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**VICTIMIZED, VILLAINIZED AND
REBELLIOUS WOMEN OF THE GOTHIC**
Luella Miller's Many Roles in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's
"Luella Miller"

ABSTRACT

Elisa Ihalainen: Victimized, Villainized and the Rebellious Women of the Gothic: Luella

Miller's Many Roles in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Luella Miller"

Bachelor's Thesis

Tampere University

Degree Programme in English Language, Literature and Translation

March 2020

This thesis examines Gothic female characters and their typical roles through a feminist framework, focusing on the main character in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "Luella Miller. Feminist literary criticism and especially studies on the Female Gothic are the theoretical background of the study. The thesis argues that Luella's role is too complex to be labeled by the typical roles for women in the Gothic because she portrays features of victims, antagonists and rebellious heroines at the same time.

Keywords: the Female Gothic, feminist literary criticism, gender roles, victims, villains, heroines

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Elisa Ihalainen: Victimized, Villainized and the Rebellious Women of the Gothic: Luella

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Kandidaatintutkielma

Tampereen yliopisto

Englannin kielen, kirjallisuuden ja kääntämisen tutkinto-ohjelma

Maaliskuu 2020

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee goottilaisia naishahmoja ja niiden tyypillisimpiä rooleja feministisestä näkökulmasta, erityisesti keskittyen Mary E. Wilkins Freemanin novellin "Luella Miller" päähenkilöön. Feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus ja erityisesti naisgootiikan tutkimus ovat tutkielman teoreettinen tausta. Tutkielmassa esitetään, että Luellan rooli on niin moniulotteinen, että sitä ei voi verrata mihinkään yhteen perinteiseen goottilaiseen naisrooliin, sillä Luella edustaa piirteitä niin uhreista, antagonisteista, kuin kapinallisista sankarittaristakin.

Avainsanat: naisgootiikka, feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus, sukupuoliroolit, uhrit, konnat, sankarittaret

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck –ohjelmalla.

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1. Introduction

This thesis will explore Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "Luella Miller" (1902) and the portrayal of its main character: Luella Miller. The story is a Gothic piece and it features typical characteristics of the Gothic mode: mysterious deaths, a haunted house, and the element of fear. Wilkins Freeman was a significant female author of her time and her works often explored the supernatural and focused on the perspective of working-class women in New England.

This thesis will examine whether Luella Miller could be seen as a victim, monstrous villain or even a heroine in the story. The story focuses on Luella from the perspective of Lydia Anderson, her elderly neighbor. The events are told by an extradiegetic narrator, re-telling Lydia's story about Luella, which was passed around in the village where they lived even after both women had died. Lydia is described as a healthy old woman who was good at telling stories. The narrator explains that Lydia always begins the story by describing Luella in detail: what she looked like, what she thought of her, and that she was not fit to work and needed help with most everyday tasks. When Luella's helper, Lottie Henderson, suddenly died after a year of helping Luella around in the school where she worked, Luella married Erastus Miller and resigned from her job. Eventually, Erastus works himself to death helping Luella, as well. Lydia then describes how all the following helpers came to live in Luella's house, how they all adored her and prioritized her over their own health, and eventually died. This cycle ended only when Luella remarried, and the new husband died immediately. There was no one to help her anymore because the whole town had by then heard rumors about the deaths and there was even gossip about witchcraft. Eventually, Lydia came to help Luella when she became ill and even weaker than before. One night, when she went to see Luella, instead of seeing her, she saw the spirits of the people who had died in that house. Luella was among them and the others were helping her around,

carrying her, like they did before their deaths. Lydia's story ends there, but the narrator tells the rest of the story as the townspeople know it: some time after Luella's death, Lydia had been found dead in front of Luella's front door. The following day Luella's house was burned down, and the story of these two women became a folktale in the village.

I will analyze the short story from the perspective of the most typical female gender roles of the Gothic, and more specifically of the Female Gothic. To analyze these roles, I will adopt a framework of feminist criticism to examine how each role represents women and how the Gothic portrays gender roles. Then I will compare Luella to the women characters of the different roles to establish whether they could be applied to her. I will begin the analysis of her role with victim characters, which is a common role of Gothic women, and then turn to monsters, which is a typical reading of Luella (Wisker 152), and then I will finally analyze Luella as a rebellious Gothic heroine.

