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**Genevieve Cogman's *The Invisible Library*
(2015) as a Feminist Utopia: Steampunk
Aesthetics and Neo-Victorianism**

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the Requirements for an M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization

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Dedications

This research paper is lovingly dedicated to my family, friends, myself, to the memory of one whose influence continues to guide me, and to everyone who will benefit from this piece of work someday.

Special thanks to my parents and siblings. Their encouragement and understanding during the challenges of this academic journey have been a source of strength and motivation.

This research is a culmination of collective efforts and shared knowledge, and I am forever thankful for the contributions of all involved.

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Abstract

The present study is a rigorous exploration of retrofuturistic narratives in Genevieve Cogman's *The Invisible Library* (2015) through the intersecting lenses of feminist utopian theory and feminism. The study argues that the novel reimagines Victorian history and gender roles through speculative fiction, situating its female characters as subversive figures who challenged the traditional "Angel in the House" ideal that once ruled the Victorian society through a contemporary context. This study engages with different feminist critics including, Virginia Woolf and Gilbert and Gubar, to reflect a rewriting of gendered power and literary participation. The library, as a feminist utopia operates as transhistorical space where knowledge, authority, and mobility are accessible to women. Moreover, a close examination of the novel shows how steampunk elements assume the role of narrative mechanisms that intensify the challenges women face while simultaneously expanding their agency. These technologies foreground the negotiation of modernity, technology, and feminine autonomy in neo-Victorian contexts. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Cogman's work exemplifies a feminist project that recasts the past in feminist terms and imagines alternative futures through historical reinvention.

Key Words: Neo-Victorianism, retrofuturism, steampunk, feminist utopia, feminism, gender roles, the angel in the House, alternative futures.

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General Introduction

“Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing if we can come up with a fitting collective term, like ‘steampunks’, perhaps.”

— K.W. Jeter (1987)

The Victorian Era has long held a conspicuous place in the annals of literary history; it spanned an influence far beyond the precincts of the 19th century. Aesthetic opulence, rapid technological developments, and fraught social complexities have kept this age inseparable from the imagination of historians, writers, artists, and even readers across generations. The Victorian Era has not been a footnote in history; rather, it has provided a vibrant wellspring of inspiration in the realm of literature to reimagine and reinterpret the past. Williams Gibson, in this context, states “Today, our futures feel increasingly citational: each is haunted by the “semiotic ghosts” of futures past” (434), as mentioned in *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction* (2014). This boldly reflects their “dissatisfaction with the present while creating a nostalgia for what they once considered the future” (14).

One such manifestation of this enduring fascination is the rise of steampunk. Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay in their chapter, “Retrofuturism and Steampunk” in *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction* (2014) affirm that steampunk, a subgenre of science fiction, engages with a longing for a reimagined past that might have yielded a different present. They reveal, “Steampunk is a malleable cultural manifestation” that negotiates a present longing for a historical past and add that steampunk “strives to create a desired future,” prioritizing the early to mid-nineteenth century before the major shifts of the Second Industrial Revolution (439). This genre often leaps over the twentieth century entirely, fusing

Victorian morality and technology with present-day applied science, and drawing on settings such as industrial Britain or the mythic American West. In this sense, steampunk blends the material culture of this historical period with aspects of science fiction or fantasy to try to construct or promote a utopian future (439-40).

In literature and culture, steampunk has become a way to interrogate or subvert systems of power, explore the digital era's origins and to propose alternative, sometimes utopian, visions of agency, resistance, and power. Thus, they argue, "steampunk combines nostalgic recall with "appropriate" applied science in order to rewrite the past and create a better future" (Guffey and Lemay 440).

Retrofuturism, though not confined to the Victorian era, is another cultural phenomenon that frequently revisits and reimagines the nineteenth century as a site of technological possibility, aesthetic richness, and alternative futures. Núñez Barranco, Alfonso N., Antonio J. Domenech del Rio, and Youngsun Yoo in their article, "A Study on the Aesthetics Characteristics of Retro-Futuristic Fashion" (2022) argue that concept of retro-futurism emerged as a fusion of nostalgia and visions of the future, providing a rich framework for understanding various cultural expressions (14). The article also emphasizes how retrofuturism does not idealize past concepts but rather reinterprets them through a modern lens (13).

