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Clockwork Heroines: Female Characters in Steampunk Literature

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CLOCKWORK HEROINES:
FEMALE CHARACTERS IN STEAMPUNK LITERATURE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Cassie N. Bergman

August 2013

CLOCKWORK HEROINES:
FEMALE CHARACTERS IN STEAMPUNK LITERATURE

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To my parents, John and Linda Bergman, for their endless support and love.

and

To my brother Johnny—my best friend.

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Steampunk is a progressive literary genre that evokes, imitates, and re-imagines the nineteenth century and favors the Industrial Revolution ideals of science and technology. In a historical framework, it mixes nineteenth-century conventions and retro-futuristic machinery with science fiction and fantasy elements. Steampunk authors are able to radically redefine socio-cultural implications that affect both past and contemporary societies.

The following study explores the multitude of characteristics that define Steampunk literature as an interdisciplinary study. Chapter 1 explores the definitions and literary genres that construct Steampunk and includes a brief literary history of Steampunk works. Chapter 2 focuses on Cherie Priest's novel *Bonshaker* (2009), which depicts self-sufficient females battling hardships in America's last frontier. Chapter 3 looks at how Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* series (2010-2013) illustrates female identity as a performance in an age of technological progression and cultural revolutions. The female characters in Priest's and Clare's novels resist hegemonic conventions and create an alternative vision of nineteenth-century women.

INTRODUCTION

Nick Carraway: "You can't repeat the past."
Jay Gatsby: "Can't repeat the past? ... Why of course you can!"
—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Repeating and imitating the past are important components of Steampunk literature. Steampunk has been classified as an integration of several literary genres: neo-Victorianism, speculative fiction, revisionist history, science fiction, and fantasy. In the last thirty years, Steampunk's hybridity has placed the genre in a discourse of continuous construction and understanding. In short, it is a literary movement that evokes, imitates, and re-writes the nineteenth century, mostly favoring Victorian cultural conditions, as an alternative technological era. Steampunk is an interdisciplinary study of textual and historical expressions regarding the interactive relationship between humans and technology. The genre focuses on the historical technologies of the steam era. It integrates this anachronistic characteristic in order to re-access a time in history that was celebrated as a progressive period. However, Steampunk also alters historical aspects of the nineteenth century, and it explores Victorian scenarios with new beginnings and new endings.

Steampunk is a term that is often associated with popular culture involving handmade crafts, mechanical gadgets, elaborate costuming and dress, and other mimics of the nineteenth century. Dylan Fox asserts that Steampunk enthusiasts gather items tarnished or "devoid of function" and puts these discarded objects to "good use," such as using typewriter keys to create jewelry (363). In order for others to understand the genre, enthusiasts from cult-like fanatics to academic scholars provide examples that are associated with contemporary media like movies, comic books, novels, web series,

and television shows.

Steampunk enthusiasts recommend films as the easiest connection for people to understand the genre. Examples range from Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), *The Time Machine* (2002) directed by H.G. Wells's grandson Simon Wells, and most recently the *Sherlock Holmes* series (2009 and 2011) starring Robert Downey, Jr. These films reflect the original texts by authors Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. While the original texts are Victorian, their film treatments reflect a Steampunk sensibility. Another film that is classified as Steampunk is the film-adaptation of Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* (2003) comic books. Moore's comic book series and movie adaptation are contemporary Steampunk, in which he reimagines Victorian aesthetics and characters like Allan Quartermain from H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). All of these films reflect traditional Victorian conventions: class divisions, the expansion of the Empire, industrialization, and the development of science. In these films, the Steampunk characters are progressive and revolutionary thinkers using scientific and technological inventions; they depict knowledge related to unconventional engineering, physics, and chemistry instructions. Specifically, they have advanced knowledge of scientific theories realistically not linked to the Victorian age, such as Sherlock Holmes using an electro-magnetic radio controller, a modern remote control in Victorian London.

Additionally, twentieth and twenty-first century movies associated with the Steampunk culture portray iconic characters connected to classic Victorian texts, like Captain Nemo of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Tom Sawyer from Mark

Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), Hawley Griffin from H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897), and Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series (1887-1927). These films include famous characters from Victorian works which are placed in counter-fictional storylines: a reinterpretation and alteration of iconic fictional works or characters. Steampunk films are contemporary re-imaginings of the Victorian period, which include and blend in modern-day machinery and retro-futuristic weaponry. Steampunk attitudes are deliberately anachronistic because the Victorian era was historically known as a progressive era, especially in the fields of science and technological developments. Steampunk reconstructs Victorian aesthetics, attitudes, and affectations and reclaims them as not yet developed in order to provide commentary on modern and postmodern ideologies, like the values and consequences of scientific innovations.

According to Alan Moore, the writer and creator of the Steampunk's most notable comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2012), Steampunk is a unique genre that allows past, present, and future to combine in a "glorious stew" that utilizes the "fragments of [the] previous culture" in order to "extend ourselves into the future" (139). The awareness of the past and the present allows contemporary Steampunk writers to bring the past, in this case the Victorian and Edwardian periods, to the forefront and take a nostalgic look at the nineteenth century. In other words, the uncertainties and triumphs of the past are catalysts for reassessing present and future in regards to technology and cultural change.

Steampunk is not limited to the idea of direct referencing and reincarnating Victorian characters. Instead, contemporary Steampunk authors specialize in re-

envisioning the culture encompassed in the nineteenth century, with or without known Victorian characters, and then incorporating fantastical adventures and “intrusive technologies-out-of-time” (Miller and Van Riper 87). Ultimately, utilizing stories and characters that an audience already connects to nineteenth-century associations is the easiest approach to relate a newcomer to Steampunk. Because many Steampunk films highlight Victorian characters in an alternative storyline, the films are able to reclaim and re-explore the historical period through a postmodern lens. The characters are placed in a recognizable Victorian atmosphere, but they introduce Steampunk aficionados to new scenarios and unknown sequences of story plots.

Connecting the Victorian era with contemporary society is an important component of Steampunk literature. This connection is typically recognized by the incorporation of “divergent and extinct technologies” that are “simultaneously retro and forward-looking in nature” (VanderMeer, *Steampunk Bible* 9). Steampunk is frequently recognized by the characteristic of clockwork machinery, mechanical devices typically made with brass, iron wirings, cogs and gears. These materials are fetishized because they are constructive items, ordinary materials that anyone could find and use. The period of industrial development was an opportunity for progress and change, and this ideology is the foundation for the material framework of Steampunk.

Steampunk fiction preserves the consciousness of the Industrial Revolution and the evolution of science in the nineteenth century. Cynthia Miller, a visual and cultural anthropologist, explains, “Victorian London is a favorite setting of steampunk works...because it represents the epicenter of the real nineteenth-century’s technological upheaval. The products of the Industrial Revolution were escaping the solitary inventor’s

laboratory and becoming mass-produced commodities” (“Interview” 352).

Industrialization, scientific discoveries, and the escalation of technology are the mainstays of imperialism and its transformation into a domain of triumphant feats in social, economic, and technological change. For example, the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830, “the very first steam-powered, public railway line in the world,” signaled England’s role as the originator of revolutionary and industrial advancements (Abrams 1046). As its name suggests, steam is the most common scientific utility depicted in Steampunk literature. Rebecca Onion explains that Steampunk focuses on the steam era because, like many postmodern theorists who revile modern technology, Victorian society had the same reaction to scientific developments:

The technological advances of the first Industrial Revolution created legendary pollution and caused incredible hazard for the workers whose lives were transformed by them. The “dark satanic mills,” as William Blake famously characterised [*sic*] them, also inspired the dingy street scenes of the novels of Charles Dickens, catalysed [*sic*] the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and, eventually, instigated the English and American reformers of the Progressive Era, who sought to alleviate the sanitary conditions and occupational hazards which were caused by the nineteenth century’s patterns of development. (Onion 138)

The nineteenth-century revolutionary landscape for new ideas and technological inventions like the steam-engine are explored in Steampunk literature because the effects of these innovations bear societal consequences. Pollution was a hazardous consequence of steam-powered machinery in the Victorian era. Consequently, pollution parallels as a

harmful aftermath in the postmodern period, too. Steampunk fiction links the past and present as counterparts in history because “Victorian and contemporary periods share certain similar features without insisting that their material structure are ‘essentially the same’” (Jones 104). Linking the Victorian era to our own is an important component because it promotes understanding between the past and the present. The techno-fantasy found in Steampunk fiction explores and recreates the Empire’s vacillating reactions to change in cultural conventions.

The postmodern world and Victorian era have many commonalities, especially in regards to social problems, like pollution and international wars. Jess Nevins explains,

The social, economic, and political structures of the Victorian era are essentially the same as our own, and their cultural dynamics—the way in which the culture reacts to various phenomena and stimuli—are quite similar to ours. This makes the Victorian era extremely useful for ideological stories on subjects such as feminism, imperialism, class issues, and religion, as well as for commentary on contemporary issues. (8)

Steampunk writers are fascinated that they can parallel current issues with similar philosophies that are usually associated with the Victorian period. The genre consciously re-envision the “past with hypertechnological perceptions of the present... [and a] recreational nostalgia” about the Victorian world (Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective (NYC) 10). The nostalgic aspect of Steampunk also encompasses the political aspects of both contemporary and Victorian societies. In Steampunk literature, political leaders and injustices in the contemporary period parallel Victorian politicians, imperialists, and the aristocratic class. In Steampunk, authors are able to create retro-

futuristic devices and Victorian archetypes; they focus on the “dark underbelly” of the Victorian empire in order to theoretically link and comment on the realities and “social injustices” found in that era and our own (Bowler and Cox 11).

In relation to connecting the Victorian period with the postmodern period, Steampunk is characterized as an aesthetical movement too. Steampunk is associated with materials that balance restoration of Victorian nostalgia, such as comparing clockwork automatons, with postmodern technological devices like androids. Materials and technologies used in Steampunk are both retro and futuristic. In the 1990s and 2000s, Steampunk grew into a movement of do-it-yourselfers (DIY), people who create their own handmade Victorian-inspired attire and retro-futuristic gadgets made with cogs and gears welded to scrap metal. The DIY attitude mimics Victorian author Samuel Smiles’s 1859 publication *Self-Help*. Smiles states that individual habits and self-reliance facilitate a nation’s progression:

The spirit of self-help, as exhibited in the energetic action of individuals, has in all times been a marked feature in the English character, and furnishes the true measure of our power as a nation. [...] Patient and persevering labourers [*sic*] in all ranks and conditions of life, cultivators of the soil and explorers of the mine, inventors and discoverers, manufacturers, mechanics and artisans, poets, philosophers, and politicians, all have contributed towards the grand result, one generation building upon another’s labours, [*sic*] and carrying them forward to still higher stages. (10)

As a prominent Victorian scripture, *Self-Help* established the foundation that individuals

of all classes can independently function on their own in order for the nation to grow as a whole. Authors and Steampunk creators establish a renewed DIY Victorian world as an establishment suitable for brass, steam, gears, gaslights, and automatons. It is not unimaginable to find Steampunkers costumed in goggles, monocles, pocket watches, top hats, canes, parasols, and visible corsets. These accessories replicate various Victorian fashions but they are more of a *punk* characteristic, a countercultural attitude associated with deviant behavior. Fashion accouterments like the visible corset deviate from the Victorian realities of attire being simple, restrictive, and conservative.

Steampunk fashion and the do-it-yourself attitude are significant factors in Steampunk literature because authors ground their storytelling and characters in these same ideals. The importance of technology and how it works, along with the nostalgic re-interpretation of the nineteenth century, are key components that give the novels “a strong sense of verisimilitude” (Perschon, “Steam Wars” 141). The romantic nostalgia of Victorian attire and the plausibility of techno-fantasy machinery are essential characteristics for Steampunk adventures; more importantly, they provide a platform for characters to mirror Victorian social conventions but also rebel against the hegemonic conceptions of the nineteenth century. The rebellious attitude concisely fits the punk characterization often depicted by Steampunk characters—an attitude aimed at deflecting conformity and socially accepted behaviors of the Victorian era.

The following study aims to define Steampunk and its incorporation into the academic world as a legitimate genre of scholarly studies. Steampunk literature’s association with speculative features in regards to Victorian conventions is an area of academic framework worthy of examination. Contemporary Steampunk woman writers

explore, dissect, and redefine the Victorian female character and her placement in society. Cherie Priest's first book *Boneshaker* (2009) in her American-based *Clockwork Century* (2009-2013) series and Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* (2010-2013) series incorporate elements of Steampunk: the fascination with technology, Victorian fashion, politics, and social transformations. They each provide a literary evaluation of their heroines in a neo-Victorian framework.

