

2007

## Rethinking the New Woman in Stoker's Fiction: Looking at Lady Athlyne

Carol A. Senf  
*Georgia Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Senf, Carol A. (2007) "Rethinking the New Woman in Stoker's Fiction: Looking at Lady Athlyne," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 1.

DOI: 10.70013/33d8e9f0

Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol9/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dracula Studies by an authorized editor of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact [czerny@kutztown.edu](mailto:czerny@kutztown.edu).

---

## Rethinking the New Woman in Stoker's Fiction: Looking at Lady Athlyne

### Cover Page Footnote

Carol Senf teaches at Georgia Tech and has written on a number of Victorian writers, including Stoker. In 2007, she edited *Lady Athlyne* (Desert Island Books) and *The Mystery of the Sea* (Valancourt).

## Rethinking the New Woman in Stoker's Fiction: Looking at *Lady Athlyne*

Carol A. Senf

[Carol Senf teaches at Georgia Tech and has written on a number of Victorian writers, including Stoker. In 2007, she edited *Lady Athlyne* (Desert Island Books) and *The Mystery of the Sea* (Valancourt).]

Over twenty-five years ago, a number of people explored the role of gender in *Dracula*,<sup>1</sup> and many of those studies looked closely at Stoker's treatment of the New Woman,<sup>2</sup> arguing specifically that the female vampires in *Dracula* are his way of responding to the growing equality of men and women, in particular their sexual equality. Not only does he emphasize their voluptuousness and sexual aggression and contrast their behavior to that of his chaste and sexually timid heroine but he has his male characters destroy these threatening women and reestablish a more traditional order. As a result, readers –especially those who are also familiar with his treatment of Queen Tera in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, Stephen Norman in *The Man*, and Lady Arabella March in *The Lair of the White Worm* – quickly conclude that Stoker is critical of sexually liberated women, perhaps of women in general.

Many readers may think that there's little reason to revisit a topic that was explored so thoroughly a quarter century or more ago. However, a recent opportunity to work closely with Stoker's *Lady Athlyne* (1908) caused me to rethink some of my conclusions about Stoker's thoughts on female sexuality and thus about the complexity of his response to the New Woman in *Dracula*. If it were not for the fact that he returns to depict the New Woman as a monstrous sexual predator in *The Lair of the White Worm*, it might be possible to conclude after reading *Lady Athlyne* that Stoker had had a significant conversion experience. The reality is much more complex and interesting.

Though *Lady Athlyne* was written eleven years after *Dracula*, biographical information suggests that Stoker was thinking about the plot a great deal earlier. David Glover observes that Stoker had been interested in Scotland's more egalitarian marriage laws for many years before he incorporated them into the plot of *Lady Athlyne*:

In a letter replying to Stoker's queries regarding the marriage laws in Scotland, the Bishop of Edinburgh informed the author that "perfectly valid marriages" can be contracted by a couple's simply declaring themselves to be man and wife in front of witnesses and then ratifying the agreement before a magistrate. The Rt. Rev. John

---

<sup>1</sup> A representative sample of articles that explore gender, feminism, or the New Woman in *Dracula* is appended at the end of this article. It should be obvious that much of this exploration originated in the Feminist movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Women who saw themselves as New Women were rebelling against traditions:

In art and in life, the New Woman insisted on alternatives to the traditional roles for women. Her smoking in public, riding bicycles without escorts, or wearing "rational dress" ... was not the result of mere whim or self-indulgence but of principle, for she was determined to oppose restrictions and injustices in the political, educational, economic, and sexual realms in order to achieve equality with men. (Beckson 129)

Dowden to Bram Stoker, January 20, 1901 (Edinburgh), Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library. Part of the importance of this letter is that it shows that Stoker was thinking about key episodes in *Lady Athlyne* at least seven and a half years before the novel was published. (184, n.50)

*Lady Athlyne* includes several women characters whose attitude toward sexuality might be classified as liberated. Indeed, both its heroine Joy Ogilvie and her aunt Judith Hayes might be characterized as New Women while Mrs. O'Brien, the earthy Irish servant, like Juliet's nurse, is a spokesperson for the joys of sexuality. Her celebration of her own sexual experience is evident: "I was a bride meself – wanst. An' I know betther nor me young Lady does now, what is what on the weddin' day afther the words is said. Though she'll pick up, so she will. She's not the soort that'll be long larnin'! (326). Her expectation that her foster son and his new bride will revel in their sexual experience is equally evident:

"What" she said "me go away in the coach wid the bride and groom! ... Do ye think I'm goin' to shpoil shport when me darlin' does be drivin' wid his beautiful wife by him an' him kissin' her be the yard an' the mile an' the hour, an' huggin' her be the ton, as he ought to be doin', or he's not the man I've always tuk him for.... this is their day an' their hour; an' iviry minit iv it is goold an dimons to them!" (325)

While her frank talk occasionally causes Joy to blush, no one else – including the groom and the bride's mother – is the least bit embarrassed by her candid references to sexuality.