Retrofuturism embraces and repurposes various aspects of collective memory, mirroring and questioning the principles, perspectives, and beliefs within what has been described by Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding in their introduction in *Histories of the Future* (2005) as "the escalating storms of the early 21st century" (qtd. in Guffey and Lemay 434). In their introduction to *Histories of the Future* (2005), Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding observe, "We have been living through boom times for the future" marked by a

cultural surge in narratives of utopias and dystopias, time travel, artificial intelligence, and accelerating change. They add, “More and more, our sense of the future is conditioned by a knowledge of, and even a nostalgia for, futures that we have already lost” (3). This demonstrates that our contemporary world is experiencing an explosion of interest in imagining and representing the future. This is not just in academic or scientific fields, but deeply embedded in literature, popular culture, and media. It is in this sense that so many steampunk authors and artists like Cherie Priest, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling have taken the technological innovations and sense of palpable wonder in the Victorian age as a springboard to explore “what if” scenarios, different times, and futures all bound inside an aesthetic and a thematic framework that belongs to the 19th century.

Neo-Victorianism has emerged as a significant cultural and literary phenomenon that reimagines the Victorian past through a contemporary lens. Neo-Victorianism, as defined by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (2010), refers to cultural texts, literary, filmic, or visual arts that are “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (4). This approach foregrounds a deliberate and reflective return to the nineteenth century, often filtered through postmodern sensibilities such as metafiction¹, intertextuality², and metahistoricism³.

¹ *Metafiction* refers to fiction that draws attention to its own nature as a constructed story, often by highlighting the writing process or breaking the illusion of reality.¹

¹ “Metafiction.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/metafiction>.

² *Intertextuality* is the relationship between texts, where one text refers to or influences another, often through quotation, allusion, or thematic echoes.²

As Claire Nally observes in her book *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian* (2019), this definition “seems to privilege a particular type of research into culture,” one deeply embedded in critical theory and literary self-awareness (12). Nally further expands on Neo-Victorianism’s scope by noting that “Steampunk locates itself, on one level, within some of the tropes outlined within the Neo-Victorian project; in other ways it challenges those tropes. Neo-Victorianism allows for a liminal space in which the Victorian and the contemporary are in constant dialogue” (12). This observation highlights Steampunk’s dual function as both homage and critique. While it draws inspiration from the aesthetics and cultural frameworks of the Victorian era, typical of Neo-Victorianism, it simultaneously subverts those conventions.

Published in 2015, Genevieve Cogman’s *The Invisible Library* is the first instalment in her eight-book series of the same name: *The Invisible Library*. The first book stands out as one of the finest examples of steampunk-inspired literary exploration. It interlaces a great tale that plunges into the depths of interdimensional espionage, literary preservation, and power dynamics, while it draws on the rich tapestry of Victorian culture and technology. Setting her story in alternate neo-Victorian world infused with retrofuturistic elements, Cogman gives the reader a narrative that thrives on the tension between tradition and innovation, between control and chaos, through a steampunk aesthetic that is both symbolic and thematic in its resonance.

² “Intertextuality.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press,
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/intertextuality>.

³ Hayden White coined the concept of “metahistory” to argue that historical writing is shaped by literary methods—such as narrative structures, thematic tropes, and rhetorical devices—rather than being a straightforward, objective recounting of facts.³

³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973. Print.

Drawing from Cogman's *The Invisible Library*, the following research paper traces deep into the kaleidoscope that is steampunk, a genre with feet firmly rooted in the Victorian era, to find a sensitive channel for exploring the intricacies of gender, power, and identity in speculative fiction. By unpacking the narrative's use of steampunk motifs and its exploration of multiple and shifting worlds, we will uncover the ways in which Cogman's work employs the fantastical to shed light on real-world cultural anxieties, feminist reimaginings, and the continuous negotiation between past ideologies and present aspirations.

My motivation in conducting this research stems from a desire to explore how contemporary literature reimagines the Victorian era through feminist and speculative lenses. Fascinated by the period's complexities, I aimed to go beyond surface-level admiration by analyzing how *The Invisible Library* repositions women as central agents of power and knowledge. This study allowed me to merge my interests in history, literature, and gender, and to investigate how fiction critiques the past to envision more inclusive futures through Neo-Victorianism, steampunk, and feminist utopianism.

This research attempts to explore how Cogman's *The Invisible Library* uses Neo-Victorian settings and steampunk aesthetics to take a deeper look on contemporary issues of gender and power. By analysing the narrative's integration of feminist utopian settings, retrofuturistic technologies, and the evolving roles of its female characters, particularly through the figure of Irene, this study aims to demonstrate how the novel reflects enduring feminist themes and cultural anxieties surrounding power, knowledge, and identity. Ultimately, it seeks to understand the significance of blending historical influences with speculative fiction as a means of deepening our comprehension of contemporary gender dynamics and the legacy of the Victorian imagination.

