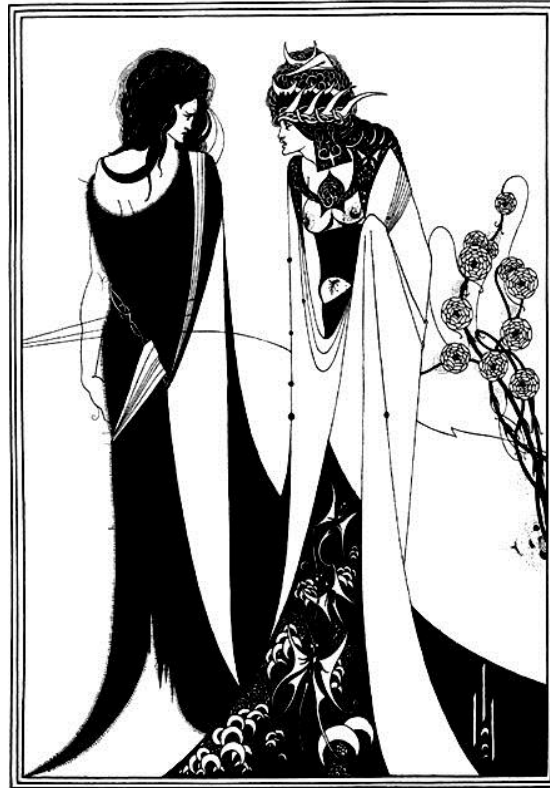
he is terrible!” however “it is his eyes above all that are terrible” according to Salomé. The Prophet articulates what his allegoric perception of the world sees making his eyes terrible, his vision, but he himself is not and neither are the profanities he is saying against her mother. Not caring what he says she asks him to continue speaking, therefore implying she wishes to hear more of him, revealing her fascination with his voice. (Similar to Laura who claimed Carmilla’s voice was like a lullaby, for the Page of Herodias the Syrian’s voice was like the “sound of a flute” to Salomé Iokanaan’s voice “is music to [her] ears.”)She is objectifying Iokanaan the same way her body has been objectified by Herod and the Young Syrian, by ignoring the content of the surface being admired and imposing a symbolic function upon the object which in this case is desire. Simply explained, his words are empty of any meaning to Salomé because she has an aesthetic fetish with the sound of his voice, and will develop a similar fetish with the beauty of his body rather than his person.

Even before knowing who Salomé is Iokanaan does not wish to be looked at by her because to him “by women came evil into the world.” He does not see Salomé; he sees a Daughter of Babylon, thus by “refusing to look beyond Salomé’s persona, he shows himself to be complicit in the patriarchal structure of the court that has defined Salomé by her image” (Marcovitch). Furthermore, by Iokanaan’s behavior, which demonstrates hatred, intolerance, fanaticism, and repulsion, Wilde integrates elements of satire since the Prophet’s behavior opposes the Christian ideology of promoting love for others, as well as the fact that he completely defies his role of preaching and attracting converts by blindly pushing Salomé away. However, by appropriating the masculine gaze and expressing her sexual desire, Salomé feminizes his religious insistence upon chastity by comparing him with similar terms as she did the moon which is considered feminine. Salomé exclaims, “I am sure he is chaste, as the moon

is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver.” Lewsadder suggests that “Salomé’s figuration of Iokanaan as a chaste, feminine object vis-à-vis her subject position as the one who ascribes meaning to the looked-upon allows her, in a gendered binary, to cultivate a ‘masculine’ sexual agency” (522). The shift of ‘masculine agency’ within a female body is similar to the description of feminized beauty within chastity in the male body, therefore maintaining the spirit of androgyny presented by the inversion of physical and behavioral gendered codes.

Beardsley visually aids Wilde’s attempt to represent gender as unstable in his illustration, “John and Salomé,” [Figure 2] where both androgynous characters are depicted as if conversing while simultaneously arguing and insulting each other as they do throughout the play.

Androgyny was according to Neginsky “associated with a kind of universality and perfection” by the end of the nineteenth century because it was perceived as a “result of the fulfillment of earthly evolution and growth” (174). However, neither Salomé nor John, nor Iokanaan, represents an ideal in the text or in the illustrations again constructing an essence of parody.



[Figure 2: John and Salomé]

Iokanaan as previously mentioned is not only intolerant but ill-tempered and unloving, yet through Salomé's descriptions of him, is made beautiful despite his arrogance. In the illustration (similar to "The Woman and the Moon") Iokanaan possesses delicate facial features, long black hair, and a troubled countenance of suffering while being looked upon Salomé. His feminized upper body part is contrasted by his exposed broad shoulders, muscular arm, and exaggerated large hand. Salomé's femininity is represented in the illustration by her two large breasts; however her large navel and her evil, vampiric facial features contradict her so-called purity as her selfish desires are made evident. Fernbach describes Beardsley's androgynous as visualized dances of gender and desire "that allow for double signification of licit and illicit desire" (201). The androgyny that permeates this illustration is perceived by the incongruous facial features of the characters with their bodies. The head of Iokanaan can easily be matched with

Salomé's body in order to represent an ideal feminine body (with physical feminine attributes and inoffensive countenance), while Salomé's head can be paired with Iokanaan's body as its sharp features are not at all delicate or feminine therefore making the masculine body figure more appropriate.