Because copies of *Lady Athlyne* are so difficult to locate, it may be useful to provide a brief plot summary prior to exploring the novel's central women characters in greater detail.<sup>3</sup> The novel opens with an introduction to the Ogilvies, a wealthy American family. As a joke among themselves, Joy and her aunt begin to refer to Joy as Lady Athlyne, having learned of this masculine paragon from Mrs. O'Brien. Athlyne's former nurse, Mrs. O'Brien is also a stewardess on their ship and a representation of Irish fecundity and common sense. The plot takes a turn when Athlyne hears of a woman calling herself Lady Athlyne. Fearing that his name is being used fraudulently, he travels to New York under an assumed name to discover who the culprit is and saves Joy's life when her horse runs away with her. The two are obviously beginning to fall in love and plan to see one another in England though their plans are complicated by Athlyne's embarrassment over his alias, by Colonel Ogilvie's sense of honor, and also by the fact that Athlyne is known throughout the United Kingdom by his real name.

When the two meet in England, they take an unchaperoned automobile trip to Scotland. Stoker's lengthy descriptions of the exhilaration the two feel as they drive border on the erotic. Glover comments briefly on the juxtaposition of the automobile with Stoker's interest in sexology: "In keeping with Stoker's habitual use of mechanical imagery, the unnamable experience of sexual excitement is displaced onto the thrill of speed as Athlyne whisks Joy away on a clandestine ride through the Lake District in his fine red motor car" (129). Furthermore, the couple is on the verge of declaring their love for one another when Athlyne is

---

<sup>3</sup> A reprint was recently published in the UK by Desert Island Books. To the best of my knowledge, only David Glover, William Hughes and Paul Murray provide significant commentary on this novel.

arrested in Scotland for speeding.<sup>4</sup> So that Joy can return home before the rest of her family notices her absence (and before her absence causes a scandal), he gives her his car to drive home. Because she becomes lost in the fog, however, the two of them wind up spending the night at the same inn, a situation they discover only moments before Colonel Ogilvie arrives to accuse Athlyne of destroying Joy's honor.

A wise Scottish magistrate reveals that Athlyne and Joy are married according to Scottish law because they have allowed other people to believe that they are husband and wife, and this revelation along with Joy's quick thinking prevents the hot-headed Colonel Ogilvie from challenging Athlyne to a duel. Stoker, who was himself trained in English law, had thoroughly researched Scottish law and marriage by mutual consent to provide this neat conclusion to the novel, the marriage of the young American woman to the thoroughly European man, the union of the ultra-feminine Joy to the hyper-masculine Athlyne.<sup>5</sup> The novel concludes with Mrs. O'Brien's repeated allusions to the joys of sexuality and her anticipation of the births of their future children.

The celebration of sexuality is not restricted to Mrs. O'Brien, however. Although she might be considered a kind of respite (indeed Stoker describes her as the "comic relief" of the strained situation." [318]), Joy is open about her desire for her husband too: "'I am glad I am to be married three times to you.... Because darling' she spoke the word now without shyness or hesitation 'I love you enough for three husbands; and now we must have three honeymoons!'" (310). This scene echoes the scene in *Dracula* when Lucy admits to being a "horrid flirt" (60), flaunts her three marriage proposals – "Just fancy! THREE proposals in one day! Isn't it awful!" (57) – and confesses a desire to marry the three men who have proposed to her: "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it" (60). Indeed, Lucy's innocent desire for three husbands becomes sexual predation after she is initiated by Dracula, and this wantonness is punished when her vampiric body is decapitated and laid to rest on the day originally scheduled for her wedding. At the conclusion of the novel the three voluptuous vampire brides in Dracula's castle are similarly dispatched.

