

## **Dreadful Yet Irresistible Luella Miller: Horror in the Absence of Self**

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### **Abstract**

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, who is generally regarded as a regionalist, thus a realist, wrote a supernatural story, "Luella Miller," about a woman who sucks life out of the people around her. Luella Miller looks innocent and charming, yet she brings about the worst fate in the people who are attracted to her: they waste away, taking care of her. Luella could be a vampire, addictive substance, monster, or parasite. Yet unlike vampires or monsters, she does not choose or even control her victims. "Luella Miller" is about the fears of lack, the fears of losing and of not possessing one's own self.

The problematic gender ideal surfaces when one brings the current discussion of addiction in examining this irresistible yet dreadful heroine. As Timothy Melley points out, addictions reveal "insufficient free will" of individuals, although the concept of addiction lessens that detestable implication by rationalizing and medicalising the state. People become addicted to Luella, and loses their self-control to the point of death. Yet in this story, no one is more devoid of self-control than Luella herself: she has no choice but to die when no one is left to take care of her. Her magnetic charm suggests that, in a woman, the absence of self and self-control looks not only harmless, but also attractive. It becomes dreadful only when Luella's complete dependency on others makes people addicted to her, eventually leading them to the total renunciation of self - death. Luella is a vacuum of self, drawing others into the same fate as hers. Freeman presents a sharp critique of the feminine ideal at the turn of the twentieth century with her description of lovable but fatal Luella Miller.

### **Key Words**

vampire, addiction, desire, femininity, hysteria, paranoia, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Luella Miller," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Parasite"

Vampire stories have always attracted us. The most famous vampire story, *Dracula*, has retained its popularity for more than a century and new novels, TV series, and movies about vampires are continuously being made, suggesting its undying hold on us. When examined with the

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current understanding of addiction, vampire stories can offer an interesting insight into our desire and ourselves. Especially an unusual vampire story, "Luella Miller," illuminates the issue of the gender ideal at the turn of the twentieth century, in relation to desire and autonomy. "Luella Miller" presents a sharp critique of an irresistibly charming woman and reveals the dreadful implication of the ideal femininity.

"Luella Miller" is now read as a vampire story, especially that of a psychic vampire, but it deviates itself from all the other vampire stories in many ways.<sup>1</sup> Written by a New England regionalist, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and contained in her only collection of supernatural stories, this story is unlikely to make the reader afraid of the dark or of the things that go bump in the night, like a conventional horror story or Gothic story. Instead, it makes us uneasy and poses a series of questions: why and how this particular character attracts us, and whether the allure entails something dreadful. Unlike other conventional ghost stories about past grudges and cruelties, this story is simply about a woman who is loved but also dreaded in a small New England village. She is loved to the point that good ordinary people just devote themselves to death to her, but she is dreaded for the exactly the same reason. Her preys are willing victims, and they are addicted to Luella Miller, like love-struck people who try everything for unrequited love and die in content. Her victims do not feel horror; horror is felt only by people who see what happens to those addicts. Luella Miller takes away their autonomy and makes them her slaves. Behind the façade of a story of goodwill and innocence, it hides a story of addiction and exploitation, and ultimately of horror of not having one's self.

The greatest mystery of this story lies in the power Luella Miller has to make people addicted to her. The text does not offer any explanation, leaving an only possibility that she is a vampire that drains energy out of others. Luella is an outsider like any other vampiric characters in history; she is a type "unusual in New England," a "slight pliant sort of creature, as ready with a strong yielding to fate and as unbreakable as a willow."<sup>2</sup> She follows the tradition of vampire characters in her "otherness"; as vampires come from somewhere else - usually from exotic East Europe - Luella Miller comes from outside one day to the village as if to seek out new victims like all the other vampires do when they run out of their victims in the area they have formally resided.

