Steeling the Show

A Comparative Analysis Between Victorian and Neo-Victorian Heroines From a Feminist Perspective in Terms of Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

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In this essay, the concept of gender equality is explored in terms of progressive heroines in neo-Victorian literature. In order to elucidate in what way a progression has been made, the comparative analysis is predicated upon second wave feminism. A description of the Victorian heroine is made in order to decide if the neo-Victorian heroine has progressed in relation to gender equality. Jane Eyre is explored extensively in order to expand on how a strong heroine can be defined.

Elizabeth Steele will represent the neo-Victorian heroine from the novel Blood in the Skies (2011). Her characteristics are defined as being more in likeness with male features, and this would imply that neo-Victorian authors aim at reinventing the Victorian literature in order to adhere to the second wave feminist equality and "sameness" ideal. The Steampunk/neo-Victorian work Blood in the Skies features a heroine who is portrayed as a strong and independent woman corresponding to the feminist definition of progression in terms of gender equality, in contrast to the typical female protagonist found in Victorian fiction.

The results show that Elizabeth can be defined as a strong and independent woman, which corresponds with the feminist definition of gender equality. Heroines in neo-Victorian literature seem to have the same opportunities as men have, and this is shown by the freedom of choice exerted by Elizabeth in the novel.

Sökord: Blood in the Skies, G.D. Falksen, comparative literature, Victorian, Neo-Victorian
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Introduction

During the Victorian era, male authors dominated the literary tradition whilst female authors could not publish their works easily if they did not write under a male pseudonym – as, for example, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë did. The Victorian heroine can be said to have been very simplified in prevalent literature, since there was an absence of complexity in their personalities (Ziegler 1). If complexity was present, however, the most common sentimental aspect of their personality presented was a problematized love life. Two novels that represent this preceding assertion are Wives and Daughters by Elizabeth Gaskell and Tess of the d’Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy, where the complex quandaries of both Molly Gibson and Tess consist mainly of love-related predicaments. Women in Victorian society were almost considered as being property or an asset that could be given away or traded by their fathers to spouses of their father’s own choice. This was done in order to accumulate wealth or status in some manner, and many Victorian novels treat the predicaments of women that have no choice in the matter of their own marriage (Ziegler 2-3). One undeniable example of this custom can be seen in Jane Austen’s satiric works, which act as reflections of the predominant societal norms in the contemporary patriarchal England. Pride and Prejudice could be seen as a humorous work of fiction, where the female protagonist Elizabeth is given away by her father Mr Bennett to the callow and naïve Mr Collins. When turning Collins’ proposal down, she insists on Mr Collins to “[n]ot consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (94). This excerpt indicates women to be somehow less than men, and Elizabeth has to address her denial to Collins’ proposition as one being made by a rational creature.

The Steampunk/neo-Victorian work Blood in the Skies features a heroine who is portrayed as a strong and independent woman corresponding to the feminist definition of progression in terms of gender equality, in contrast to the typical female
protagonist found in Victorian fiction. In order to compare the heroine Elizabeth Steele to the Victorian heroine, a definition of what can be seen as the traditional female in Victorian literature will be made. A comparison will further be made to the heroine Jane Eyre, who has been seen as a strong and independent woman due to the fact that she attains an equal relationship with her husband. *Jane Eyre* is considered to be one of the first feminist and most prominent novels of the nineteenth century (Ziegler 5), which makes this novel a perfect candidate for comparison. The comparison between the heroines will be based on second-wave feminist criticism as described by Judith Evans. A comparative analysis between Elizabeth Steele, Jane Eyre and, to a certain extent, the general Victorian heroine will follow, in order to determine if a progression has been made in the representation of female protagonists from the perspective of gender equality, and what this progression entails. Among its other aims, Neo-Victorian literature is said to be the endeavour of redefining the past in order to give heroines more space in the literary canon. This also corresponds to the goals of feminist criticism as described by Barry (128), which will be further discussed in the second section.

Feminist literary theory can be found in several variants. There is a difficulty in keeping in line with a single theory, since the goals of these different theories are both heterogenous and ambivalent. Many critics argue for the female authors right to be included in the literary canon in order to make up for the exclusion of them in traditional literary histories. They want to include more authors of “the Other”, as Simone de Beauvoir termed the female gender as opposed to the male (Brooker, Selden, Widdowson 120). Her claim is that gender is divided into binary oppositions where the male is termed “the One”, and the female is termed “the Other”. (120) This statement refers to the patriarchal structure of society and can be traced back to the Old Testament (120). There is a need for strong and
independent heroines to be more included in the literary canon in order to balance out the prevalence of male protagonists in literature.

Feminist literary theory is divided into three different waves, where the first wave predominantly features Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft. These authors’ theories are derived from psychoanalysis, linguistics and social theory (119-20). Virginia Woolf’s philosophy also contributed to the debate by claiming that gender differences are social constructions (120). De Beauvoir condensed this aspect of feminist theory in one sentence: “One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 301).