As Salomé's gaze on the Prophet intensifies the Prophet demands not to be looked at by her. He interrogates the others, "Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me... I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is." The Young Syrian makes the same plea of not looking at the Prophet to Salomé while the Page is similarly still pleading with the Syrian for him to not look at Salomé. Tookey deconstructs this situation as a power dynamic: "To see is to control; to have one's vision represented is to have one's perception of the world ratified. To be seen is to be subject to control; to represent women solely as objects of others' vision denies women their subjectivity" (29). However in the middle of this web of looking and not looking, of having control and not having it, is the fact that none of the characters has the object of their desire; subjectivity is denied to both genders leading to an obsessive (and in some cases perverse) need to obtain it nonetheless. Herod cannot have Salomé, Salomé cannot have the Prophet, the Syrian cannot have Salomé, and the Page cannot have the Syrian, yet they ignore all kind of interception with this logic. Those who are making the warnings not to look (Young Syrian, Page of Herodias, and Iokanaan) are those who know of the dangers that arise from being consumed by desire and are those who will eventually become direct or indirect victims of Salomé. Therefore to look at Salomé is as dangerous as to be looked at by her.

Salomé's beauty, allure, and seductive qualities are ineffectual with Iokanaan. She compliments him, flatters him, pleads for his attention yet he does not acknowledge her and does

not want to be seen, spoken to, and especially not touched by her. Deaf to his insults she continues to idealize his body, his hair, his mouth... “nothing in the world” is as perfect as his physical self, not who he is. To Salomé he is beautiful within the body and the soul, true perfection and balance. His beauty therefore becomes feminized not only by Salomé’s gaze, but by her rhetoric of her desire for him. She characterizes Iokanaan with docile features while again assuming masculine characteristics like that of sexually admiring and desiring a beautiful body, to indulge in a desiring and possessive gaze, and being the one to engage in a type of courting and idolatry.

She aesthetically depicts him as an unworldly image and is suspended within a realm she herself created, of admiration as well as loathing of him. The spirit of androgyny can again be perceived by Salomé’s passionate and affectionate admiration and advances towards the prophet. According to Neginsky “Wilde reverses the roles of the Lover and Beloved by making Salomé the bearer of the language of the Lover and [Iokanaan] the bearer of the language of the Beloved. The Lover [Salomé] is the one who courts the Beloved [Iokanaan] in Wilde’s play” (173). Therefore by the inversion of this role play, Salomé yet again feminizes Iokanaan by mimicking the language of the Song of Songs <sup>17</sup>(and his reaction of prudery certifies his feminization) and subsequently emasculates Salomé’s behavior. Every failed attempt to have his attention was a blow to her pride, her actions becoming more compulsive and obsessive. She then shifts her gaze to another body part briefly becoming hateful towards him and irrationally insulting the very thing she previously praised. She figuratively dismembers him, comparing the color of each part to the beauty of objects from nature: body as white as lilies, snow, roses, feet of dawn, breast of the moon shining on the sea; hair as black as a cluster of grapes, the cedars of

---

<sup>17</sup>Songs of Songs are a number of Biblical love poems depicting, depicting, according to Neginsky, “the passionate and affectionate love between a Lover and a Beloved”(173) who are meeting and seeking each other.

Lebanon, silence of forests; mouth as red as pomegranates, roses, feet of doves, lion slayer, and wine treaders, branch of corals, vermilion of mines. Bennet suggests that “These speeches which obsessively attempt to examine visually Iokanaan's body, compel Salome's desire to touch the remote body parts that her descriptions make only more remote (and more desirable)” (305). However from feeling amorous and “enamoured” of him she eventually developed a transgressive desire for him, becoming desperately obsessed with last object of her fixation: his mouth and the want to kiss it. Meanwhile, this unnatural desire within Salomé to possess the Prophet increases Iokanaan's hate for Salomé and most likely women in general, as he dismisses her completely and voluntarily withdraws back into the cistern that holds him captive. Salomé's remarks on his chastity, her comparisons of him to the moon, and her allusions to his virginity are confirmed as he chastises her desires for him by disdainfully rebuking her: “Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thine head, and get thee to the desert, and seek out the Son of Man.”

The Young Syrian, himself obsessed with Salomé, can easily detect her similar condition because of her open display of admirations and her ever repeating desire to kiss Iokanaan (mirroring his own repetition of her beauty in the beginning). Since Salomé adopted a similar attitude of the Syrian by submitting to the pleasure of voyeurism, by ignoring the world beyond the object of her contemplation and idealization, completely blind to the Syrian's compliments and pleas for attention, he attempts to refeminize her by invoking her femininity (with metaphors referring to her as a garden of myrrh and dove of all doves) as an object to be looked at and desired. This unsuccessful attempt and the way Salomé ignored him all night after she used him resulted in too much for the courageous first captain of the Tetrarch to bear, leading to his committing suicide on the spot. Assuming the role of a neglected lover he resembles a tragic

Shakespearean damsel in distress such as Desdemona, Ophelia, Juliet, etc. who kills herself over love; his final words being “I cannot suffer them.... Princess, Princess, do not speak these things.”

She further emasculates him as he loses authority and respect by giving into her orders despite not wanting to. He was obsessed with looking at her, and she in the complete opposite direction never looked at him which made him suffer. He knew the object of her desire, yet ironically he was the one that granted her access to it, overwhelmed by Salomé’s sudden attention and unable to think clearly. Ultimately his desire was to possess Salomé’s beauty, she who was to him “a silver flower,” “a garden of myrrh” “the dove of all doves,” “with hands like doves and butterflies,” references to objects of Mother Nature, embracing her femininity, wholesomeness and good. Salomé’s aggressive qualities resulted in distorting the projected fantasized projection the Syrian had of her. As Eibhar Walshe notes, “Salomé offend[ed] against a traditional system of male desire by articulating her own, independent desire for the body of the Prophet” (31). Unable to contain Salomé’s feminine beauty by her denial of him and by its distortion by her subversive passion, the Syrian’s desire became perverted to suicidal masochism. He did not die a heroic death and thus loses respect from the rest of the men in the court who consider suicide to be ridiculous and only done by “Roman philosophers” who were thought to be laughed at. The Young Syrian is not the only victim of Salomé’s femme fatality; the Page of Herodias also becomes her victim. Salomé killed his one and only friend and love, thus destroying his only source of hope. He miserably exclaims, “I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought,” in other words again linking Salomé to the moon, as the moon looks for dead things and Salomé found the dead Syrian because of her.