Luella Miller, a newcomer to the village starts drawing her victims upon arrival. The magnetic charm, or forbidden attraction, is a characteristic shared by major vampires, a characteristic that reflects their strong narcissism, for they enjoy controlling their victims through their pseudo-love affairs. A good example that explains the relationship between a vampire and a victim

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is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Parasite." Miss Penelosa in "The Parasite" hypnotises men to make them want her, and when she is met with the victim's resistance, she turns around and starts using her hypnotic suggestion to ruin him. Whether for her gain or revenge, she has 'her grip' over her victim. The relationship between Professor Gilroy, her victim, and Miss Penelosa has nothing ambiguous in terms of control. Miss Penelosa controls; Professor Gilroy is controlled. Against his will, Professor Gilroy craves seeing her. With her hypnotic suggestions, she can make "him do her will."<sup>3</sup> Professor Gilroy tells Miss Penelosa, "If ever you heard me speak of love,...you know very well that it was your own voice which spoke, and not mine."<sup>4</sup> The victim's words of love addressed to the victimiser only represent her proclamation of love for herself.

Doyle's story can be seen as an attempt to demystify the mystery of vampires. This female parasite expands her own self by using hypnosis, whose similarities to love Freud already points out in the paper "Being in Love and Hypnosis," part of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud argues that in an extreme situation when one is in love the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal, and thus, "from being love to hypnosis is evidently only a short step."<sup>5</sup> Miss Penelosa reverses this progression and uses hypnosis to make him fall in love with her. Doyle presents a disillusioned view of vampire - a nondescript or even unpleasant looking woman well over forty with a crippled leg - and his answer to the magical charm of vampires is simple: hypnotic power.

"The Parasite" clarifies that the fears of vampires, or the fears caused by parasitic invasions come from confronting the magnetic and overpowering Other: the fears of the loss of one's own self, or the fears before the powerful Other. This process by which one's self loses its own also can be explained in terms of desire in addiction. Stacey Margolis points out that the process by which Professor Gilroy loses his control is comparable with a certain model of addiction, in which the drug wants itself, not the self that wants the drug.<sup>6</sup> Professor Gilroy becomes addicted to the mysterious woman, without knowing that his desire is replaced by the object itself. The horror of this story lies in the way in which the predator renders its victim powerless by completely taking over the victim's desiring action; when the victim realises how he is incapable of controlling his own behaviour and even his desires, it is too late.

Luella Miller does not hypnotise her victims, but they still show the clear sign of addiction. While Luella gradually sucks life out of her victims, they do not notice their free will slipping away from their own hands: they go deeper and deeper into their role as a caretaker and they cannot stop themselves helping Luella. The state in which Luella's victims

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fall resembles hypnosis without a hypnotiser; as Freud explains, the “hypnotic relation is the unlimited devotion of someone in love, but with sexual satisfaction excluded.”<sup>7</sup> Luella may not offer sexual satisfaction, but they may experience the sweetness of martyrdom. The addiction to Luella ends in a form of an ultimate self-sacrifice: death. Her victims gradually lose the functions to take care of themselves until they relinquish their rights to life. Henry Krystal argues that “alcoholics and drug addicts are among those people who have a great inhibition in carrying out a multitude of ‘mothering’ or self-comforting functions.”<sup>8</sup> The irony here is that Luella’s victims start developing an inhibition in “mothering” functions for the sake of mothering and comforting they do for Luella. In this story, dependency grows from responding to and accommodating the person whose existence is based on the complete dependence.

Luella’s ability to possess her victims without even making them experience the feelings of fear indicates that she has a more powerful magnetic ego than Miss Penelosa has, yet the text suggests otherwise. Luella lives on others, and naturally and effortlessly finds her victims that devote their lives to her, yet she does not intentionally choose her victims or even control them. She does not set her target, or intentionally create “desires” in others, as Miss Penelosa does. She does not, it seems, even have a desire of her own, unlike Miss Penelosa who makes others desire for her. Luella Miller does not know what she has done, and she is like a “baby with scissors in its hand cuttin’ everybody without knowin’ what it was doin’.”<sup>9</sup> Virtually Luella Miller is a baby: her face is coloured with pink and white, and dominates others not with her power but something that “draws the heart right out of” others.<sup>10</sup> She is tended and cared for as a baby until words spread that the “days of witchcraft” have come again.<sup>11</sup> She does not take the role of predator, but rather that of dependent, someone to be protected, cherished, and spoiled like a child, in relation to her victims.