The female characters in Priest's and Clare's novels are positioned in plotlines dealing with familial problems and Victorian societal conflicts. In these particular Steampunk novels, the heroines explore their identities within nineteenth-century constructs: the "angel in the house," separate spheres, and the *fin de siècle* New Woman. The female characters question standard Victorian conventions while struggling to create their own personal identity in respect to their gender. The characters' resistances to dominant nineteenth-century principles allow contemporary audiences to identify with the heroines, and through a critical scope Steampunk enthusiasts are able to analyze Victorian norms by constructing a historical alternative vision of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 1

Defining Steampunk

“These are the worlds of steampunk, where spectacle intrudes into ordinary nineteenth century-settings, carrying with it timeless fears and fantasies.”
—Cynthia Miller and Julie Anne Taddeo

In the Preface of *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957) Walter E. Houghton states, “[t]he intimate connection between literature and life is a significant feature of the Victorian age and one of its chief glories” (xvii). According to Houghton, the Victorian period was an “age of transition” in which “men thought of their own time as an era of change *from the past to the future*” (1). Houghton’s insightful notion that Victorians were self-aware of their role in history is an astonishing concept for modern scholars. This awareness is unprecedented in human history, signaling a concept of temporality influenced by industrialization. Victorians’ self-consciousness of their history and their connection to literature helped facilitate their representation of the future, thus creating the Victorian era that Steampunk scholars romanticize in their techno-fantasy narratives.

Steampunk fiction is the development of a contemporary antidote for counter-fictional histories depicting the nineteenth century. Counter-fictional texts are reinterpretations of fictional works; therefore, Steampunk is a modern reinterpretation of Victorian fiction. Mike Perschon explains that Steampunk is a “recent-day romantic vision of how the past viewed the future... [It] evokes a sense of the past, rather than slavishly replicating it” (“Useful” 23). As an interdisciplinary study, Steampunk is associated and classified with different genres of fiction. Steampunk’s close tie to both the Victorian past and implications of futuristic technology justifies its hybridization in

many literary genres: historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy. Steampunk literature is a genre that articulates change in both the Victorian and contemporary periods.

Postmodern Steampunk fiction is characterized as a meshing of several literary categories focused in a neo-Victorian framework. However, proto-Stempunk literature that was written in the Victorian period is not characterized as neo-Victorian, since it does not re-imagine the period through a postmodern perspective. This resistance to a comprehensive definition is often illustrated when scholars try to define Steampunk.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Steampunk as “science fiction which has a historical setting (esp. based on industrialized, nineteenth-century society) and characteristically features steam-powered, mechanized machinery rather than electronic technology.” Steampunk conclusively fits into the nineteenth-century historical setting and corresponds to mechanical devices, like the steam-engine. Margaret Rose explains, “‘steam’ evokes specifically the nineteenth century and a focus on technology, past and present; ‘punk’ evokes an irreverent attitude toward history” (321). Steam-engines and steam-powered ships are common technologies fitted into contemporary Steampunk novels. Punk is an independent ethic and aggressive attitude towards the past, the present, and the future. Steampunk literature imitates the nineteenth-century era by depicting retro-futuristic weaponry. It illustrates invasions instigated by science fiction villains and archetypes, such as mad scientists, automatons, and pirates who pilot airships. As a forerunner of Steampunk, H.G. Wells’s science fiction is characterized as providing a different perspective on industrialization for his Victorian audience to evaluate. Original Victorian tales served as metaphoric commentaries on society, and this becomes the overarching theme for Steampunk writers to imitate to their contemporary audience.

Also, Steampunk is not limited to the specific genre of science fiction; it often includes fantastical elements like magic, mysticism, and supernatural creatures, and aims at entertainment and didacticism.

Steampunk authors have also tried to define Steampunk for a multitude of audiences. Cherie Priest, author of the *Clockwork Century* series, states,

Steampunk: An aesthetic movement based around the science fiction of a future that never happened. Recall, if you will, visions of the future that were written a hundred years ago or more. Think Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Mary Shelley, and the like—telling stories featuring technology that didn't exist at the time, but might someday. Remember that they were writing with no idea of the microchip, or the internet, or (in some cases) the internal combustion engine. Therefore, in their versions of the future, the technology upon which society would eventually come to depend is driven largely by steam power or clockwork. Sometimes electricity is likewise invoked, but it's often treated as quasi-magical due to the contemporary lack of understanding about how it behaved and what it could do. [...]

Steampunk could be considered a retro-futuristic neo-Victorian sensibility that is being embraced by fiction, music, games, and fashion. [Steampunk] is ornate and vibrant, and intricate. (“Steampunk”)

Priest confirms that Steampunk is a genre that integrates Victorian materialism—corsets, top hats, and parasols, to name a few—and other cultural aspects with a futuristic twist. The subject matter is an imitation of Victorian ideals but revolves around original details related to scientific innovations associated with the postmodern era.

In a 2011 interview about science fiction, Cynthia Miller described Steampunk:

Curious tales of historical science fiction infused with Victorian visions of wildly anachronistic technologies...scientists and magicians, philosophers and poets, time travelers and clockwork humans animate worlds inspired by Gothic scientific romances of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Mary Shelley, where fantastic inventions are seamlessly integrated into everyday life. (352)

This fictional subgenre interweaves and upgrades old-fashioned inventions with the techno-culture of today. Steffen Hantke declares that Steampunk is a mixture of “history, fiction, and fantasy” and the “Victorianism, what little there is of it in the conventional sense, appears not as a historical given but as a textual construct open to manipulation and modification” (248). The ability to connect the Victorian past to the present becomes an innovation for postmodern thinking and provides a mode by which to re-conceptualize past, present, and future.

Steampunk literature is framed in contemporary writers’ awareness of the present as predominantly technological; it is a malleable and organic genre of literary fiction that allows writers to use the motifs and ideas depicted in traditional Victorian novels that mirror today’s societal and technological crises. Steampunk theorist, Patrick Jagoda explains, “steampunk explores the relationships—linked rather than bifurcated—among history and fiction; nostalgia and innovations; old cultures and new technologies” (48). Steampunk literature focuses on the evocation of the old Victorian world and creates counterfactual histories, which are historical events that *could* have happened in the Victorian and Edwardian age. Mike Perschon elaborates,

The mix of the historical and the literary have been the game of steampunk since its inception...Steampunk offerings continue to utilize a mix of historical figures whose lives have become legend, and fictional heroes whose stories have become truth in the minds of their readers, carrying on the tradition of blurring lines between fiction as history, and history as fiction. (“Fictional” 40).

Steampunk fiction contrasts historical realities of the nineteenth century with a fictional alternative one. The Steampunk appeal reawakens the nineteenth century not as a realistic imitation of the period, but as a fictitious, old-world aesthetic of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Hantke claims, “the shaping force behind steampunk is not history but the will of its author to establish and then violate and modify a set of ontological ground rules” (248). Steampunk literature uses the Victorian era as its main setting because contemporary society and Victorian society mirror each other in many social and cultural ideologies. Both centuries focus on industrial and technological advancements that have social implications, good and bad. Relating Victorian features with postmodern influences allows a back-and-forth examination of culture, history, and technology incorporating both centuries.

Classifying Steampunk

In the first issue of the *Neo-Victorian Studies* journal, Mark Llewellyn defines neo-Victorian fictions as follows:

[T]hose works which are consciously set in the Victorian period (or the nineteenth century...) or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of

sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally 'different' versions of the Victorian. (165)

Like and unlike neo-Victorianism, Steampunk literature re-imagines and re-envision the Victorian period by providing an interpretation of an alternative Victorian history. Neo-Victorian fiction is not a substitute for nineteenth-century literature; instead neo-Victorianism is a contemporary commentary on the Victorian age. Llewellyn explains that this type of fiction is a “mediator into the experience of reading the ‘real’ thing [meaning literature written in the nineteenth century]; after all, neo-Victorian texts are, in the main, processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” (168). Steampunk fiction provides a literary blueprint of the historical nineteenth century and an interactive voice for the author to convey an analysis on the culture’s complexities. These cultural viewpoints reflect both modern and Victorian ideals: advancement of technology, social status, individuality, and gender roles.

Technology always has the potential to impact society and its foregoing social and economic structures. In the nineteenth century, technological advancements like the steam-engine and railway profoundly impacted travel, pilgrimages, importing and exporting goods, military enforcements, and imperialism. In effect, this technological growth dramatically changed social standings, especially the middle class that began to gain an important social reputation. Women stepped outside of their homes to work in factories; pollution, sanitary reforms, and labor laws were results of technological advancements, and these consequences are explored in Victorian and contemporary texts. Steampunk literature explores the domino-effect of technology on socio-cultural

institutions and provides a voice for unrepresented Victorian characters to explore and comment on these changes.

As a form of revisionist history, Steampunk fiction does not change nineteenth century history, nor can it, in reality; but it does add a speculative lens to the Victorian era, providing the option for “what if” questions to be asked. For example, authors can imagine, contemplate, and detail several “what if?” scenarios: what if Victorian society was able to build and control a steam-powered airship that could land on the moon? Or what if the South made use of automaton soldiers and dirigibles during the American Civil War?

In reference to Steampunk fitting into the vernacular of neo-Victorian culture, Ken Dvorak argues that, “[r]eimagining both the past and the future often through a neo-Victorian lens...allows us to debate serious social, economic, political, and cultural issues relevant to our present lives” (ix). Steampunk engages readers with the Victorian past, making history a conscious context for re-evaluation and re-imaginings. In contrast, neo-Victorian works are motivated by a “nostalgic impulse which positions the Victorian era as a ‘golden age’ from which the present has dropped off” (Hadley 8). Neo-Victorian fiction, such as Steampunk, concerns itself with historical and social realities of the Victorian era, and attempts to re-create these distinctions based on modern thought.

Nadine Muller explains that neo-Victorian “does not revisit issues of the past” but evokes and engages themes such as race, sexuality, or hysteria, “because they present problems that are as fundamental to Western societies today as they were in the nineteenth century” (130). While Steampunk literature is a form of escapism that provides the opportunity for modern writers to integrate theories about past, present, and

future, postmodern writers are very aware of the similarities and differences between the Victorian period and their own. This conscious awareness compels and inspires contemporary writers to engage with the past and explore it through fantastical elements and Victorian thought. By displacing modern innovations in the nineteenth century, Steampunk authors are able to depict a historical alteration to that century. The alteration posits new situations and commentaries on how science affects society. The resulting commentaries on technology and science not only concern the Victorian period but also reflect cautionary ideologies of postmodern technology.

Contemporary Steampunk exemplifies neo-Victorian fiction because the works recast the cultural and critical discourse of the Victorian period. Defining Steampunk as strictly neo-Victorian does not work: for example, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, the noted forerunners of Steampunk, are thoroughly Victorian, and their works in the Steampunk category cannot be labeled as *new* or *neo*.

Victorian Literature: The Proto-Steampunk Authors

Victorian texts serve as prototypes for postmodern Steampunk authors. In terms of science-fiction, James Schafer and Katie Franklin claim Verne and Wells as role-models for contemporary Steampunk texts:

Jules Verne, the proto-steampunk saint, is decidedly in the former camp and is frequently credited with inspiring most of the great technological inventions of the twentieth century. [...] H.G. Wells, the polymath that he was, was more interested in the interface of that technology with civilization and in using fantasy as a tool for writing fables about today. [...] Their dystopian visitations functioned more as warnings and as

contemporary social commentary than as roadmaps. (12)

Both Verne and Wells employ futuristic machinery and technology in their Victorian and Edwardian science fictional works. Depicting futuristic devices provides a conscious concern for industrialization. Their fictions, and the current Steampunk publications of today, are a “genre about people and society—and people and society recognizably related to our own” (Schafer and Franklin 12). Equally, Steampunk fiction, past and contemporary, focuses “on people coping with technological revolutions and social realignments within worlds possessed of significant wealth and power asymmetries” (12). Victorian literature initiates a commentary on social distinctions regarding class, race, and sex; as speculative fiction, Steampunk fiction illustrates these commentaries too, while also centering on the social role of science and society’s push and concern for technological advancements. Steampunk fiction tends to distort the distinction between fiction as history and history as fiction. The genre focuses on the bleak and punitive realities of the Victorian era, but this exploration is expressed through a fictional lens and historical allusions. Steampunk literature positions imagined characters in the bygone realities of the industrial age. The genre serves as a fictional mouthpiece for unrepresented Victorian characters to engage in a new historical perspective. For instance, a Steampunk author can characterize a single mother as an assassin, a heroine, a dirigible pilot, or a soldier during the American Civil War, and she is not faulted for subverting her gendered boundaries.