Salomé has been constantly objectified, including by Iokanaan, leading to understandable resentment of the perverted desires felt for her and for the subjectivity denied her. Marcovitch suggests that “Salomé’s attempted seduction of Iokanaan is an endeavor to find power outside the court and particularly to find a form of subjective power, one in which her power is not dependent on the gaze of others.” Salomé was oblivious to the Syrian’s death, to Iokanaan’s condemnation of her, to the world around her; she was in a mindless state only repeating, “I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan; I will kiss thy mouth,” with a dreadful determination that causes horror and anxiety. However because of Iokanaan’s constant rejection of her, her own desires become perverted by her need for attention and reaffirmation of her beauty, charm, and power. Her desires become narcissistic in nature by having the uncontrollable need to have complete sexual dominance over the object of her desire: Iokanaan who would be made an example of. As an object of sexual desire herself, she knew the destruction the consummation of desire brought forth, for she has been the source of much destruction, yet she ignored what she very well knew. Salomé reacts within a perverse world that gives her the label of a *femme fatale* by blindly asserting her sexual subjectivity perversely as well when choosing her object choice and how to obtain it.

All in sequence as Iokanaan exits the scene Herod enters, bored with his company and missing the sight of Salomé. Like all the other characters whose attention is always held captive by Salomé, their attention is similarly captured by the moon and they must say so. Herod immediately describes the moon, “like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked,” and demands that all the furnishings, such as carpets, torches, ivory and jasper tables, be moved outside for him to have full view of the sky in comfort and luxury. As previously observed, the characters project onto the moon their

perceptions of Salomé and their desire for her, implicating their states of mind. Thus Herod's way of describing the moon reveals his desires to have access to look upon Salomé at that very moment, his desire to see his stepdaughter's naked body, and his (later developed) opinion of her insanity. Herod's desire for Salomé can be considered perverse, firstly because he is married, and not only is he married, Salomé's mother is his wife and her father his brother; therefore the naked body his sexually desiring gaze has objectified is his young stepdaughter's/ niece's. After a brief moment of lamenting the Syrian's death he focuses on Salomé, particularly with a fixation on her mouth (similar to her own fixation for Iokanaan's), offering her refreshments to watch her consume them. He describes the erotic pleasure it would give him to drink wine with her so that she may "dip into it [her] little red lips, that [he] may drain the cup," or to share ripe fruit with her as he would "love to see in a fruit the mark of [her] little teeth [and] may eat what is left." Salomé refuses to have either.

Herod mimics Salomé's attitude and behavior in various ways. Like Salomé disappointed although not defeated, Herod had a fetish for Salomé's different body parts and similarly moved from one fixation to another, from her mouth to her flesh. The more Salomé refused him, the more aggressive he became just as she did. "Dance for me Salomé," was his first attempt, "Salomé, daughter of Herodias, dance for me," his second, and his final one was no longer an attempt but an order, "I command thee to dance, Salomé." She calmly refuses, "I will not dance, Tetrarch" defying and even mocking his insistence. Channeling his indignation elsewhere, he engages in trivial conversation with others until finally being overwhelmed by lack of his desire's fulfillment, he unknowingly gives Salomé the opportunity she has been waiting for. Herod proposes, "If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee. Yes, dance for me, Salomé, and whatsoever thou shalt ask of me I will give it thee, even

unto the half of my kingdom.” Being the first offer that sparked Salomé’s attention she asks him three times if he was certain to swear an oath to do so, a reaction Herod thought to be favorable, for her interest implied her possible agreement to satisfy him. Being closer than ever to obtaining his perverse desires of seeing his stepdaughter’s body dance for *him*, of having her submit to *his* demands (however temporary), without having the certainty of its approval or even knowing the price he would have to pay Herod swears “by my life, by my crown, by my gods. Whatsoever thou shalt desire I will give it thee, even to the half of my kingdom, if thou wilt but dance for me. O Salomé, Salomé, dance for me.”

Ignoring her mother’s advice and completely focused on her own erotic desires that were unknown to anyone, she agrees to visually please Herod, as the stage directions simply state, “Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils,” only alluding to her ornamental attire rather than describing the dance itself. Bennett notes that “the ritual Dance of the Seven Veils [which describes] Salomé’s enigmatic performance has to do with the removal of veils signifying the shedding of earthly appearances or illusions, and indeed the dance can be read as the stripping away of illusive poetic ornament heaped on Salomé by the male characters she engages with” (308). Seeing her as he wanted to see her, and denying her subjectivity following his command, he never for a moment stopped to think of the possible outcome of such a proposition, precisely because Salomé’s virginal beauty blinded him to her actual fatality. On the contrary he narcissistically felt pride in himself for obtaining his desire and feeling confident in keeping his word as he claims, “I am the slave of my word, and my word is the word of a king.” Not knowing anything about Salomé he assumed what she would desire would be her mother’s throne, and he would have no problem with making Salomé his queen.

The consummation of Herod's desire led to his defeat by the *femme fatale*. "It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Iokanaan in a silver charger. You have sworn an oath, Herod," Salomé reminds him. Herod who for a brief moment thought himself victorious was immediately crushed by Salomé's request. Salomé again emasculates the male protagonist by compromising not only his royal, but masculine authority despite his insistent begging of her to change her mind by showering all kinds of jewels and materialistic luxuries over Salomé for which she cares nothing. Lewsadder classifies this as Herod's "symbolic castration" for she "symbolically castrates Herod for his gaze by manipulating his desire for her, making him powerless to do anything but grant her wish" (525) and through the decapitation of Iokanaan indicating and celebrating his own castration. Even Herod acknowledges what a terrible request is made of him by a virginal figure thus exposing patriarchal society's misconception of beauty and purity. However there is nothing more that could be said and nothing more that could be done. Having compromised his crown for a moment of brief pleasure, Herod loses control over his decisions, commenting "hereafter let no king swear an oath. If he kept it not, it is terrible, and if he keep it, it is terrible also." Thus he must unwillingly submit to Salomé's request and forever repent the lesson he learned, recognizing the expense of his desire by repudiating his desiring gaze when admitting to Salomé, "Thy beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at thee overmuch. Nay, but I will look at thee no more," accepting his defeat.