Of the women in *Dracula*, only the sexually reticent Mina Harker remains at the novel's conclusion, and she had admitted earlier in the novel that she had learned appropriate behavior for women by teaching in a school for girls:

Jonathan was holding me by the arm, the way he used to in old days before I went to school. I felt it very improper, for you can't go on for some years teaching etiquette and decorum to other girls without the pedantry of it biting into yourself a bit. (175)

---

<sup>4</sup> Commentary on early automobiles often refers to speed limits in England. See, for example, Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism*. Manchester U P, 2003; and James J. Flink (*The Car Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Glover points to Stoker's use of Otto Weininger's theory of sexual attraction:

According to Weininger's laws, the maximum of sexual affinity occurs when partners are drawn together by each one's instinctively matching her or his individual mix of sexuality with that of the other like the torn halves of a letter, a predominantly feminine woman finding the missing portions of her femininity and masculinity in the man and vice versa. (128)

Mina's reluctance to display her affection for her husband in public by touching him contrasts dramatically to Joy's response to her very proper father: "'No! Daddy, that won't do; I'm going with my husband!' She took his arm and clung to him lovingly, her finger tips biting sweetly into his flesh" (329).

These four brief scenes from the two novels reveal that, in slightly more than a decade, Stoker's attitude to openly sexual women seems to change dramatically (additional confirmation of this apparent change is his dedication of the later novel to "The Lady Athlyne"),<sup>6</sup> and understanding the difference in these two works sheds light on Stoker and his literary works.

David Glover, who has written more on *Lady Athlyne* than any other critic, attributes Stoker's interest in women's sexuality to "the threat of feminism and women's social and political rights" (14), a perspective that I do not share even though I agree with Glover that Stoker is definitely thinking about the social conditions of his day and not simply writing formula fiction, either Gothic horror or romance. Glover goes so far as to argue that Stoker is at the forefront of the Modernist tradition, which puts sexuality at the center of human essence:

The robustly normative heterosexuality adumbrated in his twinned romances *The Man* (1905) and *Lady Athlyne* (1908) places him at the inception of a novelistic tradition in which sexuality forms the core of human self-definition. Read historically, Stoker's convoluted sexual politics make him an unlikely precursor to authors as iconoclastic and as radically different as D.H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall. (103)

Sexuality is just one example of Stoker's interest in contemporary thought, however. Additional evidence of this interest includes his repeated references to the aftermath of the Boer War as well as his mention of Sinn Fein in *Lady Athlyne* and his concern with the Spanish American War in *The Mystery of the Sea*.

Joy Ogilvie, the heroine of *Lady Athlyne*, is definitely an example of a New Woman, and a discerning reader can see that Stoker frequently presents her as the equal of the man she loves. Right before Athlyne rescues her from the runaway horse, Stoker shows her as a capable horsewoman:

Then round the curve swept a brown mare dashing madly in a frenzied gallop – the neck stretched out and the eyes flaming. The woman who rode her ... sat easily, holding her reins so as to be able to use them when the time should come. She was in full possession of herself. She did not look frightened, though her face was very pale. (64)

Later, when Athlyne is jailed for speeding, he gives Joy his car so that she can return to England, and – once again – Stoker presents her as remarkably capable until she succumbs to an accident in the fog:

---

<sup>6</sup> Stoker generally dedicated his books to either friends or to family members. While several of his books lack a dedication entirely, *Lady Athlyne* is the only one of his books not to be dedicated to an identifiable person in his circle.

She was by no means an expert driver. She merely had some lessons and was never in an automobile by herself before. Moreover she was not only in a country strange to her, but even the road to Dumfries on which she was started was absolutely new to her. In addition to it all she was – as an American – handicapped by the difference in the rules of the road. In America they follow the French and drive on the off side: in England the “on” rule is correct. (208)

Furthermore, if Joy is her lover’s equal where horseflesh and machinery are concerned, she is often more accomplished when it comes to managing social situations. She knows that she must see Athlyne while her father is away, and she orchestrates their meeting away from the hotel where her family is staying. Furthermore, because she averts possible trouble between Athlyne and her father, Athlyne defers to her ability to handle her father:

Athlyne stood still and silent; he hardly dared to breathe lest he should unintentionally thwart Joy’s purpose.... He knew that she understood her father and that she was the most potent force to deal with him; and knowing this he felt that the best thing he could do would be to leave her quite free and unhampered to take her own course. (271)

This passivity is rather atypical behavior for the former cavalry officer and recipient of both the Victoria Cross and the Distinguished Service Order during the Boer War. Nonetheless, Stoker demonstrates that Athlyne continues to treat Joy as his equal and even to defer to her judgment.