Precursors to Steampunk literature, nineteenth-century writers Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells illustrated fears about the consequences of human progress and technological advancements in their fictional works. They are notable contributors to

Victorian science fiction. Unlike contemporary Steampunk authors, Shelley a Romantic era author, and Verne and Wells are Victorian, and do not fit into the categorization of neo-Victorianism, as already discussed. These nineteenth-century writers are classified as the forerunners of Steampunk because they reflect the Victorian reality by adding machinery with futuristic appeal in their texts.

Shelley, Verne, and Wells's proto-Steam-punk works imagine and illustrate alternate and unconventional viewpoints towards nineteenth-century science and technological advancements. Contemporary Steampunk literature offers the same reception by reimagining the nineteenth century, and adding fantastical clockwork automatons (robots) and mechanical devices in a world that reflects modern-day injustices and other "consequences" of science.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* explores man's ambition to conquer nature through science by creating a living creature from the parts of deceased humans. Victor Frankenstein's attempt to create the perfect human ends not in perfection but in what he describes as a "monster"—"a demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life" (Shelley 38). Instead of creating life and human perfection, he acknowledges that his ability to play God or a "Creator" is perilous. His hubris and irresponsibility lead to dire consequences, including the deaths of all his loved ones.

Frankenstein represents a metaphoric commentary on the consequences of science. Equally, French writer Jules Verne and H.G. Wells are credited with introducing the late-Victorian world to science fiction as a valid exploration of science and the unknown. In *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Verne envisions a nineteenth century inhabited by scientific

explorers who venture into the unknown with machines powered by gas or electricity. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) is dependent on imagined futuristic weaponry to dramatize the Victorian political arena. The story illustrates space invaders, Martians with advanced technology, overwhelming Victorian society with futuristic weaponry and forcing humanity to look "at the present from new angles of vision" (Alkon 43). Proto-Steam-punk and Steam-punk authors have the commonality of centering their works in the nineteenth century. Verne and Wells's science fiction works are detailed with futuristic technology, such as gas-powered submarines and humanoid automatons; these scientific romances depict the dreary, steam-clouded Victorian England through allusions to eccentric, revolutionary devices.

On an Australian radio broadcast in 1938, entitled "Fiction about the Future," H.G. Wells claimed:

The best sort of futurist story would be one that sets out to give you the illusion of reality. It ought to produce the effect of an historical novel, the other way round. It ought to read like fact. [...] But then the historical romancer has a whole mass of history, ruins, old costumes, museum pieces, to work upon and confirm him; your minds are ready furnished for him; the futurist writer has at most the bare germs of things to come and all your prejudices to surmount. He has to throw himself on your willingness to believe. You have to help him. (qtd. in Alkon 41)

Wells and his contemporaries are forward-thinking writers that contemplate the present in the future. In contrast, modern Steam-punk authors use backwards-thinking in their texts in which they explore mechanics and science used in the past and today. As historical

enthusiasts, Steampunk authors are able to collect and furnish historical evidences, specifically nostalgic items of the nineteenth century. And like their predecessors, they create science fiction that advocates commentaries on humanity, politics, and socio-cultural complexities.

Steampunk as Science Fiction and Fantasy

Steampunk is a gateway into a science fiction realm of Victorian culture: “Time and again, Steampunk grabs hold of our notions of the Victorian era and knocks them off-balance, turning London, Transylvania, Tokyo, or the American West into an alien world filled with exotic machines and monstrous creatures” (Miller 354). Steampunk serves as a guide into historical fiction and re-envisions the era with retro-scientific advancements and pseudo-reformations on Victorian thought and culture. According to Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, the technological aspects in Steampunk literature are what distinguish it from other genres of neo-Victorianism. They assert, “Steampunk technology uses Victorian components and a deliberately Victorian aesthetic: exposed gears and soot-streaked smokestacks, painted iron, and polished brass” but as a literary genre it “undermines readers’ easy certainties about [Victorian] technological progress and historical inevitability by immersing them in alien surroundings” (87). True also of most science fiction, Steampunk illustrates a world that is both known and unknown. Steampunk literature concentrates on the realities of the Victorian era but reimagines those truths with illusionary elements, like automatons. These illusions provide a chance for rethinking and re-evaluation of history, technology, civilization, and contemporary events.

Amy L. Montz argues that Steampunk is a rewriting of Victorian technology and

materiality. She claims, “Steampunk and other neo-Victorian literature’s desire to rethink technology for societal and even moral advancement.” (102). Authors are fascinated with Victorian industrial progress, and they use literature as an outlet to recreate and re-access technology rooted in that period. Contrasting customary Victorian appearances with retro-futuristic technology creates an aesthetical atmosphere of the past and future entwining together in a world both known and unknown to Victorian scholars.

Mechanical devices play a crucial role in Steampunk because technology was a hallmark of the Victorian era. The machineries depicted in Steampunk texts are usually associated with “real, breathing, coughing struggling and rumbling parts of the world. [...] The technology of steampunk is natural: it moves, lives ages, and even dies” (Catastrophone 10). Consequently, the machines depicted in Steampunk literature are natural creations that embody a character of its own. Many Steampunk works depict machines or automatons that look and act like humans. These machines take on a life and role that impacts the characters, their surroundings, and the plot. The use of exotic technologies in Steampunk, such as automatons and fantastical airships, are distinctly connected to modern thinking and technology. By using an alternative Victorian era, along with its technology and aesthetics, Steampunk literature recreates and reconstructs the nineteenth century as a paralleled-companion to the twenty-first century.

As a subtext for science fiction, Steampunk literature also incorporates fantasy elements, an integration of supernatural beings, magic, and technology. Fantastical elements and anachronistic technologies found in Steampunk develop the critical framework that is concerned with the notion of progress and the fear of change and technology. Science fiction and fantasy literatures offer “alternative viewpoints to the

reader's imagination," and they emphasize "the consequences rather than techniques of science" (Alkon 23). The fictional elements added to Steampunk works focus on clockwork devices (mechanical devices of metal wiring and gearwheels), which depending on the author are powered by steam or magic.

Literary History of Steampunk

In 1987, K.W. Jeter coined the term "Steampunk" in a letter to *Locus* magazine, a publication dedicated to news and reviews of science fiction and fantasy works. Jeter stated, "I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term for Powers, Blaylock and myself. Something based on the appropriate technology of the era; like 'steam-punks,' perhaps" (qtd. in "Steampunk, *n*"). His label was designed to set apart his and his peers' fictional works from being labeled as cyberpunk.¹ Jeter's works, *Morlock Night* (1979) and *Infernal Devices* (1987), along with James P. Blaylock's *Homonculus* (1986) and Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates* (1983), became popular literature among the science fiction and fantasy crowd in the 1980s.

Even though Jeter coined the term "Steampunk" in the late 1980s, the emergence and imitation of nineteenth-century scientific romances is attributed to other literary pioneers. In the introduction of *Steampunk! An Anthology of Fantastically Rich and Strange Stories*, Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant state, "depending on whom you believe, steampunk has been exploding into the world for the last hundred years (thank you, Monsieur Jules Verne) or maybe the last twenty-five (when the term was first used by

¹ For a more in-depth definition of "cyberpunk," see *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1992) by David Ketterer, p. 141.

K.W. Jeter in a letter to *Locus* magazine)” (vii). The United Kingdom author Michael Moorcock has been credited by Steampunk anthologists Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer as “a true Godfather of modern Steampunk” (9). Moorcock is described as the “central 20th-century exponent” of Steampunk and the author of important trilogies for the Steampunk canon, *The Dancers at the End of Time* and *A Nomad of the Time Streams* published in the 1970s (Clute and Grant 656). Additionally, Brian Aldiss’s *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973) and William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s novel *The Difference Engine* (1990) are recognized as Steampunk works that stay close to their nineteenth-century Victorian roots because they insert allusions to scientific romances associated with Steampunk precursors H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Mary Shelley.

In the 1970s to the early 1990s, Steampunk texts were usually sequels or retellings of nineteenth-century sci-fi works frequently associated with authors H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. K.W. Jeter’s *Morlock Night* is a “sequel to H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* that depicts Morlock journeying through the sewer system of Victorian London” (Clute and Grant 895). On the original 1979 front cover, Jeter’s novel reads, “What happened when the Time Machine returned?” Additionally, Christopher Priest’s *The Space Machine* (1976) is also a sequel that responds as a combination of Wells’s *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. Twentieth-century Steampunk literature concentrated on the idea of recapturing Victorian images and sci-fi and fantasy elements from proto-Steampunk texts.

Steampunk writer and critic Paul Di Filippo has been highly praised for his “cutting-edge fiction that blends disparate narrative elements in shocking—and shockingly funny—ways” (Yaszek 189). Di Filippo’s three novellas, influenced by

1970's predecessor Moorcock, create the work *Steampunk Trilogy* (1995). His works parody Steampunk predecessors. Using humor as a vital component to his Steampunk fiction, he illustrates Queen Victoria being replaced by a human-newt hybrid and a love affair between Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, resulting in the birth and meeting futuristic Allen Ginsberg. His stories use intertextual references of Victorian figureheads, fictional and historical, as a ruse to describe Steampunk literature as literary escapism and a historical alternative fantasy. Di Filippo creates a more counter-fictional literary road for future Steampunk authors than a counterfactual one that was illustrated by the proto-Steampunk writers. Verne and Wells wrote science fiction stories about futuristic technologies occupying the realities of the Victorian era, placing much attention and detail on the factuality of their time period. Di Filippo generates Steampunk tales through a counter-fictional lens, a reinterpretation and alteration of iconic fictional or historical works or characters. His characters are iconic figures, but they participate in a Victorian world with little or no historical relevancy to the actualities of nineteenth-century events. For example, at one point during Dickinson and Whitman's fictional love affair, they inhabit a spiritual afterlife that defies space and time. Di Filippo's works produced a literary trend for other contemporary Steampunk writers to follow, in which they place Victorian archetypes in fantastical and unbelievable worlds.

In the 2000s, Steampunk literature has been shaped into a culture of aesthetics, fashion, and visual arts. This current era is more enamored with re-creating items and fashion of the Victorian world than with trying to create alternative histories and fictional fantasies. In the literary realm Steampunk is a form of escapism, "encouraging applied imagination put to both fanciful and practical purposes"; the genre illustrates the

“ongoing Steampunk love for outdated and baroque technologies [...] like the fanciful evolution of ‘big concepts’ like airships and robots” (VanderMeer, *Steampunk Bible* 11, 53). Modern Steampunk authors are curiously fascinated with the recreation of décor and the fashion reminiscent of the nineteenth century. Steampunk literature written in the aught years is more than a scientific fantasy that concerns technological developments. The genre has become a treasure chest or toolbox for aesthetical features from which authors can pick and choose. Three of the most influential Steampunk writers of the twenty-first century that use the aesthetical toolbox are Gail Carriger, Cherie Priest, and young adult writer Cassandra Clare.

Gail Carriger’s Steampunk works are a mix between paranormal fiction, mystery, romance, and the integration of aesthetical allusions of the Victorian era: corsets, parasols, fancy carriages, and steam-powered machines and engines. In the *Parasol Protectorate* series, Carriger illustrates a liberated woman named Alexia Tarrabotti. Alexia is an investigator for Queen Victoria, who confronts personal, socio-cultural, and supernatural problems fixated in an alternative nineteenth-century world. Carriger explains that it was the cosplayers (a term short for costume play, in which people dress in costumes that represent a specific character) and fashion that introduced her to Steampunk as a literary genre, not the literature itself:

Long before I discovered Moorcock, when I still thought Jules Verne was destined to remain safely trapped away in the 1800s forever, I wore Steampunk. I proudly donned my Victorian silk blouses and little tweed jodhpurs. I didn’t know there was Steampunk to *read*, I only thought there was steampunk to *wear*. (qtd. in VanderMeer, *Steampunk Bible* 64)

Carriger's novels are undoubtedly mimics of the aesthetical accoutrements found in popular culture Steampunk.