The second wave of feminist literary theory focused more on the role of women in society. This movement started in the 1960’s, but it is hard to pinpoint its actual genesis. Some critics say that the first wave ended in 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir published her book The Second Sex (Brooker, Selden, Widdowson 119). The question of gender equality has been a prominent issue in society since the late Victorian era, and to define when these questions were first treated in society may be somewhat irrelevant. One might say, however, that Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman published in 1792 was the spark that lit the fire of feminist champions.

After World War II, the women of America were kept in the households and were supposed to be kept out of the workplace. Men would have the role of a provider, whilst women took care of the housework, the children and her husband. These norms can be seen in various sitcoms, such as Leave it to Beaver (Connelly and Mosher). Second wave feminism concentrates on inequalities and gender differences as they are perceived in society, and how these structures are perpetuated through societies’ view on gender (Evans 2-3).

The third wave of feminist literary criticism can be seen as the modern method of analysing literary works. This theory purports to “[h]onor contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking” (Krolokke 16). This theory also emphasizes the fact that one
singular theory of feminism cannot account for every woman in every culture in the world. Feminist literary critics take into consideration the fact that questions about gender and social norms are more complex than precedent theories have taken into account (127-128).

I have chosen to analyse *Blood in the Skies* from a second wave perspective, since the revolt of domestic women in America during the post-war years can be compared to the revolt of the domesticated women during the late Victorian era. This domestication is mediated through the Victorian literature and, in order to see if a progression in gender equality has been made regarding the question of heroines, one has to speak through a theory appropriate for the issue. Gender inequality that the second wave emphasized in particular is hardly obsolete just because a third wave variant has emerged. This essay is not concerned with the psychology of female writing, but it rather focuses on societal norms, and how literature can be the vehicle of promoting equal rights for both men and women. The term *heroine* will be used interchangeably with the term *protagonist* in this essay in order to avoid prolixity. The term heroine can be classified differently, but the chosen meaning here comes from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary according to which a heroine is “the principal female character in a literary or dramatic work” (“Heroine”).

In order to analyse how Victorian and neo-Victorian heroines are presented, an article by Ziegler and several articles about neo-Victorian literature will mainly be used. As the main source when it comes to neo-Victorian heroines, however, I will use Elizabeth Steele from *Blood in the Skies* as the representative. In order to see if a progression has been made in terms of gender equality in the representation of heroines from Victorian to neo-Victorian literature, I will use second wave feminist criticism and the problematized concept of equality as a tool of analysis together with a wide range of critical articles and works that include feminist theory as their subject. A close reading of *Blood in the Skies* will be done in order to define and distinguish the characteristics of Elizabeth Steele.
The essay will be structured in two sections together with a conclusion. In the first section, I intend to provide an overview on how the Victorian heroine was presented in the literature of the nineteenth century. In order to give an understanding of why women were presented in this manner, Victorian literature will be historically related to Victorian society. In the second section, I aim to define the genre of neo-Victorianism and consider how it differs from traditional Victorian literature in terms of setting and gender equality. It has an emphasis on technology, science fiction and the reinvention of the industrialized Victorian era. In part two of this section, I want to present the protagonist Elizabeth Steele to the reader. Her characteristics will be discussed, why she is the protagonist and what role she plays in this novel. This presentation will be combined with a comparative analysis between Victorian and neo-Victorian heroines from a gender perspective. In this section, I am going to describe how strong, independent females are presented by literary theory. Feminist critics advocate gender equality in literary works; this, however, does not mean that women should be portrayed as men, but that they should not be seen as subordinate to them (Evans 3-4). They want to affirm the uniqueness of female characteristics and how they can be used in literature.

**The Victorian Heroine**

The Victorian era ranged from 1837 to 1901 when Queen Elizabeth was the regent of Britain (Henry, Walker Bergström 133). Workers’ unions, the fight for women’s rights and the industrial revolution characterizes this period. George Eliot exemplifies the suppression of women well, as her real name was Mary Anne Evans (134). She received the inspiration for using a male pseudonym from the Brontë sisters. It was almost impossible for female authors to publish works during the Victorian era, but due to the conception of the Suffragette movement in 1906, a way was paved for women authors to find a voice (“George Eliot/Marian Evans”, Brit. Human. Assoc.). Two works that greatly contributed to the struggle for women’s rights was John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*, and
Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Barry 116). The former essay was a direct attempt by Mill to legislate voting rights for women. He was elected MP in 1865 and exclaimed direct support for women’s suffrage, and the publication of *The Subjection of Women* directly influenced the House of Commons (EGS). Mill proposed in his essay that the view on women’s feebleness and need of caretaking was mere conjecture, and no one could know that women were incapable of executing male chores since they had never got the opportunity to try (Mill 12-14). Mill defended the emancipation of women on the ethical grounds of utilitarianism, since he proposed that the greater good of society would be attained through contributing to women rights. The element of liberalism was crucial in order to attain a greater public well-being according to Mill (Appiah 172-73).

