

Rethinking the Feminine in Stoker Le Fanu and Wilde

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Abstract: The representation of female characters in 19th century novels tended to follow the conventional perception of gender roles, which according to Kathleen Spencer in her 1992 article on purity and danger in the Victorian Era "never in western society have gender roles been more rigid or more distinct (at least in the middle classes) than in the late nineteenth century"(205). Women were expected to be submissive, pale and devoid of sensuality and sexuality.

My paper will tease out a tension at the heart of this normative depiction in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though I will demonstrate that the three works appear to present a reactionary approach to the theme of gender crossing, I will also provide a counter-argument the three works contain the seeds of a transgressive rethinking of gender roles that allow for a productive liberation from those self-same norms. I will also address the notion of queerness as indicative of a liminality that undermines prevailing gender binaries. The first chapter of this thesis will provide an in-depth analysis of gender norms and roles in the Victorian era, reviewing the various aspects of feminine and masculine depictions as well as the concept of the New Woman which will be traced thorough the novels. The second chapter will discuss the characterization and attitude towards feminine characters in *Carmilla* following the axis of conformity and transgression. The third chapter will explore notions of femininity in *Dracula*, particularly the various models presented in the novel and the attitudes towards them. The fourth and final chapter will be dedicated to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which I will explore the notions of queerness and gender crossing in the Dorian's character.