Killing Iokanaan, more specifically, his decapitation was the only approach Salomé had to have her way with him and have complete power over him. The more the matter was delayed by Herod's excuses and bribes, the more determined she was in demanding the head of Iokanaan eight times, and when her order was finally approved by the Tetrarch she became hysterically impatient to hear Iokanaan's cries of death, exclaiming, "There is no sound. I hear nothing. Why

does he not cry out, this man?... Strike, strike, Naaman, strike, I tell you.... No, I hear nothing. There is a silence, a terrible silence.” She perversely needed to hear his pain in order to be satisfied. By her manipulation of Herod’s desire for her as she did with the Young Syrian, her persistent insisting, constant reminding Herod of his oath that must not be broken, and insulting the soldiers for their cowardice and inability to follow orders, Salomé achieves her own ends and is given the head of the Prophet on a silver platter as depicted in the illustration “The Dancer’s Reward” [Figure 3]. This is of the few examples of the collection of illustrations of the play that is not conflated with androgyny. The genders of the characters are distinguishable between male and female, Iokanaan’s head and Salomé viewing her prize. Neginsky suggests that Salomé is “transformed into woman only when [acknowledging her role] in death and becomes fully and entirely the possession of the devil” (201).<sup>18</sup> Her facial features are softened, her expression without malice, her eyes open and briefly understanding the implications of his death, her hair differentiated from the male’s, in a floral robe next to her sandals indicated her feet were still bare after her exotic, sexualized dance. She lifts Iokanaan’s head by his long hair, the docility of his facial features now hardened, with a stiff open mouth, as drops of blood spill from the silver platter onto her fingers and the floor, thus drenching her bare feet with Iokanaan’s blood.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>This can visually be interpreted in the “Tailpiece” of the play as she is placed in a coffin by the devil after her own death.

<sup>19</sup>Neginsky asserts that Wilde’s inspiration for Salomé’s ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ was derived from a concert of the orchestra Tziganes, in which he went to the director and told him “he was writing a play about a woman dancing with her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain... Play something in harmony with my thoughts” (168). Allegedly after the music stopped playing, “Wilde went home and finished *Salomé*” (168).<sup>19</sup>

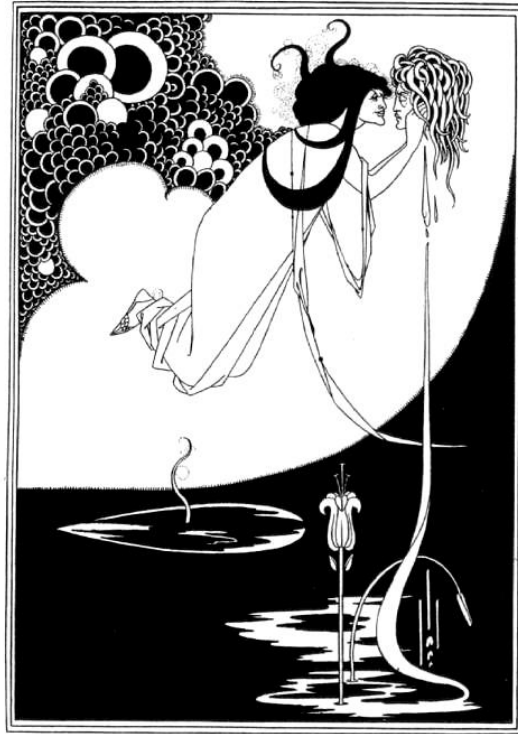


[Figure 3: The Dancer's Reward]

Upon receiving the object of her desire in her hands she becomes consumed by the ecstasy of the power she has embodied, making her narcissistic desire for Iokanaan become further perverted giving into hysteria of excesses of emotion, resentment, and sexual despair. She speaks to the decapitated head, mocking it for its loss of power and emphasizing the consequences of ignoring her, yet continuously threatening it:

Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan...  
 Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I said it; did I not say it?...  
 Art thou afraid of me, Jokanaan, that thou wilt not look at me?...  
 Thou wouldst have none of me, Jokanaan. Thou didst reject me...  
 I still live, but thou, thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me...  
 All other men are hateful to me. But thou, thou wert beautiful!...  
 Oh, how I loved thee! I love thee yet, Jokanaan, I love thee only...  
 I am a thirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body... I was a  
 virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and  
 thou didst fill my veins with fire.... If thou hadst looked at me thou  
 hadst loved me... Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and  
 the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death. Love only  
 should one consider.

Iokanaan's rejection sparked within Salomé a delusional sense of unrequited love and personal offense since her source of power, which was her feminine sexuality, was challenged by his ignoring her. Reflecting on Freud's psychoanalytic studies, Marcovitch explains that "repressed endeavors break through the pressure of the ego and either forces its way into consciousness or reveals itself through action. The resulting action invariably throws out of balance the ego's role of stabilizing the individual; in other words the individual's desire becomes perverted." She emphasizes that her one desire was to have Iokanaan's beauty for herself through a taste of forbidden love. Salomé's control which is derived from her desirability is taken from her thus perverting her persona and threatening the established order of gender hierarchy by articulating her own, independent desire for the body of the Prophet. Salomé repeatedly claims herself to be a virgin and that she is desperately in love with Iokanaan, and that by the Prophet's negation of her he stirred within her an erotic challenge she had never felt before, therefore stealing her virginity from her. Beardsley's iconic representation of the aftermath of Salomé's confrontation with Iokanaan's head after she chastises him is titled "The Climax" [Figure 4]. Throughout the illustrations Salomé's gender had been constantly shifting because of her androgynous physical portrayals. When receiving the head of the Prophet her features were not as expressive as the previous illustrations, she appears to be lost in meditation. Salomé was used to always getting her way because her feminine sexuality never failed to be effective against male suitors. Despite her masculine gestures, it is her femininity that prevails as Iokanaan's head still bleeds as she holds it, turning his dead lips towards her. Marcovitch determines that "Salomé's desire [from] breaking free from the limits her persona imposed on it, ends up consuming her as well."