Wollstonecraft’s work was much in line with Mill’s essay, and one can see how influential her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* actually was in Victorian society. She argued against the normative notion of women as being weaker and lesser than men, and she tried to argue that women were just as capable (Wollstonecraft 56-59). Wollstonecraft coined the term “new genus”, in order to break free from the old notions and restrictions of being defined as a woman (xi). Her work was written in the same breath as the French Revolution was transpiring, which indicates the revolutionary attitudes of European thinkers (xiii-xvii).

When reading Victorian literature, one cannot get far without noticing a pattern in the portrayal of women. They are put into predefined categories – further discussed below - even though they may or may not fit the mold (Ziegler 1). Ziegler argues that “the very different ideas of Victorian womanhood all have one thing in common: not a single one of them represents a positive view of women…” (1). If one looks at the societal standards regarding the prevalent gender norms that a Victorian woman was supposed to live up to, one can see that there existed a predefined identity for everyone. Women of the higher classes were supposed to master different languages, know how to play music, how to act like a lady, and
how to care for their spouse (1). If they ventured out of the household, they were seen as fallen women (1-2). The women of lower classes were slaves in the domestic household if they did not have to contribute to the support of their children. If women of the lower classes were forced to leave the household, they were seen as inferior (1-2).

Men could publish their works easily, since they were the gender in charge of society. The fact that they could publish easier than women, an inevitable consequence was that they defined what was seen as female and feminine in literature, which was also reflected in society. This promulgated a normative ideal defined entirely by the male perception, which women then felt that they should live up to (Henry and Walker Bergström 142-3).

Auerbach proposes that there are four different, significant types of fictional Victorian women: the angel, the demon woman, the fallen woman and the old maid (185). They are described as being very different, but female characters can act as several of these types in a novel. The angel is described as the woman striving for perfection and the ideal woman represented in the image of the patriarchy (64, 66-9, 71-2). She wants to make her and her husband’s home perfect, and lives up to the normative idea of the accomplished woman in terms of languages and fashion (188; Ziegler 1). She could be seen as fragile, docile and serving as an emotional proxy for her husband. The demon woman on the other hand is the antithesis of the angel (Auerbach 75). She is, by her nature, a passionately anti-social creature. She tries to actively corrupt the society in order to bring it to a fallen state (Ziegler 2). The fallen woman was sometimes a prostitute, or otherwise engaged in non-acceptable social behaviour (2). She has basically fallen from grace, and lost her innocence as defined by virginity and purity (2). The old maid was an old woman that, first of all, never married, and secondly, lived for taking care of someone else. Ziegler points out that neither of these categories reflects the complexity of the Victorian woman (Ziegler 3). The only sort of woman acceptable in the patriarchal society of Victorian England was the angel (Henry and
Walker Bergström 142-3). The socially ideal woman was projected on the heroines and minor female characters in literature. She was caught in a role that had been defined by the other sex; however, this did paradoxically lead to social acceptance at the same time. If she behaved as “the angel”, she was fully accepted in society, but she was not free in terms of her personal choice of behaviour. If her behaviour did not correspond to the myth of the angel, she would become independent to a greater extent, but would be stigmatized by the general public.

The definition of “the angel” is derived from the prominent poem by Coventry Patmore named “The Angel in the House” (Auerbach 66-69). This poem treats the concept of a happy life in marriage, and female behaviour that promotes this desirable happiness. An extract from his narrative poem mentioned above may be useful to consider. A specific extract shows the wife’s submission to her husband:

And if he once, by shame oppress'd,  
A comfortable word confers,  
She leans and weeps against his breast,  
And seems to think the sin was hers;  
And whilst his love has any life,  
Or any eye to see her charms,  
At any time, she's still his wife,  
Dearly devoted to his arms;  
She loves with love that cannot tire;  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone. (Patmore 68)

The poem evidently conveys the image of women expected to act as support to their husbands in any way they could. This, however, would imply their emotional support. Towards the end of the excerpt, the wife’s passionate duty is indicated, her love will grow “[a]s grass grows taller round a stone”. The grass in this sense could be seen as a supportive structure, highlighting the splendour of the stone that is generally not perceived as beautiful on its own. The poem also suggests that the woman should offer solace when the man is shamed, and should act as if the shame is hers. This is in order to share the pain with her husband and make him feel comforted, although this relationship is not necessarily reciprocal.
In literature, a woman that could not be defined as an angel might redeem herself in order to be accepted in society by her peers, and subsequently reach the status of the angel, ridding herself of being branded as the fallen woman (Ziegler 2-3). This was usually achieved by marrying a proper spouse of at least the same social class (2-3). If this was accomplished, and the woman changed her ways in order to behave more like the angel, she would be redeemed to some extent. Many still considered a woman to be fallen even though she redeemed herself by acting according to the constraining set of socially acceptable norms, as illustrated in Dickens’ Oliver Twist (Barnhill 21). John Milton treated the fallen woman already in his 1667 epic Paradise Lost. He uses Eve in Genesis in order to illustrate the essence of the fallen woman. She did not follow the virtue of her femininity, which caused all of mankind to fall into a state of corruption. Dickens was one of the authors who disagreed with the prevailing view that women considered fallen could not be redeemed. He thought that fallen women could be trained in a profession in order to return to a socially acceptable life (Beaven and Pulham). The fallen woman was often described as a prostitute in Victorian novels in order to illustrate the incapability of women to procure an income in an acceptable manner (Beaven and Pulham).