Wilkins Freeman's other works have raised academic interest, but "Luella Miller" has not been studied previously. Although the story has been briefly mentioned in some studies (see for example Wisker) this study is the first in-depth analysis of this short story. It is vital to question and analyze the gender roles of Gothic literature, because of the new Gothic trend in modern literature (see Edwards and Monnet) as well as the current and varied discussions of representation (Ruiz; Nulman; Ramsdell; Gestos et al.) in popular media and modern literature. Equal representation is an important aspect of gender equality but it continues to be challenged by anti-feminist and misogynist views. This thesis will show that Gothic literature has always featured nuanced women characters, and, therefore, it has and will always be possible to represent women in complex, multidimensional ways.

2. The Gothic and Feminism

"Gothic" as a term is hard to define, but it is agreed upon that the Gothic mode plays with the ideas of fear, the past – whether personal or historical – and the supernatural (Wallace 15).

The Gothic has been influenced by women authors and shaped by women's movements throughout its history. In fact, Gothic literature and feminism have innate connections and women have turned to the Gothic at times of distress. Diana Wallace notes that different feminist movements have been in line with the different peaks of Gothic writing (19). As women writers of the eighteenth century became "aware of their exclusion from traditional historical narratives", they started to use the Gothic as a way to "simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion" (Wallace 1). Wallace argues that the Gothic was an important literary field for women, because it allowed women to write themselves into history and portray their feelings using the metaphors of ghosts, for example. Therefore, feminist literary criticism has shown a great interest in the Gothic, and the feminist perspective is logical to adopt while studying Gothic texts written by women.

However, Gothic texts written by men exist, as well, which further complicates the definition of the genre. Gothic texts written by men and those written by women have been shown to use different conventions, such as different plots, narrative techniques, character roles and different focus when portraying the supernatural (Wallace 17); in texts written by women, "[t]he enemy is not solely within, as is the case with the majority of gothics written by male authors" (Hoeverler 21). Other scholars have argued, nevertheless, that the differences of these "genres" are not distinct, especially in modern times, because many female authors of the Gothic do not adopt the conventions they are expected to adopt (Wallace 18). Yet, the distinction of different conventions indicates that women have fought to keep their Gothic separated from the male Gothic, challenging the character roles created by male writers and thus creating a separate genre, the Female Gothic.

2.1 The Female Gothic

The different conventions between women and men's Gothic eventually established the Female Gothic as a separate genre. As briefly noted before, the appeal of Gothic for women

has been explained in various ways: for example, Diane Hoeveler describes it as a “need to rewrite history from the vantage point of a beleaguered daughter intent on rescuing her mother – and by extension, her future self – from the nightmare of the alienating and newly codifying and commodifying patriarchal family” (15-16). Hoeveler contends that the Gothic offered women a way to write about their experiences and that the Female Gothic was born out of a need to involve women in literature and challenge gender roles. With the Gothic conventions they were able to rewrite the narrative of the patriarchal nightmare women were trapped in, reflecting on women’s assigned roles and space in society, while at the same time giving these women agency and control over their lives.

Patricia Murphy defines the Female Gothic similarly, noting that it is “characterized by its scrutiny of the plights of vulnerable protagonists struggling against oppressive male authority and deleterious interventions” (1). Thus, Murphy understands gender roles to be a defining feature of the Female Gothic: there is a vulnerable female protagonist and an oppressive male authority figure. According to Murphy, the women are not only vulnerable and oppressed by the patriarchy, but they are also saving themselves from it. Similarly, Hoeveler describes that the women of the Female Gothic are “struggling against powerful forces that they think are real and that they believe are poised to destroy them” (21).

Furthermore, as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue, the Female Gothic reveals how women are devalued in society. They argue that the Gothic mode can be used not only to problematize the portrayal of women as evil, wicked and sinister, but also to criticize the patriarchy in which women are devalued (11). They conclude that the Female Gothic contributes to the reader’s awareness of what womanhood can be and exposes them to the “extreme reaches of the cultural celebration and demonization of women” in horrifying and sinister, sometimes ironic, ways (11).