[Figure 4: The Climax]

Her uncontrollable lust reaches its peak as she reaches for Jokanaan's mouth and kisses it, revealing the extent of her sexual perversity and the strength of her passion:

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?... But perchance it is the taste of love.... They say that love hath a bitter taste.... But what of that? what of that? I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan.

Salomé's fascination with the Prophet was for the beauty of his body and voice, but now his eyes were shut eternally, losing his vision and source for articulation. Bucknell interprets her request for Jokanaan's head as her way to create of him an icon of silence, "an unseeing, unhearing, untalking head: in other words an image [of] mute testimony to the destructive power of the female." Salomé is depicted in the illustration as a woman thriving in her glory of sexual



subjectivity and power, consumed by her erotic consummation of a love that was forbidden when Iokanaan was alive, kissing him being the ultimate satisfaction for a love once denied to her.

The perversity of this act must be questioned, as well as its consequences. Gilbert summarizes, “*Salomé* [as] essentially a play about power: about who is to have it, who is to exercise it, how it is to be transmitted” (148). Salomé refuses to internalize the socially sanctioned meanings of gendered sexual difference within a patriarchal order. To Salomé, she is the one in power because nothing that she has desired has been denied to her; she is the one who shall exercise power through her sexuality by manipulating the men that in turn sexually desire her, therefore becoming a threat. However, Fernbach correctly determines that “the phallogocentric order is threatened only so that it may ultimately be reinstated... The threat of castration to phallic supremacy, represented by Salomé herself, is warded off by the death of this castrating woman” (197.) Upon seeing Salomé’s uncontrollable desire, her brief moment of absolute glory, Herod immediately condemns her as “monstrous” and summons her death. Certainly a woman kissing a decapitated head is quite an appalling image, but can Herod’s decision to have her killed be perceived as morally motivated? He acts upon political authority that lacks integrity as he himself is also consumed in a perverse lust for his stepdaughter/ niece. Furthermore, rather than a righteous action by a just power to reestablish social order, Herod’s decision is a reaction of his broken pride and consequent fear of the effects of his loss of power and his role in killing a holy man.

Salomé being an object of desire, acted accordingly to her function. Despite her image being highly scrutinized it is but a reflection of the patriarchal order’s own perversity. Boyd suggests that “Her desire, within the reference of the text, plays out in a world in which all desire, desire *per se*, is classifiable as perverse... only because what constitutes ‘normal desire’

is either unknowable (definable only as what it is not) or unreal (has no basis in actual practice)” (22). Therefore, despite the fact that all members of society are susceptible to perversity, the main difference is that some perverts have power while others do not. Beardsley illustrates Salomé as a sexually assertive woman, as an androgynous figure representing new identity types of the fin-de-siècle such as the New Woman. Jane Marcus observes that Salomé “is crushed by the shields of the soldiers of the state because she is an enemy to the state and its power structures,” her female sexual subjectivity, like that of the New Woman posing a threat to patriarchal power structures “that attempt to control and contain desire” (Lewsadder 525). Therefore, by eliminating both the threat of the New Woman by Salomé’s death and eliminating the homosexual threat by the Syrian and the Page’s deaths, “Wilde’s play makes the connection between misogyny and homophobia in Victorian society” (Fernbach 211). Knowing no bounds, Salomé becomes the icon of destructive femininity. Bucknell suggests that Salomé is a figure that continues to remain blank, “to see Salomé is to see the eye of the male beholder looking back at itself--to see the blank space of the nameless daughter in the biblical stories... a woman reborn time after time.” In this patriarchal society however what is different becomes dangerous, therefore neither the expression of female sexuality nor homosexuality could go unpunished.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

It would be impossible to mention a *femme fatale* and not associate her with trans/aggressive sexuality. The *femme fatale*'s sexual presence (which creates sexual tension) is at all times a result of her manipulation and power over her chosen victim (male or female), and subsequently her manipulation and power over the patriarchal ideologies of her society. Her perversity is relative to masculine interpretation as her relationships result in the financial, intellectual, moral, or literal ruin of male protagonists and their estrangement from society due to her sexual, emotional, and psychological seductions. Breaking away from normative feminine sexuality that presupposed passiveness and submissiveness, by her sexual aggressiveness the *femme fatale* ironically exhibits masculine behavioral traits while maintaining alluring feminine physical attributes; thus making her a double threat to society by gaining sexual and emotional authority because of the instability of her gender and expected performance verse actual behavior.

What has been questioned throughout this thesis is whether the *femme fatale* is a creative product of masculine anxieties revolving around feminine sexuality or whether it is an artistic critique of patriarchal ideologies. The *femme fatale* embodies a dialectical reality between social reform and feminist movements (for example following principles of liberation of the sexualized body), and that of social perversion (evil, monstrous) and uncontrollable feminine nature (destructive), which is why she can be placed under an ambiguous lens (reformer versus rebel, highly feminine versus defeminized); neither however limiting her sexualized presence or her defiance to gendered social codes. Becky, Carmilla, and Salomé are all Victorian characters thus have similar characteristics between them, however each is clearly motivated differently

(emphasizing the drastic changes within a brief period of time), consequently differentiating their seductive approaches while still being considered a dangerous threat to their victims.