Luella’s appeal seems irrelevant of gender in the sense that she is strangely indiscriminate of her victims unlike other vampires. Normally the charm of vampires is associated with their sexual attractions that transgress the accepted norm. Yet in the tradition of vampire stories, vampires seem to choose one gender for their victims - Polidori’s Lord Ruthven has a particular interest in one man although his preys are all women, and Le Fanu’s Carmilla is obsessed with one girl, and Dracula saves men for his female minions while he targets only women. Whether with homosexual or heterosexual preference, vampires tend to stick to one gender as their victims. On the other hand, Luella Miller never chooses her victims. As long as they attend her, she welcomes whoever comes. The very first victim is a female student when she first comes to the village as a teacher. Then as soon as the girl, Lottie

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Henderson, who is doing all the teachings for her, dies, she quits teaching and marries Erastus. When Erastus Miller dies,<sup>12</sup> Erastus' sister comes in to help her. Luella attracts both men and women, and their relationships do not always take those of romance. Sometimes her relationship with others takes that of mother and child: Aunt Abby Mixer attends her as if she were her baby, and when Aunt Abby's daughter comes to claim her mother back from the hand of Luella, she tells her daughter that Luella needs her more than her daughter does, as if to talk to her older daughter about her younger sister. She may transgress even more than all the other classic vampires in regard to her indiscriminate nature. She can charm men or woman, older or younger, to possess them to become her caretaker.

Far from being genderless, however, this babylike woman is greatly feminine in her demeanour as well as in her looks. As Nina Auerbach calls Luella a "perfectly idle Victorian lady," Luella is the epitome of femininity.<sup>13</sup> With her "blue eyes full of soft pleading, little slender, clinging hands, and a wonderful grace of motion and attitude,"<sup>14</sup> Luella expresses her discontents and discomfort through unconventional means: hysteria. Hysteria has been considered a female disease, particularly as a disease of communication. The hysteric acts out symptoms that are "symbolic resolution of an unconscious psychological conflict," or a conversion of her or his unexpressed desires and wishes, according to the *DSM-IV-TR*, in the section of the conversion disorder, one of the descendents of hysteria.<sup>15</sup> Luella falls into a hysteric episode when no one is around to take care of her, and she faints when she cannot counter the accusation that she is killing off her caretakers. Luella acts like a baby, therefore, she communicates with her hysteria. By describing Luella with the analogy to a baby, the story evokes the connection between a baby and hysteria, and also a baby and the femininity. As a person with limited communication skills - here both associated with ultrafemininity and immaturity, Luella Miller depends on her hysteric symptoms to communicate her inarticulate wants and discomforts.

As her hysteric symptoms indicate Luella's lack of communication skills, and by extension, the state of her desires that can never be articulated, Miss Penelosa, on the contrary, has such a strong narcissistic desire that she can take over her victim's. In a closer examination, however, one can conclude that Miss Penelosa's form of desire is still in the confine of "feminine." The desire that surfaces in the hypnotic relation is her desire to be desired. She controls a man, but she does so to make him *want* her. She still breathes in the world in which only men's desires matter and women have to be desired. Her narcissistic desires seem to threaten the autonomy of her victim, yet her desires are not as much a transgression as they seem. By forcing her desire onto her victim, she steps beyond the boundary of

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femininity, but by desiring to be desired, she operates within the boundary. She manipulates men not as the subject of her own desire, but as the object of desire.

On the other hand, Luella remains the object of desire throughout. Erastus marries her, Doctor Malcom wants to marry her, and other female victims feel the need to take care of her. The text also focuses on Luella as the object, too, to show her state as the object of desire; she is seen and described and she hardly talks or expresses herself. Being an embodiment of the Victorian femininity, she lacks all the elements that one sees necessary in a modern individual: autonomy, desire, and self-control. Yet she has no question about herself, remaining the object of desire and being in the state of dependency, because most people in the village love her and accommodate her.

This story qualifies itself as a horror story just because seemingly harmless Luella's complete dependency becomes infected. Luella's physical dependency self-duplicates and spreads to the people who take care of her, so that others can experience her state. Whether it is behavioural or substance-related, addiction describes a state in which an individual cannot stop doing, or consuming, the object of desire. Luella is not an addict, for she herself being the object of desire, which her victims cannot stop desiring, but like an addict she is completely dependent or incapable of self-control. Luella, a woman even incapable of self-control, creates dependency in her victims. Her victims are addicted and controlled but they are controlled in the absence of controller.