Cherie Priest and young adult writer Cassandra Clare are also literary explorers of the aesthetical Steampunk realm. As modern-day imitators of the nineteenth century their texts focus on the socio-cultural transformations of women's roles. In her first novel, *Boneshaker*, Priest rewrites the American Civil War and the history of Seattle. She distinctly illustrates the problems of a single mother living in a world inhabited by ravenous zombies, technological gadgets, and diamond-drilling machines. On the other hand, Clare centers her neo-Victorian texts in Victorian London, which is protected by human-angel hybrids and inhabited by techno-magic automatons. Her heroine Tessa Gray is an adolescent fixed between girlhood and womanhood, struggling to identify who and what she is.

Overall, fictional works became a commonality among writers in the nineteenth century to stress political, economic, social, philosophical, and scientific concerns found in society. Alkon states, "English writers vigorously sought fresh temporal, special, and psychological vantage points from which to contemplate human conditions" (22). Steampunk writers today, British and American, reflect the same ideals in their own works. To understand Steampunk, one must grasp the idea that it is not a genre that is rewriting history but re-envisioning it. Hantke asserts that in regards to Steampunk, the reality of the past allows the modern reader to be aware of the "textuality of history" in the genre (248). Additionally, Steampunk fiction incorporates "historical figures and fictional characters" or even "fictionalizes historical characters" (248). Steampunk is a literary category that reimagines Victorian society, providing metaphoric commentaries

on both current and past societies, and sometimes reincarnating iconic Victorian characters.

Steampunk authors are aware of events that took place in the nineteenth century, and their tales balance restoration of Victorian nostalgia with imagined happenings. The authors use historical details in an imperialist world, but this world often consists of zeppelins, preternatural beings, sky pirates, clockwork devices, or machines that can cut through diamonds. Ultimately, Steampunk is an important component to literary studies. Annalee Newitz explains,

Steampunk fiction is popular because people want to recapture the enthusiasm for progress associated with the industrial age. The other thing is that Steampunk books are delightfully meta—they're escapist fiction that pastiches a previous century's escapist fiction. And all hail escapism! We need it to survive, as long as publishers and promoters are making thoughtful, critical writing available, too. (qtd. in VanderMeer, *Steampunk Bible* 69)

Steampunk literature fetishizes retro-futuristic technology and establishes a reimagining of art and the materiality of the nineteenth century. As an integration of several genres from science fiction to revisionist history, Steampunk is a literary study that rethinks the Victorian past and the postmodern period in regards to societal, cultural, moral, and technological advancements.

CHAPTER II

The Women of Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker*

“I was here. And I absolutely,
defiantly reject the implication that I wasn't.”
—Cherie Priest, interview

Futuristic fantasy *Boneshaker* (2009) is set in 1880s Seattle, Washington, America's final frontier. Priest's revisionist American history extends the Civil War by a few decades and accelerates the Klondike gold rush in a deliberate attempt to distort “history, geography, and technology” (Priest, *Boneshaker* 415). Here Seattle is divided: one part of the city is walled up in order to protect citizens from a natural, blight gas that causes zombification; the other part of the city, called the Outskirts, is where people continue to live outside the wall. The story alters narrative points-of-view between a teenage boy named Ezekiel and his mother Briar Wilkes. Ezekiel, also known as Zeke, is on a quest to prove the innocence of his missing father, a commissioned inventor, Dr. Leviticus Blue, whose Incredible Bone-Shaking Drill Engine is blamed for destroying parts of downtown Seattle and extracting the poisonous blight gas that turns its victims into rotters, the living dead. Zeke's quest to vindicate his father leads Briar to protect her son from the treachery behind the walled-up city. Briar endures and confronts the hardships of insatiable zombies, thieves, dirigible pilots, and a mad scientist who may be her long lost husband.

Priest's character Lucy O'Gunning explains, “We don't have too many women down here inside the walls, but I sure wouldn't mess with the ones we've got” (382). Although there are few of them, women characters play an essential role in Priest's novel by rejecting the hegemonic nineteenth-century principles associated with female

archetypes.² Specifically, her heroines fail to explicitly fit into the tropes associated with women depicted in nineteenth-century dime novel westerns. Michael Denning explains, “Dime novels represented one of several 'cheap' entertainment forms during an age of Anglo-bourgeois hegemony in American culture” (2). The cheap novels provided entertainment, escapism, and the reception of history; particularly it commented on Western American female tropes. Some women in westerns were described as the “Good” woman, “possess[ing] a clear complexion and lustrous eyes,” and others were depicted as “Bad” women, “doomed to a sticky end” (Hutchinson 383). Additionally, the depiction of women in dime novels was limited to different stories about the factory “working girl,” who is a “working-girl *and* a lady” (Denning 9, 15). In dime novels, with the help of a man, the “heroine triumphs magically” and she lives happily ever after, a false depiction of the Western frontier reality (16).

In *Boneshaker*, the first novel of Priest’s *Clockwork Century* series, the author establishes three distinct women characters—Briar Wilkes, Lucy O’Gunning, and the Indian princess Angeline—all of whom portray the Steampunk New Woman. It is through historical and social contexts that Priest’s heroines redefine and reassess their social roles in the nineteenth century through atypical behaviors and actions. The Steampunk New Woman is characterized as smart, helpful, and a warrior; in a novel like *Boneshaker*, “the walls of tradition (which long held women cloistered) have crumbled” (Casey 333).

² During the nineteenth century, traditional American gender roles were divided into two spheres: the domestic and the public. Women belonged to the domestic sphere and men belonged to the public. As industrialization, urbanization, and job opportunities formulated in the United States many families and individuals moved westward. In order to survive the hardships of the Western frontier many women assumed nontraditional gender roles. Although women at this time had limited political rights, the Western frontier forced women to engage in activities and roles outside their domestic duties.

An Idealization of Nineteenth-Century American Women

Priest's *Boneshaker* revises American women's history during the Civil War. The characters are fully aware of the Confederate army losing a fight for independence from the nation, and the gold rush is practically placed in the background. Priest radically rewrites and revises the history of America by decelerating the Civil War and juxtaposing it with the developing Western frontier. Steampunk scholar Mike Perschon claims Priest's "characters live and breathe in the complex web of post-abolition laws and pre-abolition prejudices"(32), enabling her to parallel the old world's fight against racial inequality with the new world's concern for the development of Western states, a symbolic connection to the progress of gender equality.

Priest's "alternative-history Seattle allows her to emphasize a Western setting...from a distinctly female, progressive setting" (VanderMeer, *Steampunk Bible* 42). Her characters are depicted in a fictional background that permits women to transgress their characterization as the weaker sex, resulting in a redefinition of female characters using their intellect to survive and overcome threats. W. H. Hutchinson explains that in dime novels the male heroes were to protect and "win the Good Girl" and "spurn the Bad Girl" (384). Distinct from the patriarchy's ostensible protection of women, some of Priest's male characters represent the opposite. Her antagonists Leviticus Blue and Dr. Minnericht are male scientists interested in technology that either destroys the world or allows them to selfishly gain wealth and power. Priest's male characters are embedded in the idea of possession for power and treating the opposite sex as property.

Treating women like possessions or property is a known characteristic depicted in British and American nineteenth-century texts. Nineteenth-century English theorist, Harriet Martineau, blamed “the ‘slavery’ of the American women upon the nation’s failure to help the American Girl escape social restraints and achieve full identity through education and experience” (Helsing et al. 173). Marriage between Leviticus Blue and Briar Wilkes is constituted on the idea of enslavement, the male owning a female. Briar asserts to Lucy that she was not in love with her husband and that he was not in love with her: “Love? No. Not love, I don’t think. Possessiveness, maybe. I’m just one more thing that belongs to him, on paper” (257). Briar informs others that she was only a possession to her late-husband, and marriage inhibited her from forming any identity other than that of a housewife. In 1845, Sarah Margaret Fuller published a book called *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, in which she explained that society accepted the “belief that Woman was made *for man*” (735). Both the American and British woman in nineteenth-century literature may have “found herself miserable in her marriage” and she “had little prospect of a second chance unless death conveniently stepped in to remove her husband” (G. Cunningham 36). As submissive characters, females are prohibited from participating in the outside world, the realm belonging to men. The wife is characterized as the sole possession and property of her husband. As a wife, the female character is supposed to find stability and comfort in her home; obviously marriage placed her in the rightful position to focus on family life:

The idealization of the wife as inspirer of humanity belonged with the [nineteenth-century] conception of the Home and its meaning with the contemporary system of values. The home, a feminine attribute as it were,

the ‘outermost garment of her soul,’ which surrounds the wife worthy of the name wherever she may be found, is like a temple of purity, a haven of peace in a hostile and impure world. It falls to the man, the active ingredient, to take risks outside the sanctuary or bastion and to pit himself against his peers in a bitter struggle that often leaves him wounded, weakened, disenchanted. (Basch 7)

Briar describes herself as a possession of her husband because he thought her to be “dumb and young, and pretty enough to look nice in his parlor. He thought [she] was helpless” (Priest, *Boneshaker* 406). She is very self-determined and believes that being married only once was enough for her to realize that as a wife she was treated like property. Fed up with the abuse, the lies, and her position as a helpless woman, Briar takes the initiative to stop her husband’s oppression by shooting and killing him (407). Unbeknownst to her, she thought she was defending herself, but she also ends up killing a man responsible for the death of thousands of innocent people. Briar escapes marriage, changes her last name back to her surname, and becomes a widowed single-mother.

The norms for gendered roles of women shifted in America during the westward expansion. Women that participated in the pioneer and Western frontier life experienced hardships beyond their obligatory domestic duties. Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen explain that in nineteenth-century America, jobs outside the domestic realm “became an ever-more-important source of paid employment for lower class women [...] and these jobs were typically held by black and immigrant women, both single and married” (281). In a reality of independence, single women had to shift to a nontraditional gender role in order to survive the hardships of the Western frontier.

Priest's protagonist Briar works as a housewife because her husband received a substantial amount of pay. When her husband departs, she no longer relies on her husband's income. She becomes a factory worker in order to financially support her son and herself. As a factory worker she enters the male-dominated public sphere.

Although Briar escapes the possessiveness of being a wife, she does not falter from her motherly duties. Once she finds out that her son has ran away to vindicate his father, she blames herself for never telling Zeke the truth of the events that took place sixteen years before. She is a mother determined to find her son, save him if he is in any trouble, and to explain the truth about the past.

Males are not the main heroes in Priest's revisionist-American Civil War text. Instead the females escape the socially constructed patriarchy and become the protectors of society. Gail Cunningham explains that the New Woman, like Priest's heroines, is a representation of "everything that was daring and revolutionary, everything that was challenging to the norms of female behaviour [*sic*]" (10). In a conservative contrast, Eliza Lynn Linton (1822-1898), a notable female journalist during the Victorian period, contributed an article called "The Girl of the Period" (1868) to the *Saturday Review*. Linton describes the "the girl of the period," the New Woman, as a materialistic "nuisance," "whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury" in comparison to the ancestral "ideal of womanhood" (172). American nineteenth-century women were denied equality and freedom but they challenge limitations equated to their gender. Women in the Western frontier were exposed to a life of hard work and struggles, not a life of luxury. Frank P. O'Brien explains:

[Dime novels portray] the struggles, exploits, trials, dangers, feats, hardships, and daily lives of the American pioneers... It is a literature intensely nationalistic and patriotic in character; obviously designed to stimulate adventure, self-reliance and achievement; to exalt the feats of the pioneer men and women who settled the country; and to recite the conditions under which those early figures lived and did their work. (3-4)

Priest's female characters are daring and revolutionary, but their lives are not dictated by superficial interests. Instead of being the background characters in a tale of nineteenth-century adventure, Priest's Steampunk heroines are the main components that define and construct the Steampunk New Woman. They establish a new identity of woman that is intelligent, useful, and rebels for justice in a patriarchal structure. Their actions in the Western frontier illustrate an era when "social unrest [is] inverting traditional roles in literature and life" (Helsing et al. 180). As the United States is expanding, the roles of women are also progressing and transgressing nineteenth-century ideologies.

Distinct from the trope of Western frontier women being the Good girl or Bad girl, *Boneshaker's* heroines are not sensationalized in this framework of gender stereotypes. In Steampunk fiction, female characters are given an opportunity to engage in the patriarchal hierarchy of the nineteenth century. In effect, they are able to challenge and possibly dominate cultural attitudes by interacting in traditional Steampunk conventions, such as the do-it-yourself (independent) attitude that allows women to be self-sufficient and independent thinkers.