*Femmes fatales* attack patriarchal principles of gender by exploiting the very notion that has imprisoned sexuality and women's bodies, which is femininity, in order to survive, succeed, or perish within her time and setting. This is quite ironic, considering her feminine sexuality is her most powerful asset and that is precisely what patriarchal ideologies were striving to avoid yet secretly desired. By wanting to maintain social hierarchy in a world where independent New Women came together and where homosexuals and lesbians created subcultures, the normalization of gender, sexual identity, and sexuality proved the moral hypocrisy of Victorian society. Men were powerless to the *femme fatale*'s eroticism, her body an irresistible object of desire and conquest. Due to the victim's inability to resist her, or more importantly act according to his or her own will, her victims experience a profound existential crisis rooted in their own inability to internalize gendered norm and behavior, commonly resulting in feelings of emasculation and consequent inadequacy. Patriarchy aimed to exert power and control over sexuality while in reality feminine sexuality controlled patriarchy by subconsciously shaping society's desires.

All the *femmes fatales* discussed have sexuality as a source of power, used as weapon for gaining even more power. However, one major difference is how this sexuality is expressed and for what motives. Becky assumes the expected roles of governess, wife, and socialite, kindling men's forbidden desires for her to achieve personal gratification on her everyday victories, leading her towards social mobility. Carmilla developed a highly intimate and erotic relationship with Laura in order to fulfill her desperate want for love and need for blood. Salomé utilizes her body to convince those that desire her to aid her in obtaining her own objects of desire. Each

manipulates her image, to manipulate her victims into thinking a certain way based on traditional female expectations. Becky and Carmilla are easily trusted due to their beauty, intelligence, wit, and charm, which complied with the standards of respectable ladies, however behind their innocent façades and pretended naivety was cold calculation on how to act and what to say. By successfully enacting a passive aggressive sexuality they maintained a mysterious allure that captivated their victims, who felt not at all threatened by little Becky and darling Carmilla. Becky hid at all costs from sexually compromising behavior in front of society; however her male visitor while she was alone at home because her husband was incarcerated would say the contrary. Carmilla would exclaim passionate declarations of love and death to her friend Laura while sexually assaulting her during the night. While Salomé's manipulation of image constantly readapted itself to the desires and expectations of various characters, in order to please them superficially so as to be sure she will receive what she wants; whether her desire be to see a forbidden Prophet, decide to dance, order the decapitation of said Prophet, or kiss his severed head.

Ironically the *femme fatale*'s aggressive behavior simultaneously emasculates her victims, thus the usurpation of her lover's masculinity and male privilege make her more frightening and gender continues to be attacked as she performs accordingly to both genders, while the male characters also contradict their roles by being feminized by this overtly sexual being. While Becky demonstrates charisma and focus, making decisions for her husband and herself, her male victims become emasculated by personifying typically feminine characteristics, for example: George's narcissistic tendencies by constantly admiring his reflection in a mirror and bestowing a gift upon himself rather than for his wife, Jos' interests and obsession with fashion and his extreme shyness evident by physical discomforts of blushing and sweating which

could also be considered womanly; even Rawdon was feminized as he assumed sacrificial behavior and self-reproach that characterized the idealized Angel in the House and expected duties of a husband and father. Salomé's male victims were also emasculated as authority was asserted by her manipulations and seductions. The Young Syrian goes as far as committing suicide in the name of unrequited love and Herod willingly gave up his royal honor for the sake of her dance by having to acquiesce to a call of action he did not agree with; in other words having to submit to Salomé's will. Of course Carmilla is an exception to this outcome of the *femme fatale*'s ambiguous gender performance on her victims, for she has no direct male victim other than patriarchy itself. Her victim remained within her gender norms however what differed was her sexual orientation. Carmilla certainly behaved as a tender, affectionate lover as well enforced the courting role typically of the man.

The configuration of the *femme fatale* was dictated by the status of women of the specific contextual period they were created in, which is why despite having similarities the *femmes fatales* attack different aspects of the patriarchal system. Thackeray's *femme fatale* was written when the first feminist revolts and gatherings started to take place in hopes for more legal rights and opportunities. Thackeray satirizes the limited options for women by attacking conventions of marriage and domesticity, society's moral hypocrisies, social extravagance, superficial values and attentions to appearance through Becky's manipulation of expected norms and the completion of her evil schemes. Carmilla's function as a vampire *femme fatale* served as a critique to the Catholic Church's involvement in heterosexual normative and its medical validation and support by seducing a young woman to lesbian intimacy. Victorian society was at unease by feminine sexuality that even friendships between young girls were being observed at with suspicion. The fact that Laura succumbs to her lesbian persona reveals Le Fanu's message

that social imposition cannot dictate the love felt between two people. By the time *Salomé* was published the *femme fatale* evolved into an image of perverse sexuality because of the notable increase of women's involvement in social and political affairs. The lines that differentiated gender behavior and hierarchy were being blurred by sexual anarchy. The growing awareness of women's authenticity and sexuality created the configuration of an all powerful sexual entity combining both genders allegorically. From a context of chaos between homosexuals and heterosexuals, women and men, even artists and art, was when *Salomé* was born which is why she defines intensity and eccentricity, exploiting her desirability like never before. Wilde being a sexual radical himself attacked notions of aesthetic creativity and desirability, as well as notions of feminine beauty's implications on purity and morality.