Their equality is reinforced by Stoker’s exploration of the Scottish Marriage Laws, laws that emphasize the equality of the contracting parties and diminish the power of both the husband and the families of the bride and groom. Unlike England, which (following the passage of Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act in 1753) required young men and young women to be twenty one or older to marry without parental consent, the Scottish laws allowed boys to marry at 14 and girls at 12 with or without parental consent. Even more important, as the Sheriff of Galloway in *Lady Athlyne* explains, “In our law ‘Mutual Consent’ constitutes marriage” (291). The sheriff goes on to explain that the “dictum of Scots’ law is ‘*Consensus non concubitus facit matrimonium*’” (291; this Latin phrase can be translated as “Agreement rather than sexual intercourse makes a marriage”). The sheriff goes on to explain the law as follows:

“It may be held that a man and a woman, by living together and holding themselves out as married persons, have sufficiently declared their matrimonial consent; and in that case they will be declared to be married although no specific promise of marriage or of *de præsenti* acknowledgement has been proved.” (292)

Not only does the Scottish law allow Joy and Athlyne to avoid scandal (they had spent the night at the same inn even though neither had been aware of the other’s presence and had been discovered by Joy’s father while both are in a state of dishabille) because they were married, having allowed others to believe that they were in fact a married couple. Furthermore the emphasis on “consensus” rather than on a settlement between father and son-in-law gives more power and autonomy to the bride. As Glover points out, Stoker had been thinking about the

Scottish law and its implicit equality for “at least seven and a half years” before he wove it into the plot twist of *Lady Athlyne*:

In a letter replying to Stoker’s queries regarding the marriage laws in Scotland, the Bishop of Edinburgh informed the author that “perfectly *valid* marriages” can be contracted by a couple’s simply declaring themselves to be man and wife in front of witnesses and then ratifying the agreement before a magistrate. The Rt. Rev. John Dowden to Bram Stoker, January 20, 1901 (Edinburgh), Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library. (184, n.50)

This letter suggests that Stoker had been thinking of the equality of men and women in marriage for a number of years prior to writing *Lady Athlyne*.

Moreover *Lady Athlyne* emphasizes the natural and healthy attraction between men and women as something that preceded the creation of law, indeed as something created by God:

It is a mistake to suppose ... that the love of a man and a woman each for each other is, even at its very highest, devoid of physical emotion. The original Creator did not manifestly so intend. The world of thought is an abstract world whose inner shrine is where soul meets soul. The world of life is the world of the heart, and its beating is the sway of the pendulum between soul and flesh. The world of flesh is the real world.... Into this world has been placed Man to live and rule. To this end his body is fixed with various powers and complications and endurances; with weaknesses and impulses and yieldings; with passions to animate, with desires to attract, and animosities to repel. And as the final crowning of this wondrous work, the last and final touch of the Creator’s hand, Sex for the eternal renewing of established forces. How can souls be drawn to souls when such are centred in bodies which mutually repel? How can the heart quicken its beats when it may not come near enough to hear the answering throb? (168-69)

In addition to emphasizing equality, this passage is surprisingly frank about the physical attraction between men and women, hardly the words of someone who was sexually repressed or fearful of women.

In addition, Stoker was also friends with a number of strong and independent women, including Ellen Terry, Geneviève Ward, Pamela Coleman Smith, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon<sup>7</sup> as well as one woman who is consistently classified as a New Woman, George Egerton,<sup>8</sup> on whose work he commented favorably.

What then does *Lady Athlyne* reveal about Stoker and his best-known novel, *Dracula*? The emphasis on women characters in both novels, including several references to the New Woman in *Dracula*, suggests that he was thinking about the changing role of women. Indeed,

---

<sup>7</sup> Although she is not classified as a New Woman, Mary Elizabeth Braddon can definitely be classified as a sexually liberated one. Dalby notes that she settled in London to live with John Maxwell, an editor, while his wife resided in an Irish asylum for thirteen years. During that time, she served as mother to Maxwell’s five legitimate children and bore him six more before his wife’s death allowed them to marry (44).

<sup>8</sup> Glover observes, “Nevertheless, some four years after her initial *success de scandale*, Stoker was in correspondence with her [Egerton] and evidently commenting favorably on her work (106). Glover references Egerton’s letter to Stoker, September 27, 1898 (London), Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library] (180, n.19).