While *The Invisible Library* has yet to receive sustained academic study, its popular reception reveals its connection with readers and critics alike. The opening of the novel covers reviews from different sources. Ranked #2 on *The Independent's* Best Fantasy Novels of 2015 list, the novel was welcomed as a “breath of fresh air” by *The Guardian (UK)*, particularly for its complex plot structure and “companionable heroine” Irene, whose narrative presence allows readers to “wallow” in the immersive world-building (qtd. in *The Invisible Library* 4). N. K. Jemisin, acclaimed author of *The Fifth Season*, described the novel as “flavoured with truly unique mythology and a dash of the eldritch,” highlighting its appeal for fantasy readers who appreciate narrative complexity and “snarky, sexy-smart characters.” Jemisin adds that the inclusion of unexpected genre elements, such as “remote-controlled alligators” adds to the book’s playfully subversive tone, making it not just innovative but genuinely fun (4).

The novel has also been recognized for its hybrid genre construction. *Big Issue* observed that Cogman’s work is “written in a similar vein to Deborah Harkness’s *All Souls Trilogy*,” noting that it bridges “contemporary” sensibilities with “fairy tale” elements (4). Similarly, *SciFiNow* praised it as “a fun and original page-turner,” with the suggestion that the book sets up a “gold mine of lore for the writer to plunder in future sequels.” This points to the novel’s narrative depth and its rich, expandable universe (5).

The humorous and metafictional aspects of the novel have also garnered positive attention. *Fantasy Faction* proclaimed, “Fantasy doesn’t get much better,” recommending it for those seeking “a swift, clever, and witty read.” *The Book Plank* compared it favourably to Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday Next* series (4), while *Fantasy Book Review* went as far as to say that *The Invisible Library* was “everything I could ever want out of a book,” calling it a “stunning work of art” (5). Meanwhile, *Bastian’s Book Reviews* connected it to both *Doctor*

Who and *Harry Potter*, stating that “these comparisons [are] well-earned,” (5). Thus, this reflects its literary hybridity and broad appeal across age and genre demographics.

This reception positions *The Invisible Library* within a literary space that is ripe for critical exploration, particularly in feminist neo-Victorianism and steampunk aesthetics. Thus, this research paper seeks to offer an academic lens to Cogman’s *The Invisible Library*. An analysis of the existing literature suggests that academics have not studied the novel. Therefore, the following study is a modest attempt to bring this novel into existing academic discourse. It will contribute to the existing literature in the field of neo-Victorian studies and science fiction in general and in the examination of the novel in particular. The study will help understanding the enduring impact of Victorian cultural and literary tropes, particularly through the lens of feminist utopianism and feminist neo-Victorianism on contemporary speculative fiction. By examining how Cogman’s *The Invisible Library* blends historical aesthetics, gender commentary, and speculative storytelling, the research underscores how reimagined pasts can offer critical insight into present-day social structures and ideological shifts.

This research seeks to examine several key aspects of *The Invisible Library*. It explores how the novel constructs a feminist utopian space through the Library and its portrayal of empowered female characters. Additionally, it investigates how steampunk aesthetics are used to reimagine Victorian-era gender roles and how the traditional “Angel in the House” ideal is subverted through Irene’s character. The study also considers the role of narrative agency in Irene’s transformation from a passive literary observer to an active agent within the plot. Finally, it analyzes the shifting power dynamics in Irene’s relationships with male characters, revealing deeper insights into gendered authority within a neo-Victorian framework.

This study analyses the novel using a feminist utopian theory and feminist neo-Victorian perspective drawing on feminist Victorian criticism, focusing on the use of steampunk and retrofuturistic elements to challenge traditional gender roles and power structures. The study is divided into a general introduction, two chapters, and a general conclusion. The first chapter is devoted to the authorial background and the literary-theoretical context of the study. The second chapter provides an in-depth textual analysis of the novel's feminist utopian settings, feminist themes, and characters' development, with a focus on the subversion of Victorian ideals of womanhood. The conclusion provides a summary of the main arguments while also highlighting both their impact in the field of research and their limitations.