The Female Gothic thus simultaneously includes women in literature and displays the problems women face in everyday life. In addition, Hoeveler explains that the Female Gothic works as a discourse system of its own: the struggles and desires portrayed in it change with the times and with women's individual struggles (11). The female gothic's focus on individuality resonates in the portrayal of working-class women's struggles in New England in Wilkins Freeman's writing. Leah Blatt Glasser contends that Wilkins Freeman's central theme throughout her works is the struggle between "rebellion and submission, self-fulfillment and acceptability" (323). "Luella Miller" is no exception, as I will demonstrate later in the thesis.

2.2 Roles for Gothic Women

Female authors use the Female Gothic to communicate their experiences and struggles in relation to women's oppressed status in society. Due to this, the female roles of this genre are diverse and multifaceted. Typically, women in the Female Gothic have had the role of a victim or a heroine, or both at once (Murphy 16); however, the Female Gothic also offers villainous roles to women.

Murphy claims that in New Woman fiction, which she describes to be the Victorian successor of the Female Gothic (3), women characters have a dualistic nature: they can be situated either as "monstrous aggressor[s]" or as "maligned victim[s]" (2). She identifies three different groups of New Woman villains in Gothic literature: the first group consists of women who act inappropriately but ultimately are good and willing to learn from their mistakes and saved by marriage. The second group consist of women who are punished for their actions but survive only to return to their bad habits. The third group consists of women who are inherently immoral and "have turned their lives into disasters" (245).

Murphy's set of roles represent women who are still considered human, but Gothic female villains can be portrayed as vampires or other vampire-like creatures, as well. Gina Wisker

describes female vampires as thrilling contradictions: they are women who problematize aspects of womanhood such as conforming to passivity and nurturing roles, which reveals that gender roles are born out of social hierarchies (150). By escaping the typical feminine roles of the nurturing mother and the dutiful wife, vampiric women symbolize the opposite of traditional womanhood while simultaneously remaining women. Wisker notes that, at best, the role of the female vampire is socially engaged and expresses the juxtaposition between the moral and the immoral, demonic, women (150-51).

In addition to the vampiric role, antagonized women of the Gothic can be portrayed as wicked. According to Anne Williams, these women characters rebel “against their patriarchal roles as dutiful daughters, faithful wives and self-sacrificing mothers” (91). Similarly to the female vampire, they are considered dangerous and evil because of what they represent: women breaking free from the patriarchy and declining traditionally feminine roles and qualities. The word wicked derives from these women’s connection to witchcraft, as well: they are considered dangerous women, which makes them appear witchy.

When it comes to the heroines of the Female Gothic, a character is defined as a heroine on the basis of her actions, instead of representing a specific role, such as vampire or wicked woman. Hoeveler describes heroines of the Female Gothic “as anything but entrapped, passive, and docile. Or, to be more precise . . . women who ostensibly appear to be conforming to their acceptable roles within the patriarchy but who actually subvert the father’s power at every possible occasion and then retreat to studied postures of conformity whenever they risk exposure to public censure” (22). In other words, these women are not necessarily considered heroes on the surface of the story; instead, they become heroines on a deeper level of the story. They are heroines in hiding, not wanting to risk being caught: they rebel against patriarchy but remain its victims at the same time. Both victims and villains can, therefore, become heroines.

Moreover, a significant role to discuss is the victim role, which can be divided into different categories: there are the ghosts, damsels in distress, madwomen, and so on. I will, however, focus on the Gothic Girl Child, which Lucie Armitt defines as follows: “children are slippery to define: ‘[A]nyone between the ages of one day and 25 years or even beyond might, in different contexts, play that role’ . . . the term ‘child’, in literary texts, can extend to include: ‘persons of unstable perception . . . [those] lacking affective maturity. . . [the] vulnerable and helpless’” (61; the two latter ellipses in original). Furthermore, Armitt notes that many female characters are infantilized in the Female Gothic and points out that even Ellen Moers, the critic often credited for coining the term Female Gothic, described women in Gothic as maidens “who are ‘forced to do what they could never do alone’, who ‘scurry’ across landscapes unchaperoned and ‘scuttle’ along the corridors of gloomy chateaux” (62). Armitt criticizes these word choices for not being appropriate to describe adult women, yet similar descriptions are found in various Gothic texts (62).