All female protagonists, however, were not seen as docile creatures in the grip of the patriarchy. Ziegler has written about three strong women in Victorian fiction of which I here want to focus on one in particular due to the fact that a presentation of a Victorian heroine is needed in order to define what is considered to be a strong, independent woman. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë is one of the novels considered to be before its time. The novel was released under the pen name Currer Bell, which indicates that women would not be taken seriously if they published under their own name (Miller 14, 17). The heroine in this novel goes through a series of stages, where she evolves out of being a shy, cautious girl to a strong, independent woman. Ziegler claims that this is considered unusual in Victorian literature, because female
protagonists usually do not take charge of their own lives (Ziegler 7). Jane, however, accomplishes this and becomes self-sufficient both emotionally and financially.

Jane begins as an angry, rebellious orphan who is mistreated by her aunt and later sent to school to be able to have a chance of a normal upbringing. This does not become the case however, but Jane spends six years there as a student and two as a teacher. She is later hired as the governess at Thornfield. There, she falls in love with the owner named Rochester whom she later marries. After several intrigues, which included Jane leaving her husband, she returns and remains happily married in a relationship that she herself defines as coequal. She is equal to her husband Rochester in several ways, which is rarely found in Victorian literature. The fact that she becomes Rochester’s equal only after he is incapacitated by blindness, can serve as a caveat to Brontë’s brand of feminism in that females can only be equal to men when these men are impaired. Jane is considered to be equal to Rochester by the fact that he treats her as an equal, and not as a feeble woman in the traditional sense. She is considered to be strong and independent enough to be defined as an autonomous individual.

The most important point about Jane Eyre is that she is considered to be a woman characterized by individuality in the novel. She wants to go to school and learn, resisting the temptation of becoming Rochester’s mistress, and she has the willpower to leave her husband after the woman he was already married to is revealed. Since Rochester was already married to another woman, the marriage ceremony was invalid, and it was not legally binding. After she has left Rochester, Jane proclaims: “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself” (Brontë 621). This indicates that Jane now considers herself to be independent. After she has left Thornfield, she moves in with two sisters called Diana and Mary Rivers. Jane recognizes much of herself in them, as they are intellectual, educated, and also her cousins. A reciprocal, sisterly relationship of learning and teaching takes form, and Jane feels solidarity between sisters,
where she can strive for personal growth. Jane has eventually developed so much that she can even consider herself as more powerful than her spouse Rochester. She is no longer emotionally dependent on him as she was before but has transcended her stature as the traditional woman, returning to him on her own terms. Jane is therefore one of the few women in Victorian literature who takes an active role in her own life in order to shape her destiny. Her independence and her view of herself as an equal to Rochester can be seen in how Jane puts the emphasis on herself as the agent: “Reader, I married him” (885).

Jane Eyre is not considered to be the typical heroine in Victorian literature. She was used as a symbol for the “New Woman”, since she transcended her traditional standing as the domestic woman. When women started to establish the New Woman in their novels, several heroines were used in order to establish what this term implied. From being “the angel” in the house, acting as a housewife and a mother in order to keep the household running without problems for her husband, the New Woman strived for equality and a career of her own, instead of remaining the docile wife and mother (Diniejko, “The New Woman Fiction”). Dickens also featured several women in his novels, such as Ester Summerson from Bleak House and Agnes Wickfield from David Copperfield, who can be considered to embody Victorian domestic values. William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel Vanity Fair, on the other hand, satirized the domestic woman as seen in normative literature by making the women absurdly docile and self-denying. Even though the societal norms advocated that females conform to the myth of the angel, the heroine of the Victorian novel was much more multi-facetted. The heroine also embodied the desires of women in Victorian society who wanted to break free from the chains of the patriarchy (Dijienko).

The writer Sarah Grand was the first to coin the term “New Woman” in 1894 in her article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (271). By inventing this term, she provided a useful tool for women who considered themselves as avid advocators of gender equality.
Novels such as *Kith and Kin* by Jessie Fothergill published in 1881, and *The Wing of Azrael* by Mona Caird published in 1889, were written in order to promote this image of a new form of heroine. This was an important aspect of promoting women’s rights that took its basis in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, and John Stuart Mill’s work mentioned. The fact that the New Woman was needed in literature indicates a subjection of women in Victorian society that was no longer tolerated by them. This expressed itself in the fact that women had very little power to influence the trajectory of their own lives. Women could not instigate divorce procedures, for instance, or own property until 1882 (Henry, Walker Bergström 143).