The controlled state without a controller, or the dependency on dependency, can easily be associated with the contemporary pseudo-psychological entity, co-dependency. According to John Steadman Rice, many theorists of "co-dependency" assume "human nature to be 'innately benevolent and constructive,' and culture and society 'overly repressive'" and co-dependent persons are suppressing their "inner child."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the co-dependency theories would see Luella's victims suppressing themselves, finding their identities in the empty vessel of self, Luella. According to those theories, Luella's victims are the ones to blame as failures that cannot liberate themselves from all the constraints of society. However, Luella's victims are perfectly normal adults, varying in age, gender, and rank. Unless reading this story as a critique of a New England village, whose suppressive culture supposedly produces "immature" and "addiction-prone" adults, albeit possible, the ideological tenets of co-dependency theories disagree with my reading. The ideas behind co-dependency theories, however, can help better understand the psychic vampire story with a helpless victimiser.

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The co-dependency theories are a variation of the addiction therapy discourse, thus, it shares the same concern and the same principle. Rice points out that the resistance to the institution and socialisation is at the bottom of the co-dependency theories. This makes sense when one looks at the discussion of an early advocate of “addiction” scare, Stanton Peele. In his influential book that claims addiction can be applied not only to alcohol and substances but also to love or interpersonal relationships, Peele argues that the decreasing sense of our control over ourselves and the increasing societal control over individuals contribute to the rising numbers of various forms of addiction.<sup>17</sup> Since one does not feel that he or she has control over oneself, it becomes easier for one to start falling into the addictive behaviours. This argument, however, also reminds one of another contemporary illness - paranoia.

Paranoia and addiction can be tied together in that they both react to the sense of loss of control. Addiction explains the loss of control and paranoia represents fears of loss of control. Timothy Melley terms the sense of serious anxiety about the autonomy and individuality of persons in contemporary society, in which he finds the “national tendency toward addiction-attribution,” as “agency panic.”<sup>18</sup> In paranoia, one has a delusion or an acute sense that he or she is being persecuted or watched. Someone, or very often, the government is behind this operation in the minds of the paranoids. These conspiracy theories reflect the sense that one is not in control of oneself. Alternatively, the conspiracy theories can compensate his or her sense of insignificances in the world in which one feels less and less in control of oneself because of today’s complex structure. When a similar sense manifests itself in the physical form, the paranoid will fear one’s own body gradually decaying or invaded by the foreign life forms. The combination of conspiracies and invasion fill the modern legends of alien stories seen in TV programmes or Science Fiction stories. In fact, vampire stories could be one variation of alien stories, and thus, stories of paranoia.<sup>19</sup>

In place of the monster or alien, this short story has Luella Miller, a helpless woman. She does not have control over herself. Luella herself is the embodiment of our anxieties, without autonomy, control or even desire. Yet no one - including Luella herself - knows how dreadful her state is until victims replicate her state by losing their mothering functions, simply because she is viewed with a positive light of femininity. The fate that all the ordinary people fall into –addiction and then death - is that of Luella Miller, who herself does not feel fear for her own life, like a baby.

Vampire stories, therefore, can also be stories of paranoia and addiction: when the focus is on fears of loss of control, the story can become that of paranoia; when the loss of control is accepted and its process is

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focused on, the story can be that of addiction. Luella Miller is the story of addiction, because victims themselves are unaware, and thus unafraid, of their loss of control. Yet by applying the name, "addiction," one can rationalise the process. Without the name or diagnosis, what one sees is his or her own weak will that cannot even stop what he or she is not supposed to do against the wise judgment. Applying the name to it does not change the fact that an individual cannot stay in that condition, but at least gives a rationalisation and offers a seemingly plausible prognosis. The aforementioned addiction specialist, Peele, later changes his position on addiction theories as applicable to behaviours unrelated to substances, and harshly criticises the tendencies to see compulsive behaviours as diseased events because they avoid the "work of understanding why people drink or smoke in favor of simply declaring these activities to be addictions."<sup>20</sup> If one attributes what happens to Luella's victims to addiction, here we find the rationalisation, or something like it, for only rationalisation of Luella's power can be found in seeing her as a vampire or supernatural being. However, Luella is not a supernatural being, an alien, or a domineering woman with hypnotic techniques. One still cannot explain why her victims cannot stop putting Luella's interest first before their own interest, without using the word, addiction or vampire. Yet we know why her victims are drawn to Luella and why those victims feel compelled to help her; her vulnerability and helplessness that people are afraid in themselves are accepted and cherished when described as feminine.