3. Victimized, Villainized and Rebellious Luella

This chapter will analyze Luella from the perspective of different female roles in the Female Gothic, adopting a feminist viewpoint to the analysis. The analysis will begin with the most traditional role for Gothic women, the victim, although Luella is not a typical victim character, and move on to Lydia’s perspective of Luella as the villain, and then to discussing the possibility of viewing her as a heroine, a rebellious woman character.

3.1 The Infantilized Victim

In this subchapter, I will demonstrate how Luella could be considered as a victim because her agency is taken away from her. I will first discuss the ways in which Luella’s caretakers restrict her agency and infantilize her; second, I will problematize the storyteller Lydia’s perspective and demonstrate her unreliability.

Luella's emotions are not taken seriously, as most things in her are not: on several occasions, Lydia describes Luella "going into hysterics" (361, 365, 366), which is a typical way to silence women and deprive them of their agency, sanity and trustworthiness. Additionally, she is constantly pitied and she is spoken to and spoken about as if she were a baby. In addition, her age is never told in the story, but from the way she speaks, looks, acts and is acted around it can be concluded that she has a very childlike presence. Furthermore, Lydia notes that "she . . . had been so petted and done for all her life" (372). If she has been treated in this way, it could mean that the people who help her treat her in the same way as she was treated as a child. The infantilization Luella is subjected to is also explicitly discussed in the story, and Lydia even criticizes it by stating that Luella's helper "just tended out on Luella as if she had been a baby" (361). She tells Luella that she does not believe her to be as helpless as everyone sees her and as she sees herself: "I guess if you have coffee this mornin' you'll make it yourself" (364).

Although Lydia does not consider Luella to be as useless and in need of constant help as the others do, she describes her physical appearance as "a slight, pliant sort of creature" (357). She is described as looking feminine, having long light hair, a lovely face, blue pleading eyes and slender hands and that she moves and acts gracefully (357). Being a small woman with a lovely face and dressed up like a doll could play a part in why she is treated the way she is. In fact, it is quite hard to imagine a woman who is considered ugly receiving similar treatment. Based on all this, it can be said that Luella fits the Gothic Girl Child role. However, this interpretation contradicts with Lydia's intended interpretation.

Knowing how Luella looks and acts, it is hard to imagine her as a vicious murderer or a monster of some kind, but two of the women who interact with her, Lydia and Mrs. Sam Abbott, are sure that her appearance is merely a disguise and that she is aware of what she is doing to people. When the young Dr Malcom meets Luella, Lydia mentions

thinking that “[He is] another, young man; she’s got her pretty claw on you” (366) and that she “sort of pitied the poor young doctor, led away by a pretty face” (367). However, Luella is never confirmed to be the guilty for the deaths of Dr Malcom and the others, nor show “her true nature” to the people who are sure that she is to blame for the deaths. In fact, when she is accused of killing people, her face reddens, she denies it, and begins to cry: “‘I ain’t goin’ to kill him, either,’ says she, and she began to cry” (369). All in all, there is very little evidence offered to the reader besides Mrs. Sam Abbott and Lydia’s mistrust in Luella.

The lack of evidence leads us to question Lydia’s reliability as the narrator of Luella’s story. Susan Oaks argues that Lydia is not telling the truth because she is jealous of Luella for marrying Erastus, and the memory of Erastus affects her feelings towards Luella. As Oaks points out, Lydia admits that there were times when she thought Erastus was interested in her: “Folks used to say he was waitin’ on me, but he wa’n’t. I never thought he was except once or twice when he said things that some girls might have suspected meant somethin’” (214). Luella came to their lives and made it impossible for Lydia to be involved with Erastus. She mentions Erastus a few times in the story: for example, when she is helping Luella, she does it to do right by Erastus. Oaks mentions how “Lydia speaks harshly to Luella about the doctor’s probable death because ‘[she feels it] on account of Erastus’” (214). Lydia’s opinion on Luella is biased, which makes her unreliable. However, Lydia’s story is accepted in the village, since she is the only one alive to tell the story. Lydia is happy to tell her version of the story and, because she is a great storyteller, everyone accepts the story as it is. Lydia’s obsession with Luella and Erastus Miller could imply that she was taking her revenge on Luella by ruining her reputation, even after her death.