One example of a DIY character is Lucy O'Gunning. Lucy positions herself as a protector and guide for Briar while Briar searches for Zeke in the Seattle wasteland. She

is also the only female bar owner in the ruined city, and she has a disability that requires a mechanical arm. Her robotic arm is a typical characteristic of the DIY technological conventions found in Steampunk literature, and with “one arm or many, she’ll break down doors or men or rotters” (*Boneshaker* 211). Lucy’s disability characterizes her as a strong female heroine who is self-sufficient and uses any materialistic resources to her advantage.

Priest’s female heroines are positioned in an American framework of the New Woman, a nontraditional woman who is forced to work and be self-sufficient in order to survive the frontier. In *Boneshaker*, equality between the sexes is formed within the desolation of Seattle. Their actions outside of the household and the heroines’ interactions with the opposite sex level the playing field between the genders. Due to the disruption of the status quo, patriarchal structures are re-evaluated.

Women situated in the American frontier endured many hardships. As a thirty-five year old woman, Briar Wilkes chooses to find her son in a labyrinth of adventure. When she steps outside the protection of her home, her obstacles include criminals and the natural Blight gas that causes people to turn into zombies. She also subverts the patriarchal attitudes of solely depending on males for help. Widows, like Briar, often found themselves “thousands of miles from the family and community support that would normally have eased them through their bereavement” (Freedman and Hellerstein 264). Briar is dependent on herself to survive the hardships of the frontier life, and she uses technology to her advantage. Self-sufficiently she protects her lungs from the heavy yellow contagion with a gasmask. She is stubborn and firmly safeguards herself with a gun; her self-reliance and perseverance are helpful when she comes into contact with

thieves, Chinamen, the mad scientist Dr. Minnericht, and dirigible pirates. Briar does not seek patriarchal power; instead, she adopts Samuel Smiles's self-help philosophies defined in a generic masculine lexicon: "it is nevertheless equally clear that men must necessarily be the active agents of their own well-being and well-doing; and that, however much the wise and the good may owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers" (24). As a self-protector, Briar acquires a masculine role and displaces herself in a celebrated position of usefulness. Because she takes on the role to help others in need, she is identified as a hero, a role often established by male characters in dime novels.

Briar's identity is subversive and alters the nineteenth-century perspective of gender assumptions. She is a single mother trying to financially, physically, and emotionally support her son. Because she is a widow, she provides for her son by participating in the financial community as a factory worker, a distinctly masculine realm. She has fallen away from housewifery duties, no longer being the loaf maker but now the breadwinner. Briar's identity as a working mother is pragmatic because she takes on the paternal role to financially support her son Zeke; she is also using her survival instincts to emotionally care for her son at the same time. Briar does not try to imitate a man; instead she presents herself as equal to the opposite sex by actively becoming a useful citizen and participating as a protector.

Priest enforces the idea that her female characters are real. Like contemporary women who are depicted with troubles regarding marriage, children, and work, Briar's life is also encompassed with these struggles. However, with these troubles, Briar has doubts about herself as being a good and useful mother. She often questions her

relentlessness to endure life's hardships. Numerous times in the novel, Briar criticizes her ability to be a mother. According to nineteenth-century standards on motherhood, a woman was responsible for the "family nucleus":

Failing in her example and duties to those beneath her, the very social hierarchy crumbles; the corruption reaches all those who come into contact with the nucleus of chaos. The work eats into the fruit, then the entire tree. (Basch 62)

Because Zeke runs away from home, Briar manifests the idea that she has failed her maternal role and that her family is crumbling. The one-armed barkeep Lucy O'Gunning comforts Briar by saying, "You're being awfully hard on yourself. Boys disobey their parents with such great regularity that it's barely worth a comment [...] Boys are boys, they are. They're useless and ornery as can be, and when they grow up they're even worse" (189-90). Lucy maintains the idea that people are self-reliant and have free will. One person, such as Briar, cannot take the blame for human faults such as her son's rebellious plan to right his father's reputation.

Rational Clothing and Steampunk Attire

Both Briar and Miss Angeline, the mother-in-law of the mad-scientist dictator of Seattle, are described as dressing like men. On her mission to find her son, Briar abandons her blue-collar factory job. She exchanges her attire for rational clothing which provides her with the physical mobility to fulfill her role as a protective mother.³ "Briar

³ In the nineteenth century, the Rational Dress Association set out to reform women's clothing that "appeared to be fashionable but in fact be designed so it gave freedom to the wearer" (P. Cunningham 93). The rational dress reform transpired as a movement more concerned with women garments than men's. The dress reform was significant to society because it provided the options of clothing where women could actually breathe and freely move in their garments.

thanked heaven she wasn't wearing skirts," so she could freely journey through the city wreckage (Priest, *Boneshaker* 112). Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble state that the New Woman "disturbed [nineteenth-century] consciousness by challenging dress and behavioural [sic] codes and so blurring the neatly classified distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable representations of femininity" (7). Priest does not clothe her female characters in men's attire in order to hide their gender identity; nor are they androgynous. Their feminine characteristics are still obvious, but they are able to enjoy clothing that allows them to freely move; wearing rational clothing is a necessity for Briar's factory job and her search for her son. The female characters are no longer confined in clothes that may be easily snatched by zombies or torn by the city rubble. Their sensible clothing is worn as protection from any obstacles, and the clothing provides the women easy access to run and climb away from trouble.

One chapter of *Boneshaker* is dedicated to Zeke contemplating and assessing Angeline's attire: "the jacket she wore had belonged to a man, once. It was cut to fit someone bigger, and her pants were rolled and cinched to keep them from falling down" (*Boneshaker* 206). His concern for her dress leads him to asking why she has chosen that look, and she replies "Because I feel like it" (210). Priest acknowledges that gender equality does not fully exist in her retro-futuristic fantasy, but her female characters engage in a society that freely permits them to dress and talk as they please. Angeline is a defiant character because she has been living in a wrecked part of Seattle that is overrun by flesh-eating zombies; she knows that her survival depends on herself. Survival, in her case, is stepping outside the traditional dress of women, heavy clothing and skirts. In

return, Priest's female characters wear sensible attire enabling them to freely walk or run in dire situations.

Steampunk New Woman

The Steampunk New Woman blurs the domestic and public spheres associated with American gender roles. Priest's characters do not shun the help of the opposite sex. Because Briar is dependent on the help of sky pirates like Captain Andan Cly to take her into the chaotic city, her relations with Cly and other men are all business. "All of Priest's female protagonists are largely unconcerned with liaisons with the opposite sex," explains Mike Perschon ("Useful" 31). Priest does not insert her heroines into traditional dime-novels in which the male hero saves the virginal female, and they live happily-ever-after; instead Briar's transactions with the males in *Boneshaker* are strictly platonic. Briar does not believe that marriage or romantic relationships guarantees a happily-ever-after ending. Instead, in Briar's case, a happy ending is deviating from the ideological and domestic sphere allowed for the inferior sex. Instead, Briar participates in the male-dominated public sphere where she is a useful commodity, a heroine that saves her son.

Priest's heroines, like Briar Wilkes, undermine the gender-specific philosophies instructed in early American society. Briar's decision not to form any romances with the men she encounters in the novel allows Priest to create a story about an independent woman who is more concerned about the wellbeing of her son than the idea that marriage is the only answer to a woman's problems. Priest makes her female characters useful that they "move from the domestic spaces of matrimony and maternity into the wild blue yonder" (Perschon, "Useful" 31). Additionally, her female characters do not engage with the opposite sex with the intention of receiving romantic or sensual admiration. Instead,

Briar and other female characters are more concerned with survival and the challenges of life that come from reality. They aim to prove that they belong at the top of the social hierarchy as much as males do.

At the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the gradual emergence of the New Woman became a notable figure in nineteenth-century literature. Jennifer Hedgecock notes, “the New Woman trope...is rebellious, socially aware, complex and frequently misunderstood” (193). Priest’s heroines do not specifically fit into the separation of social spheres, but they are characterized as the New Woman that does not necessarily disrupt familial lifestyle. Although Priest’s heroines are complex characters, their autonomy portrayed outside the home does not harm the society that surrounds them. In fact, their ability to interact with the world outside their domestic duties helps cultivate nineteenth century ideals of being a caregiver. American women were situated in the domestic sphere, in which they dedicated their time to “household chores” and learned the habits of “patience, piety, politeness, self-control, [and] fortitude” (Baym 340). As caregivers the women help each other and those who are in need of assistance. Gail Cunningham explains, “few novelists specifically identified their heroines as New Women—the term was too loaded with associations of eccentricity and fanaticism...[and] it was feared that what women read about, they might do, and thus the new type of novel appeared to threaten the whole domestic structure” (17). Briar’s contact with the world outside her home, specifically a realm filled with zombies and renegades, is not rebellion against the patriarchal hegemony. Instead, her self-reliance and survival instincts to protect herself and her son provide her the opportunity to explore her role as a New Woman. She makes the personal choice to participate in the realm

outside her home. *Choice* is an important feminist aspect for the New Woman. The ability to choose, instead of being inculcated by patriarchal conventions, is an imperative component of Priest's Steampunk women. *Boneshaker* does not threaten the domestic structure, instead it challenges male superiority supported by gendered assumptions. The novel clearly serves as a didactic commodity for males to reconsider their position and relation to the female gender.

Similar to late nineteenth-century writers who were reevaluating women's roles, neo-Victorian fiction, a contemporary and speculative representation of the nineteenth century, reevaluates and re-defines the female character. Gail Cunningham describes New Women as "heroines who refused to conform to the traditional role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause" (3). Priest's female characters are pragmatists that break down the hegemonic structure in their society. Her heroines are clearly a postmodern re-interpretation of the New Woman. They are useful nineteenth-century Americans, but they are not radically redefining feminist causes. They interact with the challenges of life often associated with male heroes: raising a family, being a single parent, working outside the home, owning a business, or providing justice to those who have been wronged. Hedgecock explains that New Women in traditional nineteenth-century texts "desire both independent professional lives and relationships with men who can treat them as equals" (208). Briar never asserts that she wishes for a professional life outside the home that her late husband provided for her. In chapter three, she explains to her son Zeke that she *chose* his father to be her husband (*Boneshaker* 41). Once Briar escapes the social context of having to be married, in order to survive she gains access to the idea of

gender equality. Other than her possessive husband, Briar never insists on being treated equal to the men that she encounters in the book; instead, the men naturally treat her like a human being. Captain Cly and other men in *Boneshaker* treat Briar equally because she is the daughter of their hero, Maynard Wilkes. Maynard Wilkes was a prison guard during the zombie invasion. He courageously released many of the prisoners in order for them to escape the destruction of Seattle and the unearthing of a poisonous gas. In the process of saving many men, he loses his life to the Blight gas and his act of mercy and courage makes him a hero for the refugees that choose to live in the walled-up city. Briar uses both men and women as helpful resources to find Zeke. Most of the men that Briar encounters in the zombie-infested city are also sympathetic to the idea that she needs to find and rescue her son. By helping her, they show compassion for the opposite sex; they fully understand her parental instincts to find and protect Zeke.

Even Zeke, the main male protagonist in Priest's novel, accepts the help of females. As he ventures through the underground tunnels of the ruined city, he confronts the obstacles that his mother also faces: zombies, criminals, and the poisonous gas. At one point of the story, he becomes very dependent on Miss Angeline. Angeline helps Zeke because she knows he is not familiar with the layout of the city and the criminals who inhabit the Seattle wasteland. She is smart and cunning, and possesses knowledge that Zeke is being misled by Rudy, a drug addict and a dependent of the antagonist Dr. Minnericht (*Boneshaker* 122). Because she is an Indian princess that has inhabited the walled-up city for years, Angeline is able to be a useful character, and she helps guide Zeke on his adventure. She also conforms to the helpful role by caring and protecting

Zeke. They both escape Dr. Minnericht's underground establishment because Angeline portrays the ability to take charge and protect Zeke who needs help.

Conclusion: Escaping the Hidden Cracks of History

Priest positions her heroines in the realm of Otherness, which is often associated with minorities like females (gender inequality), Orientals (racial inequalities), and other oppressed citizens less described or often left out of nineteenth-century texts. She invents her characters as worthwhile spokespeople who advocate that they do hold a secure position in society. In reference to her Steampunk heroines Priest claims,

[T]he great thing about steampunk, I think, and the thing that really gives it legs is no matter who you are, no matter your orientation, your ethnicity, your gender, whatever your tribe, you were there. We were all there. But we don't always get talked about. And steampunk is a very nice way of reclaiming that. Because whoever you were, whatever unpopular religion or orientation or whatever you were back then, it's worth talking about. And maybe even more importantly, at least kind of for now, it's worth playing with. It's worth re-appropriating and taking that back. And steampunk is a really fun way to do that. (qtd. in GeekandSundry).