This unusual vampire story reveals the other side of an attractive feminine woman. Only people who have not fallen under Luella's spell - people who can resist her feminine charm - can see the dreadfulness of her state, as well as that of her fate. Luella Miller may be attractive from outside, yet being in Luella's shoes is dreadful. Her victims are not conscious of the horror of her state and they share Luella's fate, also unconscious of the horror of her fate. By spreading her dependency and helplessness into others, Luella makes others experience her dreadful state. They lose control of their fates, as Luella has never been and is, only because they cannot resist Luella's charm. She makes them regress into the state of incomplete human beings like her. She not only draws the heart out of her victims, but also draws them into the same fate as her. This psychic vampire story questions the idea of the attractive woman at the turn of the twentieth century, and shows us the attractiveness is indeed simply deadly helplessness. Functioning as an addictive substance, Luella Miller lets us see how fearful it is to be a feminine woman without her own self.

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### Notes



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- <sup>1</sup> Several anthologies, such as *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, A Ryan (ed), Penguin, New York, 1987, include this story as a vampire story.
- <sup>2</sup> M E W Freeman, 'Luella Miller' in *Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, 1986, pp. 77-78.
- <sup>3</sup> A C Doyle, 'The Parasite' in *Dracula's Brood*, R Dalby (ed), Crucible/Thorsons, Wellingborough, 1987, p. 127.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.
- <sup>5</sup> S Freud, 'Being in Love and Hypnosis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 18, J Strachey (trans and ed), Hogarth, London, 1955, p. 114.
- <sup>6</sup> S Margolis, 'Addiction and the End of Desire' in *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, J F Brodie and M Redfield (eds), University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, p. 22.
- <sup>7</sup> Freud, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- <sup>8</sup> H Krystal, 'Self Representation and the Capacity for Self Care' in *Essential Papers on Addiction*, D L Yalisove (ed), New York University Press, New York, 1997, p. 122.
- <sup>9</sup> Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>12</sup> Because Erastus dies of "consumption," this story can be interpreted as a story of vampire/tuberculosis, in which people who die one by one are gradually infected and wasted away. The association of vampires and tuberculosis may lie in the appearance of blood on the lips of the sick. In this story, Luella Miller can be the carrier of tuberculosis, and the last incidence, burning of Luella's house, can be the preventive measures to stop any more infection.
- <sup>13</sup> N Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 108. Auerbach also points out that Luella is the "exemplar of her class and time, the epitome of her age, not an outcast to it." However, Luella clearly belongs to a class in which a woman also has to do physical work. She has to work as a teacher before she marries Erastus, and even after marriage, she does not have servants to do household chores. Auerbach's indication that Luella is a Victorian "lady" is based on a false assumption, but also it also suggests that the true misfortune is that Luella was born into a wrong class.
- <sup>14</sup> Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- <sup>15</sup> The American Psychical Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 2000, p. 494.

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<sup>16</sup> J S Rice, *A Disease of One's Own*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1996, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> S Peele, *Love and Addiction*, Signet, New York, 1976, p. 153.

<sup>18</sup> T Melley, 'A Terminal Case: William Burroughs and the Logic of Addiction' in *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, J F Brodie and M Redfield (eds), University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> To be precise, this kind of delusions is categorised as "schizophrenic" rather than paranoiac, according to the *DSMs*. The delusional disorder, the contemporary name for the paranoid disorder, is characteristic of "nonbizarre" delusions, meaning delusions with realistic events, while the schizophrenic disorder entails "bizarre" delusions. Stories of invasion by imaginary creatures and extraterrestrial life forms will be no doubt qualified as "bizarre."

<sup>20</sup> S Peele, *Diseasing of America*, Lexington Books, New York, 1989, p. 146.

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