The coining of the concept New Woman was directed against the status quo, which created a conservative reaction by the patriarchy. By adapting the title of the New Woman, female authors could express the sexual and social desires and needs of contemporary women. The new woman’s desire for emancipation can be seen in the “new woman” heroines who were engaged in prostitution, free love, adultery and gave birth to children out of wedlock (Senf). The new woman can be related to Wollstonecraft’s idea of the “new genus”, where she tries to define a new category of femininity and consider its implications.

Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* advocated the emancipation of women from their role as emotional supporters of their husbands. He discussed the present system of the domestication of women as resting only upon a social construct. There is no real reason for women to be subjugated by men only because they “by nature” are considered to be inferior. According to Mill, there is no evidence that the system of the subjugated woman promotes a better, more viable society. Mill continues by claiming that gender equality

arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man. (13)

He further comments this by suggesting that men simply subverted physical facts into law
(13). Since women were seen as physically inferior to men, then legislation would put them in their place. Women could then not object to a law that was seen as based in nature (13).

In this section, the general Victorian heroine has been discussed in order to tie the perception of Victorian females in society to literature. Jane Eyre has been used as a literary example of a strong and independent woman who takes control of her own fate. This has been made in order to grasp the nuances of the Victorian heroine in varying, representative works. The struggle of women has been exemplified by the writings of Wollstonecraft and Mill, and has been tied together with the concept of the new woman, as well as the new genus. The next section will treat the concept of neo-Victorianism and the neo-Victorian heroine, who will be represented by Elizabeth Steele from the novel Blood in the Skies. The definition of neo-Victorianism will be discussed in the first part of the section, and an analysis of Elizabeth will occupy the remainder of it.

**Neo-Victorianism and the Neo-Victorian Heroine**

**Defining Neo-Victorianism**

A definition of neo-Victorianism may be complex due to its scattered ideas, but will provide a frame of reference that is useful for understanding the development of the heroine belonging to this genre. When one understands the aim of this genre, one can understand why women are represented in the manner that they are. Elizabeth Steele will serve as the representative of the neo-Victorian heroine in this section and the next.

The diffusiveness of neo-Victorianism is simultaneously an asset and a problematic element. Generally, neo-Victorianism is defined as a genre of literature, film or music that reinvents the nineteenth century in some form (Mitchell 1-3). There is a debate still, however, of what belongs to neo-Victorianism and what does not, and there is also the question of its definition. In his article “Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter”, Kohlke proposes that
the necessary discussions and debates around ‘neo-Victorian’ – as term, as genre, as ‘new’ discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past urgently require an appropriate forum… (1)

Here, we can see that the neo-Victorian implies several different features, and it is not as simple as neo-Victorianism just being a component of literature. Even though this section will deal with the literary phenomena of neo-Victorianism, it is crucial that some of these components are analysed as part of literature.

One genre that is closely related to neo-Victorianism is called “steampunk”. It is vital to characterise steampunk at this point due to the fact that the novel *Blood in the Skies* is considered to be part of this genre. Steam technology has been extensively developed in the novel, and the story takes place in an alternative Victorian future. G.D Falksen has described steampunk succinctly as “Victorian science fiction.” (Falksen, “What is Steampunk?”). In other words, steampunk is related to the Victorian era, and to technology. Falksen argues in his article that steampunk is not necessarily related to a specific culture, but to the industrialized nineteenth century in general. This genre aims towards reinventing the Victorian era through literature, film and music in order to create and imagine an alternative history. Many steampunk works feature advanced steam-machines and fictional power sources. Novels such as *Morlock Night* by K.W Jeter, and *The Anubis Gate* by Tim Powers are considered by many steampunk and Victorian devotees to be the first real steampunk novels. They mainly feature the element of time travel and science fiction, where gods and fantastic machines facilitate and hinder the progression of the protagonist. There is endless variation and ingenuity as to how these machines are driven, but the focal point of steampunk is to try to improve Victorian society with the help of advanced technology.

One can succinctly summarize that the aim of the steampunk subgenre is to tell a story about how the Victorian era would have looked if more advanced technology had been invented earlier than it was (Yaszek 190). One prominent novel that has been considered as
the first steampunk novel is H.G Well’s *The Time Machine*. This novel tells the story of a
scientist who has invented a time machine, which he uses to explore the past and the future. I
would argue that steampunk and neo-Victorianism are two inseparable genres, since
steampunk is an essential part of neo-Victorianism and vice versa. Steampunk can be used as
being representative of progression and improving society.