Furthermore, in some ways, Luella is an example of a stereotypical, misogynist representation of woman characters: passive, hysterical and beautiful but shallow, stupid and incapable of work. Even the way she speaks reflects the way such stereotypical women

characters speak: “‘What is – what is it, oh, what is it?’ she sort of screeches out” (363). She does not sound confident or sure of herself but easily distressed and confused. In addition, nothing that she says is very relevant or takes the story to a new direction: her replies are merely short reactions to other people. The portrayal of Luella both criticizes the common misogynist roles of women characters and suggests that the character can be a victim.

In conclusion, Luella is infantilized and her agency is taken from her by her caretakers, yet she is blamed for the deaths by Lydia. Therefore, Luella could also be interpreted as being a victim of Lydia’s unreliable storytelling. Furthermore, she is silenced, and her reactions are reduced to hysteria, which further strengthens the reading of Luella as a victim. Based on all this, it is possible to consider her the victim of the story.

3.2 The Vampiric Villain

It is not usual to have a female villain portrayed in the manner Luella is portrayed; passive, and lacking agency. Instead, female villains typically subvert gender ideals and roles, because they are loud, seductive and in control of their lives. Even though Murphy’s list of female villains was specifically created with New Woman villains in mind, it appears sufficient to be applied to most female villains, which is why it is good basis for analyzing Luella, as well. Murphy’s female villains are all different, but, unlike Luella, they all have agency, which is why she cannot be placed in any of these categories, although most readers would consider her the villain of the story. Luella does not fit the first group, as she is not saved by marriage; in fact, there is nothing concrete to save her from. She is not punished nor is she saved, there is not even an attempt to bring her to justice by the people who believe she is the cause of the deaths. Her life is not a disaster and she does not appear to do anything improper throughout the story: her life seems quite typical for a woman of her social group in the early 1900s. Based on this, we can conclude that Luella does not represent a typical female villain of the Gothic.

However, there are other categories where Luella could be placed, such as the vampire or the wicked woman. Luella could be interpreted as a vampiric monster who sucks her victims' life force instead of blood (Wisker 152) and whose innocent appearance and passivity work as a disguise that hides her real nature and attracts her victims. Despite this, she is quite untypical for a vampiric woman, as well: she does not oppose the societal expectation of women's passivity as vampiric women often do (Wisker 150), nor does she appear to be seductive or have active sexuality (Wisker 152), since she has a more child-like, innocent presence, as discussed in 3.1.

The female vampire is similar to the category of the wicked woman. While Luella does not oppose all societal expectations for women, she could also fit this category because she challenges several roles in the story: she neglects the role of the "dutiful daughter" and, in fact, is the one requiring service in the house. Moreover, she subverts the role of the "self-sacrificing mother" by not becoming a mother at all, although she is a married woman. Furthermore, having remarried can be interpreted as challenging the "faithful wife" role. Witchcraft is something Luella was also accused of which is something women of this role typically have in common. Ironically, Luella protests these roles through her passivity, which, as mentioned before, is not something villains are often connected to. It is important how it is specifically Luella's passiveness that sets her free from these roles and turns her into a rebellious woman, which is a role I will discuss in chapter 3.3.

Luella's story could also symbolize women's struggles from a different perspective where she represents the patriarchy and the people helping her represent women in it. The way her caretakers live to serve her and work for her, day in day out, until they wilt away and eventually die, could be regarded as symbolizing women's lives: working in their homes, working for their husbands and families until they die. This reading is powerful because the roles are reversed: if Luella were a man, her story would not be so out of the

ordinary. Her character reverses the gender roles by taking the role of the man of the house, the patriarch, by requiring others to do all the work for her. In this reading, she would be the villain of the story, but not in the traditional sense.

In the end, it is Luella's lack of agency that makes her an unconvincing villain because most villains have agency in their actions. She is not actively killing anyone or taking part in any immoral activities, nor is there anything monstrous or evil in the way she is portrayed, other than Lydia's feelings and beliefs about her. The way the story is framed encourages the reader to consider Luella the antagonist of the story, but there is very little actual evidence of her committing the murders or being villainous. Instead, it is justifiable to argue that Luella represents a rebellious woman through her excessive passiveness. Lydia considers Luella immoral because she does not conform to the traditional female roles: she rebels against the patriarchy and is therefore "wicked" and a convenient suspect for the murders.