If the common question concerning sexuality is which gender has power over the other superficially it may appear as though patriarchy wins, as they impose the rules that dictate behavior of which women must obey. However by being forced to act a certain way the *femme fatale* manipulates imposed behavior, lurking in their own deceptive reality. Carmilla and *Salomé* are executed for their eccentric sexual identities; Carmilla being a lesbian vampire and *Salomé* being consumed in sexual lust and desire. It would appear as though the patriarchal order is restored with their deaths. However blood has already been spilt by these ladies, their sexual perversity has already intoxicated those that remain living. Laura will forever remain searching for Carmilla's show, searching for her other lesbian half who help her find her sexual identity. Herod lives to remember the day *Salomé* made a fool of him, her death was but a necessary precaution to save himself the negative judgment from the people of the court. Does patriarchy really win? The truth of the matter is that both sexes are affected by gender roles. All three *femme fatales* demonstrate how hypocritical and perverse society actually is as they are a product

of the society they reflect. In other words, the *femme fatale* is evil because society has forced her and molded her to readapt to survive. Some women die, as do male characters, some live to regret their lives disappointed while others persist in memory. If a *femme fatale* figure sought to scare society about women's sexuality, what was actually being reflected was society's own flaws, and there is no one else to thank but themselves for all the resentment and danger the *femme fatale* comes to represent. Typically the woman must take the blame for the series of unfortunate events resulting from her sexual expression, however the unfortunate end of all the characters reflects that there is no superior gender, because gender does not exist at all outside society's categorizations. Gender is but a cultural product society accepts as normal because of the centuries of repetition making gender behavior pass as natural. Since the *femme fatale* archetype is all about sex she can easily be blamed for perverse sexuality and pin that label on regular women in society.

Since Carmilla and Salomé both kill their victims, it would appear as though their death was necessary in order to restore peace in the chaotic setting they manifested themselves in. The main difference between these two fatal ladies and Becky Sharp is that Miss Becky survives the end of her novel, actually in a satisfied manner, getting away with all her misdemeanors unpunished and with economic stability. The reason Becky survives is to make the statement that as long as gender norms that dictate behavior exist, there will be a Becky Sharp manipulating those very rules; as long as there are ridiculous rules to follow, men will be continued to be ruined by a *femme fatale*'s sexuality. What saves Becky in comparison to Carmilla and Salomé is that she never expresses her sexuality. Because patriarchal institutions fear to embrace female sexuality she must remain silent and endure these rules that she will break in society in order to survive within it.



The Victorian period was the first society to emphasize sex as a defining component in society, affording instrumentality to sexuality in such a way that sexuality and its exploitation continues to be of great importance, particularly when it affects masculine behavior as well. Society continues its obsession with sex, with scrutinizing women's bodies, and judging others under patriarchal ideologies that define what the correct form of expression is, "correct form" being the option maintaining the system's order. The *femme fatale* will always reflect some kind of anxiety revolving female sexuality, and its corresponding link with masculine insecurities. However in the end, what must be remembered is that we all suffer from societally gendered pressures, and who we are is but our reaction to the outside world. *Femmes fatales* are and will be considered evil when a patriarchal institution has a problem with feminine sexual expression, and most importantly, when they themselves fear losing social authority or fear of losing personal control, either way making the *femme fatale* unforgettable and recognized as a powerful, dangerous woman.

## Works Cited

- Allen, Virginia M. *The Femme fatale Erotic Icon*. New York: Whitston, 1983. Print.
- Bade, Patrick. *Femme fatale Images of Evil and Fascinating Women*. New York: Mayflower, 1979. Print.
- Bailie, Helen T. "Blood Ties: The Vampire Lover in the Popular Romance." *Business Library*. The Journal of American Culture, n.d. Web. 18 Oct. 2011.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Print.
- Becker-Leckrone, Megan. "Salomé: the fetishization of a textual corpus." *New Literary History* 26.2 (1995): 239+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Bennett, Chad. "OSCAR WILDE'S SALOMÉ: DÉCOR, DES CORPS, DESIRE." *ELH* 77.2 (2010): 297-323. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.
- Bonds-Raacke, Jennifer. "Remembering gay/lesbian media characters: can Ellen and Will improve attitudes toward homosexuals?" *Journal of Homosexuality*. 5.3: (2007): 9-34. NCBI. Web. 10 May 2015. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18032285>
- Boyd, Jason. "Staging the Page: Visibility and Invisibility in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*." *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 35.1 (2008): 17-47. Web.
- Braun, Heather. *The Rise and Fall of the Femme fatale in British Literature*. Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2012. Print.
- Bucknell, Brad. "On 'seeing' Salomé." *ELH* 60.2 (1993): 503+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. NY: Routledge, 1990. Print.

- Butler, Judith; Osborne, Peter, Segal, Lynne. "Gender as Performance: An Interview with *Judith Butler*." *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (1994): 32-39. EGS. Web. 10 May 2015.  
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/gender-as-performance-an-interview-with-judith-butler/>
- Calzo, Jared. "Media Exposure and Viewers' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Evidence for Mainstreaming or Resonance?" *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 53. 2 (2009): 280-299. EBSCO Host. Web. 10 May 2015.  
<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/41224468/media-exposure-viewers-attitudes-toward-homosexuality-evidence-mainstreaming-resonance>
- Capuano, Peter J. "At the Hands of Becky Sharp: (In)Visible Manipulation and *Vanity Fair*." *Victorians Institute Journal* 38.1 (2008): 167-191. Web.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/88>
- Christ, Carol T., and John O. Jordan. *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. By Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997. 347-62. Print.
- Chodorow, Nancy. "Family Structure and Feminine Personality." *Woman, Culture & Society*. By Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford UP (1974): 43-66. Print.
- Cody, David. "The Gentleman." *Victorian Web*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Dec. 2014.  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/history/gentleman.html>
- Cole, Sarah R. "The Aristocrat in the Mirror: Male Vanity and Bourgeois Desire in

- William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61.2 (2006): 137-170. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Dec. 2014.
- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2006.61.2.137>
- Costello-Sullivan, Kathleen. "Meet Carmilla." *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*. NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013. Print.
- Creed, Barbara. *Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection*. na, 1986.
- Davis, Lloyd. "The Virgin Body as Victorian Text: An Introduction." *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*. Albany: State U of New York, 1993: 3-24. Web. 26 Aug. 2016. <<http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/52612.pdf>>.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- Fernbach, Amanda. "Wilde's 'Salomé' and the Ambiguous Fetish." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29.1 (2001): 195-218. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Feb. 2016.
- Fisher, Judith L. "Image versus Text in the Illustrated Novels of William Makepeace Thackeray." *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995. 60-85. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Random House, 1990. Print.
- Freund, John Christian. "Address to the Public." *Dark Blue* 2.12 (1872): iii-v. ProQuest. Web. 5 Dec. 2015.
- Geary, Robert. "Carmilla and the Gothic Legacy." *The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature*. OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1999. Print.
- Gilbert, Elliot L. "Tumult of Images: Wilde, Beardsley, and *Salomé*." *Victorian Studies* 26.2 (Winter 1983): 133-159. *JSTOR*. Web. 03 Feb. 2016.