Stoker continues to examine young, independent women in the novels that follow *Dracula*, including *Miss Betty*, *The Shoulder of Shasta*, *The Mystery of the Sea*, *The Man*, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, *The Lady of the Shroud*, and *The Lair of the White Worm* as well as *Lady Athlyne*. For readers who want to understand the entirety of what Stoker wrote, it is unfortunate that his Gothic novels are more widely read and more often republished than his romances. As a result, there is a marked tendency to see Stoker as sexually reticent (or even mentally ill, suffering from syphilis, or sick in some other undiagnosed way). This passage from *Lady Athlyne* should change readers' attitudes:

Healthy people are healthy in their loves and even in their passions. These two young people were both healthy, both red-blooded, both of ardent, passionate nature; and they were drawn together each to each by all the powers that rule sex and character. To say that their love was all of earth would be as absurd as to say that it was all of heaven. It was human, all human, and all that such implies. Heaven and earth had both their parts in the combination; and perhaps, since both were of strong nature and marked individuality, Hell had its due share in the amalgam. (170)

Rather than a creator of monstrous, devouring female characters Stoker should be seen as the creator of interesting, surprisingly modern women characters:

Though Stoker's heroines engage in protracted courtships usually ending in the celebration of marriage, they frequently display both a degree of personal assertion and a sexual precocity which at first sight distances them from the patriarchal ideal of female passivity and subservience. Such behaviour may, in Stoker's fiction, be attributed to the power of the other discourses which make up the individual, even though by the end of each work the suggestion is implicitly made that biological difference, the destiny invested in gender, is the most powerful force of all. (Hughes 11-12)

Stoker simply happened to be a product of a period in which gender roles were changing rapidly, and he responded to these changes in his literary works, just as he responded to what was happening in Ireland and elsewhere in the world.

All writers are products of the period in which they live, and Mina's references to the New Woman reveal that Stoker was thinking of this contemporary phenomenon when he wrote *Dracula*. However, *Lady Athlyne* and many of the novels Stoker wrote after *Dracula* reveal that he was less frightened of independent women than is sometimes believed. Whoever "The Lady Athlyne" was, she owes something to Stoker's knowledge of real women and perhaps even to his work with the Lyceum Theatre. Stoker had watched his friend Ellen Terry play the following remarkable Shakespearean heroines: Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and especially Viola in *Twelfth Night*. His romances conclude with the marriages of his principal characters, and even his Gothic novels tend to suggest that something human remains beyond the fear and the darkness that threatens to overwhelm it. His monstrous characters of both genders demonstrate the power of that threatening fear and darkness.

## Appendix

The following is a representative sample of articles that explore gender, feminism, or the New Woman in Stoker's *Dracula*: Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, "Feminism, Sex Role Exchanges, and Other Subliminal Fantasies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Frontiers* (1977): 104-13; Phyllis A. Roth, "Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Literature and Psychology* 27 (1977): 113-21; Judith Weissman, "Women as Vampires: *Dracula* as a Victorian Novel," *Midwest Quarterly* 18 (1977): 392-405; Gail B. Griffin, "'Your Girls That You All Love are Mine': *Dracula* and the Victorian Male Sexual Imagination," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 3 (1980): 454-65; Carol A. Senf, "*Dracula*: Stoker's Response to the New Woman," *Victorian Studies*, 26 (1982): 33-49; Anne Cranny-Francis, "Sexual Politics and Political Repression in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," in *Nineteenth-Century Suspense: From Poe to Conan Doyle*, ed. Clive Bloom, Brian Docherty, Jane Gibb, and Keith Shand (New York: St. Martin's, 1988); Alison Case, "Tasting the Original Apple: Gender and the Struggle for Narrative Authority in *Dracula*," *Narrative*, I (October 1993): 223-43. More recent studies look at *Dracula* as an articulation of Stoker's concerns about homosexuality: Christopher Craft, "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Representations* 8 (1984): 107-33; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siecle* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Talia Schaffer, "'A Wild(e) Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*," *ELH* 61 (1994): 381-485; Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

## Works Cited

- Beckson, Karl. *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*. New York: Norton, 1992.
- Dalby, Richard. "Friends of Bram Stoker 6 – Mary Elizabeth Braddon." *Bram Stoker Society Journal* 12 (2000). 44-49.
- Glover, David. *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Hughes, William. *Beyond Dracula: Bram Stoker's Fiction and its Cultural Context*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Murray, Paul. *From the Shadow of Dracula: A Life of Bram Stoker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. London: Constable, 1897.
- Stoker, Bram. *Lady Athlyne*. London: Heinemann, 1908.