Socio-political critique in neo-Victorian literature is seen as an essential part of the
discipline. In their article “Introduction to Adapting the Nineteenth Century: Revisiting,
Revising and Rewriting the Past”, Bowler and Cox discuss the rewriting of the past in order to
expand our view of the Victorian era. This is significant in terms of gender equality that this
essay intends to elucidate. By attenuating gender equality in neo-Victorian literature, authors
inevitably reassess the value of Victorian literature (3). Neo-Victorian literature endeavours to
provide readers with Victorian aesthetics and democratic social values adapted to the twenty-
first century. Discussing steampunk in his interview with Liza Yaszek, Paul Di Filippo
proposes that

> steampunk fiction promotes understanding of the roots of our current global
scene, and offers lateral insights as to how we could improve retroactively on
some of the choices we made, all unknowing, in the path of technological
development. (190)

Although Di Filippo considers choices made in the technological realm, this is not necessarily
the only choice that is treated in this genre. Much of neo-Victorian literature treats either
consciously or unconsciously the question of inequality between genders. Victorian society
was ruled by the monarchy, the church and, as second-wave feminists would argue, the
patriarchy.

**Elizabeth Steele as the Neo-Victorian Heroine**

The chosen character that is to represent the neo-Victorian heroine is Elizabeth Steele from
*Blood in the Skies*. She is one of the women who could be said to indicate the emancipation of
the Victorian heroine from patriarchal structures. As seen in the previous section, the neo-Victorian heroine represents, to a certain degree, a progression in gender equality in contrast to Victorian literature. Wollstonecraft considers herself as belonging to the “new genus” (Wollstonecraft, xi), and Elizabeth can be said to represent the literary equivalent of the “new genus” and the emergence of the new woman that questions the values of Victorian gender relations.

This section will also utilize feminist literary theory in order to show how the neo-Victorian heroine corresponds to feminist ideals. There are two main terms that are used in order to achieve this: equality and “sameness”. Equality and the concept of “sameness” are not synonyms but can be seen as being closely related. These terms will be used in order to argue that the proposed gender equality in neo-Victorian literature is present due to heroines minimizing, or eradicating the prevalent dichotomy of the sexes.

Feminist literary criticism purports to investigate, amongst other things, the literary canon in terms of female authors and their place in it (Barry 128). The rediscovery of works written by females, and works attempting to elucidate the female experience as represented by male and female authors, is the focal point of feminist literary critics (128). The critical investigation of inherent male and female traits is usually part of the feminist discourse in order to see if there are biological differences between the sexes or if social constructs are all that the chasm of division consists of (128). Young describes the debate of equality and difference in her work *Throwing Like a Girl*, and includes an evocative line that can be interpreted in several ways: “Do we want to be like men or not?” (85). This can mean, that if women become like men, they will automatically be treated as equals. It could also mean that women should not become like men, who have been seen as an oppressive sex, as they would only repeat the oppressive power of the patriarchy. This statement will be used in the analysis of Elizabeth Steele in order to elaborate on the question of the progression of female heroines
being equal to men due to their male characteristics.

Evans treats the problem of proposed equality by feminist theory in her work *Feminist Theory Today*, where the term “equality” is problematized in order to achieve a clear definition (2-3). Equality and difference are closely related, and when one discusses equality issues, one assumes that there are pre-existing differences that need be solved. Early second wave feminist theory is subdivided into two main groups, which Evans calls “liberal” and “early radical” (13). The liberal variant proposes the term “adequate similarity” (13) as an alternative term to equality, and this term purports that gender-based discrimination is based upon nothing but social constructs. The early radical school proposes the term “sameness”, and implies an aspect of androgyny (13). They state that women are to be treated as equals to men due to the fact that men and women are really the same (13). Evans proposes that “[e]quality here must mean at a minimum some form of equality of opportunity for the sexes…” (14), and that there should be no pro-male bias in society.

Elizabeth starts out as a fighter pilot, and continues to be one throughout the novel. The reader first encounters her when she saves the airship *Fortuna* from raiding pirates (*Blood in the Skies* 18-19), and, after she finds a peculiar artifact onboard (23), she takes initiative to seek the help of her friend Ray. They travel together to explore the power of the artifact, and Elizabeth continues to brawl with bandits and soldiers. She travels freely, and this eventually leads her into a conflict with a pirate lord, who seeks the artifact in Elizabeth’s possession. Elizabeth does not change in any conceivable way throughout the novel, but remains an action heroine.