Fitting into the genre of science fiction, Steampunk literature allows female characters to reject the tropes of nineteenth-century dime novels. Paul K. Alkon believes that science fiction is a "genre best suited to speak for and attract the marginalized" (37-8). He describes Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* as a "provocative subtext of feminist issues," true also of *Boneshaker* (38). Priest's protagonists come from nontraditional backgrounds, and they are driven by instinct to survive.

Based on Priest's novels in the *Clockwork Century* series, some critics object to the idea of her characters reflecting twenty-first-century females: "you really wrote this very modern woman, I think in this nineteenth-century role, and it doesn't feel true" (William Kenower). Priest counters that her characters have always existed in reality, but they were not always given a vehicle or voice to express their existence to the world in traditional nineteenth-century texts. She asserts that Steampunk is the vehicle that allows these characters to speak up:

When mainstream society members don't see people who are different from them (in pop culture, in history books, in their neighborhoods), they get the impression that those people don't exist ... or if these Others do exist, then they aren't very important. But with its time-travel/history-altering underpinnings, steampunk has the capacity to unwrite some of the rules that created the Other in the first place. It offers a voice to those who were marginalized, allowing them to stand up and say, "I was here. And I absolutely, defiantly reject the implication that I wasn't." It's open to everyone — including those whose historical representation got left out, written out, or killed out of hand. (Priest "Steampunk")

Boneshaker re-imagines characters that were always there in the nineteenth century but they were left in the cracks of history or in the dark corners of literary tales. Although Steampunk fits into the realm of fantasy and science fiction, Priest establishes that her heroines are real and they are worth reading and acknowledging. Her heroines transgress

the typical nineteenth-century female stereotypes and limitations by alternating and re-imagining a new female status in society.

CHAPTER III

Victorian Girlhood in YA Steampunk Literature

“One must always be careful of books," said Tessa,
"and what is inside them, for words have the power to change us.”
—Cassandra Clare, *Clockwork Angel*

Feminist theorist Judith Butler argues that a “body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). She asserts that gender is inculcated with the idea of “cultural construction,” and it is “an act which has been rehearsed” (523, 526). It is not the role of biological sex that creates the idea of gender, a dichotomy between male and female; instead it is the constitution of performance that gender is culturally constructed. In January 1897, Hugh E.M. Stutfield wrote, “it is to women writers that we must look for the solution of what is termed the ‘feminine enigma,’ and more especially to their more recently published works” (243). The 1890s were considered the period of decadence and society’s push into Modernism. Victorian feminists were constructing a new public image for the female identity. Contrasting with mainstream and canonized Victorian female writers, Steampunk is a literary outlet that allows female writers to recreate and re-envision female characters of the past and present; these heroines “act” out a new construction of female identity or at least disrupt the status quo socially constructed by patriarchal socio-cultural institutions.

Near the end of the nineteenth century there was much concern about the transformation and role of women in society. New Woman radicalism was a mainstream idea shown through art and literature. New Women asserted the idea to “reinstate female sexuality as a positive feminist attribute” because depriving a woman of her sexuality made her “insubstantial and incomplete” (Reynolds and Humble 72-3). Steampunk

literature, a twenty-first century counterpart to *fin de siècle* novels, explores female limitations established by Victorian patriarchy and its advocates. Steampunk is a connection to the past, as depicted in many neo-Victorian works, that “seeks to advance an alternative view of the nineteenth century for a modern audience” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 7). Because Steampunk examines nineteenth-century social and gender roles through a speculative lens, it is able to reassess and connect the Victorian world to the present. Situated in the Victorian era, heroines in Steampunk literature participate in Stutfield’s “feminine enigma” and respond to patriarchal assumptions with the do-it-yourself attitude associated with the Steampunk tradition.

Self-reliance is a primary value promoted by Samuel Smiles in the nineteenth century. Smiles asserts, the “spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual” and that the “energetic action of individuals” is a recognizable “feature in the English character” (7, 10). Although Smiles’s publication was intended to be read by males in Victorian society, women rooted themselves in the self-help and do-it-yourself attitude as well. Steampunk writers also encompass this attitude by portraying self-reliant women as challengers to the performative aspect of gender politics that requires female passivity and immobility in society. Cast as do-it-yourselfers, women in Steampunk literature are urged by the authors to perform not as inactive characters but to conquer daunting difficulties through reliability, “perseverance,” “diligence,” and “patience” (Smiles 9, 15).

In the *Infernal Devices* series (2010-2013), Cassandra Clare re-evaluates Victorian girlhood and womanhood in an alternative realm of fantasy that parallels Victorian culture and history. Clare uses young adult (YA) Steampunk and fantastical

elements to reclaim and play with historical gender roles, thus the performances of her self-reliant characters renew and revise gender assumptions for the modern reader.

Set in 1878 London, Clare's trilogy describes Shadowhunters, also known as Nephilims, as human-angel hybrids who protect humanity from demons and other evil creatures. After the death of her aunt in America, Tessa Gray, the series' protagonist, sails to England with the intention of finding her older brother Nathaniel (Nate). He currently works for Mr. Mortmain, a mechanical factory owner. When Tessa arrives in London, a man claiming to know her brother kidnaps her; she is then tortured by the Dark Sisters, who vow to teach Tessa how to control her hidden, supernatural power. Unbeknownst to her, Tessa is a shape-changer, and she can assume the likeness of any male or female, dead or alive.

While escaping the witch sisters, Tessa encounters a clockwork device called an automaton: "a mechanical creature, made to move and appear as a human being moves and appears" (*Angel* 160). This prompts Tessa's first realization that her world is not what it seems. Instead of dealing with adolescent issues, she now must fight supernatural creatures and robots. Unable to escape on her own, she is rescued by William Herondale, a Nephilim, who takes her to a sanctuary called the London Institute. The Institute is a place where orphans, all of whom are Shadowhunters, are cared for by Charlotte Branwell and Henry, her husband and aspiring inventor.

At the Institute, Tessa's world is turned upside down. She is told that her brother is being held hostage by the Magister, a hubristic man who has created a clockwork army with human hearts, kept living by magic and machinery. This mechanical army needs to be destroyed by the Shadowhunters because their goal is to protect humanity and the

Empire from the Magister's rule (*Angel* 419). Not only is Tessa now aware of a supernatural world that consists of vampires, demons, werewolves, warlocks, and angel hybrids, but her assumptions about conventional female roles also undergo radical shifts. Her first awareness of this radical change is established by calling the man who saved her from the Dark Sisters by his first name.

After being raised by her "bossy" Aunt Harriet in America, Tessa reflects often on her aunt's rules. The idea of calling someone by their Christian name creates an "air of authority" that she should not have as an adolescent or as a female (*Angel* 56). She should not call a gentleman by his Christian name because "it implied intimacy between them that did not exist" (55). Her interaction with the opposite sex is confined by the idea to be ladylike, and yet in the first novel of the series Tessa finds herself calling males, specifically seventeen-year-old male Will Herondale and Jem Carstairs, by their first names. She fears that her actions and words towards the male gender are inappropriate. This inappropriately forward action may disrupt the male superiority encouraged by Victorian culture, so she "cringe[s] inwardly" and internally chastises herself for this fault (54).

Continuously, Tessa is astonished by the female and male disruption and class decorum in the Institute household. Several times she sees the maid servant Sophie verbally bantering with Will: "Tessa's mouth fell open. How could Sophie talk to Will like that? She was a servant, and he—even if he *was* younger than she was—was a gentleman" (95). In reaction, Tessa confronts Sophie about her behavior, and Sophie in return claims that the lady of the house, Charlotte Branwell, has allowed this type of repartee to exist: "she warned me about Mr. Herondale, though, said he'd likely be rude

to me, and familiar. She said I could be rude right back, that nobody would mind” (112). Notoriously, Victorian gentlemen treated servant girls as available sex objects. Clare challenges this stereotypical association by allowing a lower-status servant like Sophie to empower her role as a woman and stand up against the social injustice of being treated as an erotic object instead of as an individual.

Contextually, women in the nineteenth century were depicted in a dichotomy of the Madonna/Harlot, the passive and the aggressor, respectively. Sophie deviates from her class and gender roles by verbally defending herself. She is a dependent servant, but Branwell’s permission gives her the opportunity to defend herself. Sophie does not remain silent and submissive; instead, her self-reliance allows her to protect her sexuality and reputation. Using her own witty words, Tessa defends herself against male verbal abuse. Her idealization of female banter and performance reframes her views of gender assumptions about male dominance taught in Victorian society. This begins Tessa’s reconsideration of her own position as a female in relation to the opposite sex.

Reversing the “Angel in the House” Role

Tessa is a keen observer of male and female interactions within the Institute. As a young adolescent female she tries to befriend the one and only female around her age, seventeen-year-old Jessamine Lovelace. Jessamine often mocks Tessa’s lifestyle which is influenced by Victorian stories like *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Moonstone*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Jane Eyre*. Clare’s ability to describe Tessa as a Victorian reader, and a woman reader at that, implies a response that Tessa is invested in a mindset of different views and a variety of social concerns. Tessa is given the opportunity to read “novelistic conventions and their relation to actual practices,” which allows her to focus

and contemplate Victorian conventions (Reynolds and Humble 28). As a non-reader, Jessamine aligns herself with the conventional standard, the “angel in the house,” who remains passive, meek, and inferior.

As a haughty teenager, Jessamine exclaims, “Girls shouldn’t read novels” and a “lady does not read the newspaper. The society pages, perhaps, or the theater news” but nothing else (*Angel* 135, 115). She is an orphan whose late-parents despised the dangerous lives of the Shadowhunters, and she cannot wait until she is eighteen so she can escape her Shadowhunter training. After the death of her parents her immediate family refused to take care of her, so she is fostered by the Institute until she is of age to choose whether she wants to be a Shadowhunter. She refuses to be part of the Shadowhunters and fight against those who threaten humanity: “I will not have this life, Tessa. *I will not have it.* I don’t care what I have to do. I won’t live like this. I’d rather die” (154). Jessamine asserts herself as the “angel” that does not participate in socio-cultural standards associated with the patriarchal realm; she is a caregiver not a warrior—a dependent on the hegemonic patriarch first and foremost.

Instead of accepting her role as a guardian and protector of society, as most Shadowhunter Nephilims do in Clare’s trilogy, Jessamine wants a life of normalcy. She defines normalcy as being part of a nuclear family. She characterizes normalcy as a fairy-tale where two parents nurture their children, and the dangers of the outside world have no impact on their lives. Jessamine longs for the ordinary life of adolescent girls “who are dancing and flirting and laughing and catching husbands. They get lessons in French,” and she only gets “lessons in horrid demon language” (136).

When Jessamine first entered the Institute as an orphan and a Shadowhunter-in-training, Charlotte's husband Henry created a beautiful parasol for her. Jessamine discovers that the parasol is deadly and designed with electrum metal and razor sharp edges. She does not want her feminine instrument to serve as a weapon. The practicality that her parasol is a weapon and not an ornate accessory disillusions her ability to look and act like a conservative female figure. In one scene, Jessamine and Tessa journey through a park where they encounter a goblin. In self-defense, Jessamine kills the goblin with her parasol. After killing the goblin, Jessamine sobs, "No. I didn't want to. I didn't mean to. *No—*" (140). Jessamine proves that she has the skill to be an admirable Shadowhunter, but she prefers not to be part of that world. As a Nephilim, Jessamine is supposed to be a fighter, but in her mindset she would rather be the archetypal "angel in the house"—the beautiful, passive, graceful, and moral female.

Even though Jessamine is a pupil at the Institute, she does not take her Shadowhunter training seriously. Unlike many females depicted in the trilogy, she does not resist the patriarchal paradigm. Instead of fighting automatons that attack the Institute, she leaves a human being, unskilled Thomas, to fight her battle. She excuses Thomas's death by saying, "I'm a lady, Sophie. It is expected that a man sacrifice himself for a lady's safety" (427). Jessamine's attitudes and behaviors mirror the patriarchal ideals that diminish her. She dismisses the importance of a human life lost by her ignorance. She refuses to acknowledge that she has the power within herself to defend the helpless.

