

Reinventing Female Fashion:  
From Victorian Apparel to Steampunk Expression of the Self

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First impressions have always been said to be crucial in most situations. Traditionally, outfit is linked to one's conception of the society one lives in. Some scholars, such as Roberts, argue that fashion was used in Victorian times as a means of control. Crinolines, crinolinettes and tight-lacing were elements of repression deriving from the social consideration of women as objects that must observe certain rules of behaviour; as Ellis states, a woman was expected "to suffer and be still" (Roberts 556). However, the introduction of new materials and new designs has given rise to a reinterpretation of this Victorian apparel. This reinvented female fashion has become a distinguishing mark of the Steampunk Neo-Victorian sub-culture, which recovers nineteenth-century female fashion and gives it a radically different meaning.

My paper will focus on the transition from Victorian to Steampunk fashion and the new implications coming from the reinterpretation of the various elements used for feminine appearance. Several cultural productions of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries will be used as examples of my main arguments, paying particular attention to the character of Mina Harker as represented in Stoker's masterpiece *Dracula* (1897) and in Norrington's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003). As the members of this community are increasing not only in Britain but worldwide, research on the different features of this movement become highly relevant for cultural studies. Fashion can be considered to be a good starting point for research on the topic of gender identities and new gender stereotypes within the steampunk trend.

To provide my arguments with a relevant theoretical framework, I will make reference to several works by experts in the field of gender and cultural studies. Foucaultian notions about control over female bodies will also be relevant in my paper, as well as Butlerian ideas about the construction of gender identity. Given that steampunk is set in a retro-futuristic world, some of Braidotti's notions about the post-human will be also discussed.

My main thesis is that female steampunk fashion has developed to a point in which it is not just a reinterpretation of the Victorian past, but something totally new that has enabled the twenty-first-century woman to externalise her inner self and her true identity. For instance, Victorian tight-lacing has moved from being a means of patriarchal control to a way for women to show self-confidence and control over their own bodies. Moreover, cross-dressing has also become part of this sub-culture, being highly frequent in steampunk conventions and meetings.

Keywords: Steampunk, fashion, identity, gender, Victorian period, Dracula, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

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