- Heller, Tamar. "The Vampire in the House: Hysteria, Female Sexuality, and Female Knowledge in Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1872)." *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*. NY: Garland, 1996. 77-95. Print.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 1-20. Print.
- Homans, Margaret. "Victoria's Sovereign Obedience." *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*. By Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan. Berkeley: U of California Press 1995. 169-97. Print.
- Hopcke, Robert H. "Jung and Homosexuality: A Clearer Vision." *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 33.1 (1988): 65-80. Print.
- Houston, Larry. "The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885." Homosexuality in Great Britain Section Two: Legislation. N.p., 11 May 2013. Web. 03 Mar. 2016.  
<<http://www.banap.net/spip.php?article156>>
- Jadwin, Lisa. "The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in Vanity Fair." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. Autumn 32.4 (1992): 663-687. JSTOR. Web.
- Jaffe, Audrey. "Spectacular Sympathy." *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*. By Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995. 327-44. Print.
- Jones, E. Michael. *Monsters from the ID: The Rise of Horror in Fiction and Film*. Dallas, TX: Spence Pub., 2000. Print.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Is the Gaze Male?" *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. By Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review (1983):

- 309-27. Print.
- Kettle, Arnold. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Vanity Fair; A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice- Hall, 1969. Print.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. NY: Harper and Row, 1984. Print.
- Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. "Carmilla." *Vampires: Two Centuries of Great Vampire Stories*. By Alan Ryan. Garden City, NY: Doubleday (1987): 71-137. Print.
- Lewsadder, Matthew. "Removing the Veils: Censorship, Female Sexuality, and Oscar Wilde's Salomé." *Modern Drama* 45.4 (Winter 2002): 519-544. Print.
- Major, Adrienne Antrim. "Other Love: Le Fanu's *Carmilla* as Lesbian Gothic." *Horrifying Sex*. Ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik. Jefferson: McFarland, 2007. 151-166. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 200. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2014. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Dec. 2015.
- Mamoon, Sayeeda H. *Flowers of Androgyny: The Garden of Salomé in Fin-de-Siècle Art and Literature*. Diss. 1996. Print.
- Marcovitch, Heather. "The Princess, Persona, and Subjective Desire: A Reading of Oscar Wilde's Salomé." *Papers on Language & Literature* 40.1 (2004): 88. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 5 Feb. 2016.
- Marmor, Judd. *Homosexual Behavior: A Modern Reappraisal*. New York: Basic, 1980. Print.
- . *Sexual Inversion*. New York: Basic, 1965. Print.
- Mason, Michael. *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Mayayo, Patricia. *Historias De Mujeres, Historias Del Arte*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2003. Print.
- Michelis, Angelica. "'Dirty mama': horror, vampires, and the maternal in late nineteenth-century

- Gothic fiction.” *Critical Survey* 15.3 (2003): 5+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Dec. 2015.
- Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1988. Print.
- Neginsky, Rosina. *Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was; Salome: Nymph, Seducer, Destroyer*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. Print.
- Nochlin, Linda. "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art." *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989. 136-44. Print.
- . "Women, Art, and Power." *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989. 1-36. Print.
- Pym, Anthony. "The Importance of Salomé: Approaches to a *Fin de Siècle* Theme.” *French Forum*. 14 (1989): 311-322. Print.
- Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 505-508. Print.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Women, Reproductive Rights and the Catholic Church.” *Feminist Theology*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2008): 184-193. Print.
- Senf, Carol A. *The Vampire in Nineteenth Century English Literature*. Bowling Green: Popular, 1988. Print.
- Signorotti, Elizabeth. "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in ‘Carmilla’ and ‘Dracula.’” *Criticism* 38.4 (1996): 607+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web 16 Dec. 2015.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Viking, 1990. Print.
- Stott, Rebecca. *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme fatale*. London: Macmillan

- Press, 1992. Print.
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, and George Saintsbury. *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*. London: Oxford UP, n.d. Print.
- Thomas, Tammis Elise. "Masquerade Liberties and Female Power in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*." *The Haunted Mind*. Ed. Elton E. Smith and Robert Haas. Lanham: Scarecrow, 1999. 39-65. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 200. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2014. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 16 Dec. 2015.
- Tookey, Helen. "'The Fiend that Smites with a Look': The Monstrous/ Menstrous Woman and the Dangers of the gaze in Oscar Wilde's 'Salome.'" *Literature and Theology* 18.1 (2004): 23-37. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Feb. 2016.
- Ulanov, Ann Belford. *The Feminine*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971. Print.
- Walshe, Eibhar. "Angels of Death: Wilde's Salomé and Shaw's Saint Joan." *Irish University Review*. 27 (1997): 24-32. Print.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. London: Longman, 1989. Print.
- Welter, Nancy. "Women Alone: Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' and Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'." *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. By Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006. 138-48. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé A Tragedy in One Act*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. The Project Gutenberg. 12 May 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/42704/42704-h/42704-h.htm>>
- Zimbalist Rosaldo, Michelle. "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview." *Woman*,



*Culture & Society*. By Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1974. 17-42. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj, Elizabeth Wright, and Edmond L. Wright. *The Žižek Reader*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999. Print.