Elizabeth’s characteristics are stereotypically male to an extensive degree, as she possesses traits that could be more compared to how heroes would behave in traditional Victorian literature. She is heroic, practically fearless, flirty, and more adventurous rather than careful. In terms of self-reliance, she can be compared to Jane Eyre in several ways,
although Jane is controlled by societal gender norms to a greater extent than Elizabeth is, since she is a person who insists upon being treated as an autonomous individual. Ray cares about her, as can be seen in an incident where Elizabeth becomes wounded, and Ray asks, “Are you alright?” (70), to which Elizabeth replies with “What sort of question is that?” (70). By indicating that the Ray’s question is stupid, she is insisting upon caring for herself. In *Blood in the Skies*, society seems to have changed its views on gender equality, and there are not many instances in the book that actually emphasize the fact that Elizabeth is a female military pilot. Her sex is emphasized when it comes to love and sexuality, but it does not seem to be strange that she is a highly skilled military operative. No one reacts when Elizabeth decides to hit a pirate in his face after he has approached her inappropriately by “[g]iv[ing] her a long, reassuring pat on the backside” (102).

The most prominent feature of the novel is the lack of attention paid to gender. Men and women do not seem to have predefined roles, but act as free individuals. This could be explained by the fact that the majority of the novel takes place in an area called “The Badlands”, where anarchy is prevalent. There are no limitations as to what the characters choose to work with, even though certain vocations in society might be more represented by men or women.

Elizabeth’s friend Ray, who is a spy for the state of the Commonwealth, possesses qualities of a careful and demure person. He works at the *Special Survey Bureau*, where he has procured the position of cartographer (*Blood in the Skies* 31). One does instantly notice that he is more than a cartographer as his skills are successively revealed; he is a highly skilled lock-picker and knows much more than a simple cartographer would (33-36). He considers Elizabeth to be reckless in many instances, and he does not have the taste for warfare as she has. She is the character that is not afraid to get engaged in hard labor, whilst Ray is more of the impeccably dressed gentleman with an inclination towards science. This
can be seen in the way Elizabeth is confounded by Ray’s fascination in numbers, after which he replies “I don’t understand how you can get so excited about machine guns and whizbangs” (33). Elizabeth tells the reader that he is “[d]ressed impeccably in a suit and cravat, [that] he was handsome enough to charm, but [that] he would never stand out in a crowd” (31).

There are several instances in the novel that makes one raise an eyebrow when it comes to normative gender patterns. Elizabeth takes more initiative in terms of flirting and being more of a risqué part in the duality between male and female, and is unbridled when it comes to paying compliments and slightly rude remarks to Ray. This is illustrated by her comment in the last battle of the novel when she tells Ray to “get [his] pretty face looked at. I don’t want you getting all scarred up. I’ll never be able to take you out in society again” (205). She is also very sarcastic in her manners, as is illustrated by her comment when Ray and she have to go into the Badlands incognito. When Ray tells her to be careful, her sarcasm and condescension become evident: “How lucky I am to have my very own bodyguard” (95), and “Well isn’t this a charmy little teahouse?” (96). They are the dynamic duo interacting fervently in the majority of the novel, and it is in this interaction that one detects a behavioral pattern of equality. The characters are somewhat static, and one does only gain an insight into Elizabeth’s psyche by means of sporadic thoughts.

Progression in terms of gender equality can be difficult to define. A Victorian might consider a domestic woman to be independent and strong if she controls the household and has the power to influence her children. A predicament emerges when one questions if power over children and the household really is sufficient for considering a woman to be independent. Gender equality today may be seen in terms of women having an equal part in decision-making, equal economic independence, equal pay as men for work and freedom from gender-based violence (European Commission). If equality in these questions is
attained, women will be defined as equal and independent. These standards, however, do not contain the definition of a strong woman, since this term might be considered as being too subjective. One does not usually hear men described as being strong other than in a physical manner; but women are usually described as being emotionally and mentally strong. Independence and strength are considered to be two crucial components of gender equality since women demand equal rights from their perspective. This discussion emanates into societal standards as defined by men, and women want to attain the same rights as men do. This would lead to the conclusion of men being the gender with an advantage over women whereas women are seen as inferior or unequal.

Elizabeth seems to be a relatively free individual, except from the constraints of a working life in the military. She does decide over her own time, however, and she is a commander of the air force. This indicates that she has had possibilities in life, which she has seized as a free woman. Elizabeth has to take leave from her position in the military in order to make an excursion with Ray, which she does without problem in terms of work related politics, indicating thus fair working conditions for the female gender.

During a trip that Elizabeth and Ray have to undertake from Ray’s town of Kilkala to the scholarly town of Singhkhand, she has to wear a “blue and green day dress” (62), with an absurdly cumbersome hat. She does this in order to avoid arousing suspicion, indicating that the normative attire for women is indeed a dress. She does not mind this attire, but she is not fully accustomed to wearing this garment as she wears a uniform during the majority of her working time. This could imply that even though the normative garment was a dress, Elizabeth has the choice of not wearing it. Dress code is evidently related to gender, but it does not seem strange if a woman chooses not to wear it, although it might attract attention.