3.3 The Rebellious Heroine

As a heroine, Luella would be quite unconventional, but we can regard her as one, especially if adopting a feminist perspective in the analysis. As discussed in chapter 2.2, the Gothic offers two distinct roles for women characters, the victim and the villain, but, analyzed from a feminist framework, a character who represents a victim or a villain can be a heroine through what she symbolizes. In Luella's case, she symbolizes women rebelling against the patriarchy, but she does it with her exaggerated passivity, which simultaneously criticizes the passiveness women are expected to adopt. Investigating Luella from the feminist perspective challenges the reader to consider Luella more than merely a villain or a victim, and in both cases she can be a heroine: as a victim through her survival, as a villain through her rebelliousness. I will take into account both interpretations, as they are not contradictory, but in fact, support each other in several ways.

As a rebellious woman, Luella defies society's expectations of women: by not having children or taking care of the house and the husband, because she does not do much anything, as discussed earlier. She is thus neither a nurturing woman nor controlled by men. Although lack of agency is not something feminist literary critics would typically praise, the way it is used in this story is groundbreaking. In Luella's case it can be considered a strategy for fighting oppression: it is her passivity that makes her rebellious.

A feminist heroine is typically defined in the following way: she has a story of her own and is not determined by her relationship to a man, or she challenges gender stereotypes or ideals in some other way. These criteria apply to Luella. The men in Luella's life do not define her, she is not killed or abused by men like women of the Gothic often are, and her passivity does not lead to her being taken advantage of. Moreover, her role in the story is crucial: without her there would be no story, and her way of rebelling lies at the center of the story. To Lydia, Luella is wicked because she is a young woman who seems to gain people's trust and admiration easily, does not serve men, and survives alone, widowed and through horrible events. In times of distress and grief, she does not give up. Even in the end, when there is no one left to take care of her and when she is dangerously ill, she survives on her own long enough for Lydia, the person who seems to hate her the most, to offer a hand. Although it is questionable how dependent on others Luella is, it cannot be denied that Luella subverts societal expectations of how a woman should act, and for that, she can be considered a feminist heroine. In a way, to regard her as a heroine is to acknowledge the hardship women who break social norms often encounter.

Furthermore, it could be argued that her role as a victim makes her the heroine. As noted earlier, having her agency taken away from her makes Luella a victim. However, she uses passivity as protection against the expectations of the patriarchy and therefore is not limited to the roles offered to women as she gains some agency through her own actions.

Even in death, Luella does not disappear and fade away but instead persists in the world long enough for Lydia to see her, and for her story to be told in the village. When she dies, the other people who have died in the house offer Luella solace and proof that she is not evil: they choose to be with her even after death. Luella's role in the story is thus complex: she is not merely a victim of patriarchy or a typical female villain. Despite featuring characteristics of both victims and villains, Luella is not only Lydia's antagonist but also makes a compelling heroine in the end.

4. Conclusion

Luella's role in the story is not easy to determine, but I have established that she could be a feminist heroine for many reasons. Although on first glance it is easy to consider Luella a villain or a vampiric monster, after analyzing Luella's actions and the way she is portrayed in more depth it is not hard to find reasons to dismiss Lydia's perspective that portrays Luella as a villain. Luella's actions, which there are a very limited amount of, and her speech and appearance are all described from the storyteller's point of view, but even that does not offer us much proof of Luella's evil nature; instead, she is infantilized and lacking agency. In addition, Lydia seems to have a biased opinion of Luella based on the way she feels about Luella's first husband, which could affect the way she tells Luella's story.

Furthermore, analyzed from the perspective of rebellious women, Luella becomes a rebellious heroine. Women who rebel against society's expectations threaten the patriarchy and are thus "wicked"; this applies to Luella, too. Passivity, attractiveness and inability are ideals women are expected of, but Luella uses them to rebel against the patriarchy. To conclude, Luella has multiple roles in the story, depending on how the story is read and in what context. Luella's role changes with different readings: she can be a victim, a classic Gothic vampiric villain, or even a rebellious heroine. Multidimensional and nuanced

characters such as Luella create thrilling, unique and complex stories, while at the same time criticize certain aspects of society – in this case, the ideal of women’s passivity.

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