Clare's commentary on Jessamine's contrasted female roles, an "angel in the house" versus being a Nephilim (a supernatural angel), illustrates the idea of self-reliant

women in Steampunk literature. Jessamine innately has the supernatural power to defend herself and others; however, her concern with patriarchy and her standing in Victorian society complicates her social and moral conventions to defend the helpless. In the end, Jessamine's decisions are shortened to the idea that she can be dependent on others, in her case the males, to fight her battles. Or she can conquer life's difficulties by being independent and perseverant. She chooses the former.

More importantly, Jessamine believes her biologically assigned gender should be celebrated not fought against or made equal to the male-dominated society. Her performance throughout the trilogy asserts that she is disgusted with the lifestyle that her provider Charlotte has chosen:

And live like Charlotte, having to dress like a man and fight like a man.
It's disgusting. Women aren't meant to behave like that. We are meant to graciously preside over lovely homes. To decorate them in a manner that is pleasing to our husbands. To uplift and comfort them with our gentle and angelic presence. (*Angel* 136)

Jessamine manifests the idea that she can escape the Institute and the Shadowhunter lifestyle by getting married and presiding over a home. She agrees with Victorian contemporary John Ruskin who stated, "the woman's power is for rule, not for battle," in his conservative essay called "Of Queen's Garden's" (1865). She does not fight the enigma of femininity, but she resorts to the feminine-stereotyped role, female piousness, an "angel in the house." In retrospect, Jessamine's ambition to be the "angel in the house" is flip-flopped for twenty-first century Steampunk readers. As the domestic figure-head, Jessamine is in actuality the angel's binary, the monster. By not accepting

her Shadowhunter status, she deviates from her role to be benevolent and someone that helps others in need. Her objective is to be confined to the feminine ideal. She refuses to be a Nephilim, an angel and a protector, and this typecasts her as a selfish monster. Her obsession with feminine qualities, not her superhuman powers, stifles her rationality and duty to help others.

In *Clockwork Angel*, the Shadowhunters rescue Tessa's brother Nathaniel Gray, and Jessamine decides to nurse him back to health. She believes, "he'll know [she's] the one who nursed him back to health. Men always fall in love with the woman who nurses them back to health" (*Angel* 300). Tessa explains to Jessamine that her brother has no money. This is not an obstacle for Jessamine because she has inherited money from her deceased Shadowhunter-hating parents; her primary goal is to marry someone, anyone who can take her away from the Shadowhunter world.

Jessamine classifies Shadowhunters as monsters, a human-angel hybrid that initiates battles on the patriarchal realm. Her animosity develops into selfishness because she wants to fulfill the idealized feminine role. She did not grow up in their world of self-reliance. Instead she was taught that the patriarch of the family solved any and all problems humanity faced. Jessamine believes that accepting her role as a Nephilim, an angel warrior, will prevent her from achieving the fairy-tale life that she has dreamt of, a marriage where she cares for her husband, her children, and her home.

Tessa's brother turns out to be a traitor to the Shadowhunters. He is a supporter of the man who is trying to kidnap and marry Tessa, and then rule the Empire. Infatuated with the idea of love and a fairy-tale marriage, Jessamine convinces herself that Nate is not a bad guy. Because he promises her marriage, she works with him as a spy against the

Shadowhunters and Tessa in *Clockwork Prince*. Tessa explains to Will, “Jessamine’s been spying for Nate all this time...She thinks he’s in love with her” (283). As a spy, Jessamine assumes a masculine role by dressing up as a boy and sneaking out of the Institute. Her male persona is not used as a tactic to escape the social hierarchy; instead it is a vantage point for her to betray her friends. Jessamine’s mercenary tactic to dress as a man shows that she would go to any extremes necessary to acquire the “angel in the house” status, even if she has to masculinize herself. When she is discovered as a spy, she announces that she properly married Nate at a church and that he truly loves her (312). Shortly after this confession, she is widowed and left with a fake wedding ring—a symbolic epiphany that Nate never truly loved her; she was only a pawn for him to gain power.

In the last book of the trilogy, Jessamine is murdered by the automatons that she refused to fight in *Clockwork Angel*. Her dying wish is that Will Herondale will care for her dolls. In one scene of *Clockwork Angel*, Tessa enters Jessamine’s room and sees a

beautiful reproduction of a real town house [...] perfectly decorated with miniature furniture, everything built to scale, from the little wooden chairs with needlepoint cushions to the cast-iron stove in the kitchen. There were small dolls, too, with china heads, and real little oil paintings on the walls.
(152)

The dollhouse and the dolls are an exact replica of Jessamine’s previous life before being fostered in the Institute. The house is a small-scale reproduction of her home that had burnt down, and the dolls resemble her parents that she lost in the fire. The dollhouse symbolizes Jessamine’s feminine and materialistic nature. Likewise it characterizes her

refusal to step outside cultural boundaries. Jessamine wants to be preserved as a doll in a house, presumably the “angel in the house.” As an “angel in the house,” a Victorian woman is depicted as a housewife. She has not only married a man, the supposed superior gender, but she has married a man-made structure. Jessamine’s care for her dollhouse presumably symbolizes her home, and her only duty will be to care and nurture those who are in the house’s womb.

Defining and Redefining a Woman’s Role

As a young adolescent, in comparison to Jessamine, Tessa is socially constructed with the idea of male supremacy in and outside of the household. In *Clockwork Angel*, Charlotte becomes Tessa’s caregiver and maternal role-model. Instead of observing the naturalness of patriarchy in the Institute, Tessa’s cultural views of womanhood are challenged:

It was the husband, wasn’t it, who decided what was and was not allowed, and how his home should be run? The wife’s duty was simply to carry out [her husband’s] wishes, and to provide him with a calm stable refuge from the chaos of the world. A place he might retreat. But the Institute was hardly that. It was part home, part boarding school, and part battle station.

And whoever might be in charge of it, it clearly wasn’t Henry. (164)

At twenty-three years old, Charlotte takes on the responsibilities associated with both gender roles. She shares equality with her husband but her performance in the texts often portrays her as the dominant character. She is a woman skilled in weaponry and physical combat. Tessa compares Charlotte to a governess because she houses orphaned Shadowhunters, cares for them, and teaches them “history and ancient languages” (*Angel*

93). Shockingly, she is a “*woman with tattoos*” (56), and her ability to engross herself in fights appalls Tessa: “women don’t have those sort of feelings...Bloodlust...Fierceness. Warrior feelings” (93).

Clare’s trilogy asserts Tessa as a newcomer in London. As an orphaned American with British parents, Tessa was raised and taught conventional ideals. She was a stranger to the Shadowhunter world and their abilities to be independent fighters. The Shadowhunter women are New Woman radicals, which makes Tessa rethink the culture she is now part of. Unable to decipher the new changes, she evaluates these vicissitudes. New Women are undeniably different from feminine roles inculcated by male-dominated society.

In Steampunk literature, Charlotte is the role model for the nineteenth-century New Woman. As a wife and a Shadowhunter warrior, Charlotte is situated in a position that corresponds to that of the men in her society, not outside them. She often explains to the females in her household, particularly Tessa and Jessamine Lovelace, “you are a Shadowhunter first, and a lady second” (*Angel* 115). Her performance as a caregiver and a warrior challenges society’s generalizations of gender. Charlotte’s ability to separate herself from the gendered hierarchy of Victorian England is what allows her to be a Shadowhunter first and then a woman. Throughout the series, Tessa measures her placement in society against Jessamine’s role (“angel in the house”) and Charlotte’s role (New Woman).

In Clare’s novels, Charlotte manages the Institute, a home and school for orphaned Shadowhunters. The Clave, the council that heads the Shadowhunters, chastises her role in society and in their governing organization. Although Charlotte is a good

manager over the Institute, the council continuously regards her husband Henry as the head of the Institute and insists that he is present at all meetings. “As a woman, [Charlotte] must fight to be heard, and even then her decisions are second-guessed” explains Jem, a student and fellow Shadowhunter nurtured under Charlotte’s care (*Angel* 304).

In *Clockwork Princess*, the third book of the series, Gabriel Lightwood, a recently turned eighteen-year-old Shadowhunter, concerns himself with the idea that Charlotte is a “tiny creature” who is taking on too much power not fit for her gender (61). Throughout the trilogy, Charlotte battles these gender stereotypes. The scolding that she receives from her fellow warriors, mostly men, even allows Charlotte to doubt herself as a leader. In the end, she separates herself from male-dominated expectations by participating in battles as a leader. Her participation in council meetings and on battlegrounds interrupts the masculine dominance enforced on her. She even subverts the men that do not want her to be future Consul of the Clave. As current Consul, Consul Josiah Wayland refuses to let Charlotte take over his position:

I am afraid I cannot second your recommendation of Charlotte Branwell as my successor. Though possessed of a good heart, she is altogether too flighty, emotional, passionate, and disobedient to have the making of a Consul. As we know, the fair sex has its weaknesses that men are not heir to, and sadly she is prey to all of them. (Princess 74-5).

The Consul associates Charlotte’s biological gender with the Victorian ideas that all women are meek and pious, whose biological sex is unsuited to the male-dominated world.

Charlotte contemplates the reasoning behind Consul Wayland's ability to put her in charge of the London Institute, but Wayland lacks any support for her to uphold the role as Consul. Gabriel, who at first viewed Charlotte as inferior, changes his mind and explains Consul Wayland's reasoning to her:

Because he believes women are weak and easily manipulated, but you have proved not to be, and it has ruined all his planning. [...] He underestimated you, and that is not a tragedy. That you have proven to be better, cleverer, and stronger than anyone could have expected, Charlotte—it is a triumph. (*Princess* 367)

Gabriel's insights and change of heart attests that some men support the idea of female leadership. Charlotte's resourcefulness and determination to morally fight provides the rationality that she is fit to be a strong leader.

Clockwork Princess describes the final battle between the Shadowhunters and Mortmain with his army of magical-automatons. Charlotte uses her position as the head of the Institute to warn the Shadowhunter world that war is imminent. She writes to the Consul,

I am sure you will agree that the whereabouts of Mortmain are now established and that we must with all haste assemble what forces we can and march immediately...Mortmain has shown in the past remarkable ability to slip from the nets we cast. We must take advantage of this moment and strike with all possible haste and force... (320)

Consul Wayland refuses to believe that the Nephilim army will be attacked, and because Charlotte is a woman, the gender that he connotes as weak and unreliable, he

refuses to act on her warnings. Instead, he writes Charlotte back and dictates that as a female Shadowhunter “she [is] no better than [a] governess or nursemaid” (328). His refusal to listen to female warnings prevents him and other Clave members from protecting themselves against Mortmain’s clockwork creatures. On the other hand, Charlotte refuses to be belittled by her Shadowhunter associates or to be undermined by Mortmain and his mechanical army.

In “A Corset Manifesto,” Katherine Casey explains that within Steampunk literature “adventure knows no gender, and possibility knows no bounds” (333). She asserts that Steampunk characters, in this case Charlotte, are no longer cast as submissive creatures under “oppressive morals”; instead, Steampunk heroines refuse negotiations and socially assumed female expectations (Casey 333). Charlotte appoints herself as a warrior and protector and pursues her own army to defeat the antagonist Mortmain. The battle ends in favor of Charlotte’s self-reliance to protect the British Empire: a victory maintained by a woman’s thoughts and actions.

After the death of Consul Wayland and considering Charlotte’s quick and valiant ability to collect troops to defend humanity, the males who hold power in the Shadowhunter council reconsider her position and accept her role as the first female Consul. Jem once again supports Charlotte’s new role by stating, “There must always be a first...It is not easy to be the first, and it is not always rewarding, but it is important” (*Princess* 294). Charlotte becomes Consul and performs her role as a leader while also having a baby at the end of the trilogy. Ironically, this fulfills the familiar trope of woman as caregiver. She becomes an example that women can participate in many roles other

than being a housewife. She is both a mother and a leader of an angel army that defends humanity against oppression and automatons.

Female literature in the late-nineteenth century described the New Woman's progression, and in order for the new female identity to be plausible and progressive the "change must be gradual and organic" (Reynolds and Humble 75). Steampunk literature does not undermine socio-cultural Victorian tropes; instead, it gradually reconfigures them through a postmodern lens. This gradual change is depicted when Cassandra Clare decides that the child of her female hero inherits Charlotte's surname Fairchild, instead of her husband's last name Branwell, who claims he does not mind, "not at all" (*Princess* 518). Gradually, Charlotte is changing the social structure. She is the first female leader of an army and governing community. She also makes the choice that her child, a male heir, is given her surname.