Elizabeth Steele could be further seen as an independent heroine due to the fact that she can hold a prestigious military position without the society being biased towards
biological differences between men and women. Pro-male biological differences do not seem to be favored in the novel since the patriarchal structure of modern society seems to be nonexistent. She does not seem to be bound to a household, and her socioeconomic class is never mentioned. Marriage or children are not mentioned either, and this indicates that women are not necessarily expected to settle down with a man chosen for her, or partially by her. The women that are featured in the novel are either in the military, as Elizabeth’s co-pilot Azra Nadir (18), privateers or highly skilled archaeologists, as illustrated by Miss Molekane (135). The Victorian heroine presented earlier seems to be constituted by differences between men and women. Considering the four categories as presented by Auerbach, a whole mythology has been devised in order to explain the devious behavior of heroines in comparison to the normative behavior of male protagonists. This, once again, brings up the emphasis on difference between genders, and, by elucidating how these differences seem to be absent in neo-Victorian literature, one can draw the conclusion that a progression has been made in terms of gender representation between Victorian and neo-Victorian literature. The traditional Victorian heroine was confined to the household, as illustrated in section one, or to marital endeavors evident in the novels such as *Tess d’Urbesville* and *Kith and Kin*. Heroines such as Jane Eyre appeared when female authors struggled for gender equality, and much of her strength and individuality is reflected in Elizabeth.

It seems that Neo-Victorian writers have abandoned the archaic view of women as the inferior gender with a myopic view of the world in terms of love and marriage. The neo-Victorian heroine has no such constraints when it comes to her self-development, which was seen as being exclusive to male protagonists. Heroines have progressed over time due to the enlightened views of equality and sameness, which is reflected in *Blood in the Skies*. Elizabeth Steele does not have the traditional features of the Victorian heroine, and, in terms of her characterization, she represents the emergence of a new woman, liberated from the
shackles of domesticity and marital bliss.

Gender questions have been put aside in *Blood in the Skies*, and there is no reason as to why neo-Victorian heroines cannot act as equal agents to male protagonists, in contrast to Victorian heroines. This is illustrated by the emphasis on action in the novel, where Elizabeth assumes the role of a brawling action heroine. The lack of depth in terms of social and existential questions seems to indicate openness to men and women assuming roles regardless of gender-bias.

Jane Eyre is one of the heroines presented who differs to the greatest extent from traditional Victorian literature. She is an agent who can decide over her own fate, which Elizabeth can as well. A conclusion can be drawn, that a number of female authors during the Victorian era strived for gender equality, and highlighted this by creating heroines that could live up to the concept of the new woman. Brontë created a new woman heroine before the term was coined, which also points to a desire for women to break free from the patriarchal hierarchy. The concept of heroines has evidently evolved since *Blood in the Skies* does not mention the presumed obligations of the woman that typically feature in Victorian literature.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, the concept of progressive heroines has been explored in terms of gender equality. My thesis is that the Steampunk/neovictorian work *Blood in the Skies* features a heroine who is portrayed as a strong and independent woman, corresponding with the feminist notions of equality that attenuates gender difference, and in contrast to the typical female protagonist found in Victorian fiction.

I have tried to show that the neo-Victorian heroine Elizabeth Steele can act as the representative heroine of this literary genre, and that she has been presented in a manner that is far more developed than the Victorian heroine. *Blood in the Skies* is a novel in which gender does not have any bearing in terms of gender bias, but each sex has equal
opportunities in line with second-wave feminism. Elizabeth is a heroine who has the alternative of not being married, and she is not confined to the domestic sphere as the Victorian heroine was. She has the power to control her own life, which the Victorian heroine seldom had.

Since male authors most often represented the heroine during the Victorian era, she was often depicted as being lesser than the male protagonist. I have shown that this is due to the fact that literature often reflected the Victorian societal norms, where women were supposed to live up to the mythological ideal of “the angel” as described by Patmore, Ziegler and Auerbach (Auerbach 63).

Ziegler has, however, shown that there were strong heroines in Victorian literature. Amongst them, Jane Eyre can be found as one of the most prominent examples. This emergence of strong and independent Victorian heroines testifies to the fact that women and female authors began to show dissatisfaction with their current social condition.

Neo-Victorianism is a genre of literature where authors want to reinvent the Victorian past. This is done in order to democratize the past as contended by Di Filippo, whilst still retaining the Victorian aesthetics. Democratizing the past is done in order to create equal rights for men and women, poor and rich, old and young and present the era in the light of twenty-first century values.

The purpose of this essay was to suggest that the neo-Victorian/steampunk novel Blood in the Skies presents the heroine Elizabeth Steele in a more gender-equal manner than Victorian novels have done. Second wave feminist theory suggests the term “sameness” as applicable to the relationship that should exist between the sexes. Even though there are biological differences between men and women, the majority of differences are considered to be social constructs.
Elizabeth Steele is considered to be a strong and independent woman; however, this might not apply to neo-Victorian works in general. To verify that this conclusion has external validity, one could, for instance, analyse other Victorian novels and explore more neo-Victorian works in order to make another comparison. One might also apply a different aspect of progression in terms of gender equality.
List of Works Cited