Tessa's Identity Issues and Self-discovery

In the first book of the *Infernal Devices* series, Tessa Gray struggles with identity issues. On the outside, she is an American teenager in search of her brother in London, England. And on the inside she is conflicted about who she is in reference to her family, gender, race among the Shadowhunters and Victorian culture. Clare's series declares Tessa as the main protagonist in search of her true self. Tessa is a Victorian adolescent who has internalized male superiority and who assumes that as a female she is socially constructed to be the inferior sex.

Tessa's world is torn apart when she finds out that her brother is associated with her enemy Mortmain, who wants to marry her. Mortmain is a man that wants to access her shape-changing abilities and even possess the "power to control [her]" (*Angel* 78).

Nate is obsessed with wealth and power, not his brotherly or familial duties to protect his sister. The concern for his sister does not overwhelm his mind during his trials for superiority.

Tessa acknowledges that her brother is not psychologically and emotionally like her. During her adventures and battles to survive, she accepts the idea that he is different than the brother she was raised with: “if he isn’t like me, then it means he isn’t completely my brother. He’s my parents’ son. But whose daughter am I?” (*Angel* 282). She believes that her lost family linkage illustrates that she does not belong to anyone or anywhere in society. Her brother’s refusal to protect her from the outside world results in the conclusion that she no longer is part of any family. The trilogy sets up a standard that blood is not the only connection that someone has to family. Tessa realizes that the Shadowhunters, the warriors that protect her and fight beside her, are her family.

The *Infernal Devices* trilogy is an adventure story about a girl who goes through the trials and triumphs of a Victorian life. Through Steampunk elements, such as clockwork devices (machinery that resembles artificial human beings), Tessa is able to search for her own identity and answer “Why am I...” (*Angel* 443). Clare uses Steampunk literature as a suitable passage for self-discovery. Steampunk is defined as a credible source for gender performance to be illustrated by do-it-yourself and self-reliant female characters. Smiles claims, “All progress, however, the best kind, is comparatively slow. Great results cannot be achieved at once; and we must be satisfied to advance in life as we walk, step by step” (74). In order to seek the “elevation of [her] character” Tessa Gray’s identity and placement as a Victorian woman can be defined and accomplished by “continuous application” and diligence (Smiles 125, 73). She must

conquer life's difficulties with "unbounded perseverance and inexhaustible patience" (54).

Tessa's enemies see her as a little girl: "A delicate female" in which "violence is not in [her] nature" (Clare, *Angel* 445). However, she does not let her biologically assigned gender define her identity. Her identity as a supernatural being is never fully labeled because she is the first of her kind: a breed of a Shadowhunter and a demon. In *Clockwork Angel*, Tessa discovers that she is a shape-changer—as a warlock she can embody the identity of any male or female. However, as a supernatural being, her origins are not recognized by the supernatural realm. Many guess that she is the offspring of demons, faeries, or another type of Downworlder (any supernatural being that is not a Nephilim or Shadowhunter). In *Clockwork Princess*, Tessa is told that her mother, a Shadowhunter kidnapped by faeries (so she never knew of her Shadowhunter heritage), had a non-consensual relationship with an Eidolon Demon disguised as her husband Richard Gray. As the child of a human and demon, many characterize Tessa as a warlock.

When Tessa is trying to discover who she is, she is at first told that she is a warlock, which is explained in the Shadowhunters guidebook the *Codex* that she is *sterile* and "cannot produce offspring" (*Angel* 266). This revelation separates her from the idea of fulfilling her duty as a Victorian woman: "It is not so much that I dreamed of having children...I had not thought so far ahead in my life. It's more that this seems yet another thing that separates me from humanity. That makes me a monster. Something set apart" (*Angel* 468). Her thoughts are internalized by the dictum that maternity is one of her main responsibilities for a woman. Tessa believes that her inability to breed casts her as a

monster. She is not the “Angel in the House” outlined by Coventry Patmore’s Victorian poem which posits women as merely mothers and caregivers.

In accordance with Patmore’s ideology, Tessa defines herself as the Fallen Woman because she is unable to reproduce and fulfill her role as a mother. However, her enemy states, “You are not a Shadowhunter, but you are not a warlock, either. You are something new, something entirely other,” which counteracts with the *Codex*’s description that she cannot have children (347). At first, Tessa believes her otherness sets her apart from the natural world but instead it makes her someone new, someone that is set up for new discoveries. Her ability or inability to have children is not yet known, and this news gives Tessa hope.

Tessa makes many assumptions about how ideal Victorian women are supposed to behave. These conventions change throughout the trilogy. By the end, Tessa firmly celebrates womanhood that disrupts the conservation of masculine superiority. In the last novel she explains to a member of masculine power, a werewolf named Woosley, “you would not exist without a woman, would you? However little use you may find us, we are cleverer and more determined and more patient than men. Men may be stronger, but it is women who endure” (*Princess* 118). Tessa understands that society has characterized females as the weaker sex, but in reality women are able to tolerate and alter the abuse and stereotypes of their gender. Tessa is a shape-changer, an unworldly monster, and in order to break down the stereotype of being the weaker sex she assumes the identity of an actual angel. This angel has been sealed in her bronze clockwork locket. In the persona of one of God’s real angels, Tessa defeats her enemy and his mechanical devices (*Princess* 460-2). In the end, she becomes the unlikely hero and a savior.

Her strength and determination allow Tessa to assume the identity of an angel and save her friends and herself. Along with this happy conclusion, and fitting into the trope of Victorian literature, the series ends with multiple marriages. As Sally Mitchell the author of *Daily Life in Victorian England* points out, “Marriage was seen as a woman’s natural and expected role: it satisfied her instinctual needs, preserved the species, provided appropriate duties, and protected her from the shocks and angers of the rude, competitive world” (266). The novel conforms to the trend of the heroine Tessa Gray marrying her hero, the man that saved her multiple times and shared her love for Victorian literature, Will Herondale.

Clare’s Steampunk trilogy mimics Victorian classics like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in which the independent female thinker re-establishes herself as a part of the Victorian community through marriage. Unlike many traditional Victorian texts, Tessa, a Victorian female, is the savior not the male characters. She decides she wants to work with the Shadowhunters in order to protect her friends and the world from Mortmain’s control. In comparison to Jane Eyre, Tessa Gray is not only the “domestic heroine”; she and her caregiver Charlotte Branwell are the New Women that advocate reform and “new ideas about female political and personal independence” (Gillooly 398, 399). As an example of the New Woman radical, Tessa discovers her true identity outside the home. Avoiding the safety of her home, along with her defiant performance as a warrior among the Shadowhunter army, Tessa portrays her perseverance to protect others from harm. She does not reject marriage, but as a feminist she chooses to get married. In actuality, like many contemporary young adult protagonists in literature, Tessa is put in a love triangle. She is characterized as a confused and emotionally driven adolescent in

Clockwork Angel because she kisses Will, in *Clockwork Prince* she accepts Jem Carstairs's proposal for marriage, and she has pre-marital sex with Will in *Clockwork Princess*. She does not threaten the institute of marriage by being in a web of emotions and suitors; instead she undermines the female stereotypes and is given options for marriage. Clare's *Infernal Devices* series acts as a critique of the Victorian and patriarchal inclinations by debunking "conventional femininity" (qtd. in Gillooly 400). As a New Woman, Tessa conveys a feminist choice.

Conclusion: Self-Constructing Females

Gender is a fluid construct that conforms to the actions and performance of its characters. In Steampunk literature for young adults, adolescent heroines are featured as empowered characters in an alternative history of Victorian England. The Victorian trope of cultural conformity and respectability are juxtaposed with gender rebellion, courage, and action. In a CNN interview with Steampunk writers, YA Steampunk author Kady Cross explains, "In a steampunk world, women can be anything" (qtd. in Strickland). Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* series is fabricated as an historical reinterpretation of female placement in nineteenth-century society. Steampunk is a genre that allows females to perform a renewed and reconstructed outlook on gender assumptions.

Clare's Steampunk series romanticizes Victorian nostalgia through the performance of her heroine Tessa Gray. As a Victorian female, Tessa urges herself to participate in patriarchal society, but Steampunk's do-it yourself tradition strengthens the character's mindset to change and accommodate a new role in the gendered hierarchy. Clare's Steampunk novels, like any neo-Victorian text, are able to "re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalised [*sic*] voices, new histories of

sexuality...generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (Llewellyn165). Tessa Gray's adventures and performance as a heroine, along with characters like Charlotte Branwell, in a Victorian world of clockwork and mechanical devices creates a new feminist attitude. The modern New Woman is redefined in Steampunk literature, and the female characters construct a new position based on gradual change and female choice.

CONCLUSION

“STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man / baroque stylings) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot”
—Jeff VanderMeer, *The Steampunk Bible*

Steampunk literature is a progressive genre that mixes science fiction and fantasy, concentrated in an alternative history of the nineteenth century. In the genre, authors are able to radically redefine socio-cultural implications that represent both past and contemporary societies. Steampunk adds relevance to history, the present, and the future. Steampunk’s new wave of female authors like Cherie Priest and Cassandra Clare create the momentum for literary critical analyses to occur. Jeff VanderMeer explains, “[t]here is feminist steampunk, international steampunk, and multicultural steampunk in ever-growing numbers,” and as long as these texts of escapism are being published, Steampunk will continue to grow as an interdisciplinary study worthy of researching (“Afterword” 301).

In reference to the proto-Steampunk writers, specifically Wells and Verne, Steampunk exists as a foundation for forward-thinking authors to embody the Victorian era. Through science fiction and fantasy they were able to portray an alteration and commentary on technology. Alternate and revisionist histories and speculative and historical fantasies existed before the development of Steampunk in the 1970s. Contemporary Steampunk borrowed elements from these genres, and, as a result, today’s Steampunk subculture takes a backwards look at the historical timeline engrained with the elements of technology, specifically steam, and the social and political concerns of the nineteenth century. This backwards focus establishes a forward-looking lens to

emphasize and refocus a commentary on the social, cultural, and technological assessments of the twenty-first century. According to VanderMeer, “Steampunk focuses on the Victorian era not only because of its aesthetic and technology, but because it recognizes within that epoch issues similar to those facing society in the twenty-first century” (*Steampunk Bible* 42).

In the nineteenth century, Samuel Smiles stated, “For the nation is only an aggregate of individual conditions, and civilization itself is but a question of the personal improvement of the men, women, and children of whom society is composed” (8). Ultimately, seeking elevation of the individual self creates a society of progress. Women Steampunk authors, like Cherie Priest and Cassandra Clare, illustrate heroines that are part of a progressive nineteenth century. Their female protagonists are described as radical New Women that are independent; they gradually shift the perceptions of women being the inferior sex.

Priest’s *Boneshaker* ends with Briar reunited with her son. She does not follow the tradition of being courted or married as many iconic dime novel westerns and Victorian texts end. Her independence portrayed throughout the novel is viewed with unselfish motives and the thoughts to protect her son from insatiable zombies, poisonous Blight gas, and a mad scientist. In the end, Priest’s heroine transgresses the typical nineteenth-century American domestic sphere which would have limited her ability to rescue her son. Instead, Steampunk as an alternation of the nineteenth century allows Priest to re-imagine the motherly role in that period; Briar Wilkes portrays the idea that as a female she is a useful commodity to society, and after rescuing her son, she is depicted as a savior.

Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* series engages in the conversation of gender identity through the aspect of performance. Specifically, she focuses on the transformation of girlhood to womanhood in regards to her protagonist, Tessa Gray. At first, Tessa is a sixteen-year-old girl interested in staying in the confines of patriarchal rules. As she weighs her identity between Jessamine, a fellow peer, and her caretaker Charlotte Branwell, Tessa begins to acknowledge that women's roles are progressing. By the end of the series, her marginalized voice and female identity are reconstructed.

Priest and Clare's Steampunk heroines embody the mantra of self-reliance. Through Steampunk storylines, their heroines engage in conflicts that are familial, societal, technological, and cultural. The heroines' performances in the texts transform their identities as remarkable nineteenth-century women. In compliance with gender constructs, specifically transgressing the American "domestic sphere" and the Victorian "angel in the house," Briar Wilkes and Tessa Gray interrogate socio-cultural conventions and serve as the up-and-coming modern New Woman. They both struggle to create their own personal identity in respect to their gender. As their adventures progress, the characters begin to develop a worldly view of how their social status. Inserted in a genre of fantasy and escapism, Priest and Clare's heroines begin to resist the nineteenth-century hegemonic principles set upon them. The heroines' storylines allow contemporary audiences to identify with them and critically analyze the construction of Victorian and American norms and the transformation of women and gender identity throughout history.

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