Chapter One: Authorial Background and the Literary-Theoretical Context of the study

Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview, beginning by establishing a solid groundwork on which retrofuturism is explored in the realm of literature, underpinning its significance and defining key terminology. It also explores how retrofuturism intersects with science fiction. Additionally, it discusses how Steampunk embodies retrofuturism through its blend of Victorian aesthetics and futuristic imagination, underlining its unique characteristics and historical roots. Following that, the theoretical section explores feminist utopian theory and feminist neo-Victorianism that are used to interpret and analyse *The Invisible Library*. The chapter also takes a closer look into Cogman's life and literary influences concluding with a summary of *The Invisible Library*.

1. The Historical, Literary and Theoretical Background of the Study

1.1. Retrofuturism: Historical and Literary Context

In their chapter entitled "Steampunk and Retrofuturism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014), Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay describe retrofuturism as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon in twentieth-century culture, marked by a fusion of futuristic aesthetics with nostalgia, irony, and temporal dislocation (434). They add that retrofuturism is the act of remembering past visions of the future. While futurism is often associated with scientific efforts to predict what is to come, retrofuturism reflects on how those predictions were imagined. The term is inherently ambiguous, positioned between memory and imagination, and centered on the recollection of past anticipations of the future (434). In his article, Latham Rob, "Our Jaded Tomorrows" states that the term retrofuturism was coined in 1988 and suggests that most recent speculation has attributed it to the writer, editor, and musician Lloyd Dunn (340). Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay explain that the

term retrofuturism speaks to our complex relationship with progress, highlighting a present-day dissatisfaction and a longing for past imaginings of the future (435).

They expand that retrofuturism and steampunk can be understood as cultural responses rooted in nineteenth-century ideas of progress and technological optimism. The concept of imagining the future that I. F. Clarke called in his book *The Pattern of Expectation* “the tale of the future” (qtd. in Guffey and Lemay 435), depends on how we understand the past and present, both of which took their modern forms in the nineteenth century. This period saw a shift from religious utopias to secular ideals for social reform, as proposed by thinkers like Marx and Morris. The Industrial Revolution further solidified a belief in progress through science and technology (435).

Early dime novels⁴ and scientific romances⁵, such as Edward Ellis’s *The Huge Hunter* (1868) and the *Frank Reade* stories (1876-1894), reflected this optimism, portraying young inventors who used machinery to transform society. Writers like Jules Verne and H. G. Wells expanded this vision, depicting advanced technologies as tools for individual and societal betterment. Their works helped establish futurism as a speculative science rather than mere fantasy. Steampunk, emerging from this tradition, draws from the visual and thematic legacy

⁴ *Dime novels* were cheaply produced and inexpensive fictional books, typically published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, often featuring sensational and adventurous stories.

⁴ “Dime Novel.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dime-novel>.

⁵ *Scientific romances* refer to a form of early science fiction, primarily associated with British writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as H.G. Wells. These narratives typically explored speculative scientific concepts and futuristic ideas before the term “science fiction” became common.²

⁵ “Scientific Romance.” *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls, and Graham Sleight, 12 Aug. 2018, https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/scientific_romance.

of these texts, particularly the steam-powered, industrial imagery, to revisit and critically engage with the utopian dreams of that era (435).

While science fiction typically transports readers away from the present, retrofuturism plays with concepts of time, merging the past and future. This approach can create a disorienting effect, prompting contemporary audiences to rethink earlier visions of the future. In *The Gernsback Continuum* (1981) authored by William Gibson, for example, an art historian urges the narrator to photograph decaying futurist architecture in California, describing it as ‘a kind of alternate America: a 1980 that never happened. An architecture of broken dreams’ (Gibson 28). This implies that an alternate version of 1980 could coexist with the narrator's reality, leading him to envision a world filled with airships and skyscrapers ‘phantoms’ of a parallel present inspired by 1930s Pulp Fiction (437).

Elizabeth Guffey, in *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (2006), states that “the resurgence of interest in the art and design of the late nineteenth century suggests the beginning of a unique Post-War tendency: a popular thirst for the recovery of earlier, and yet still modern, periods” (8). The final chapter, “The Lure of Yesterday’s Tomorrows,” (152-59) It deals head-on with the concept of retrofuturism. It looks to the divergence between past futures and current meanings, noting that retrofuturism appeared when Post-War visions of boundless progress encountered limitations and environmental costs, most strikingly in the mid-to-late 1970s. Declining enthusiasm for the Space Age and disillusion with technological ambition fueled this. Nostalgia crept in, with films like *Star Wars* (1977) calling to mind 1930s space operas and bands like Devo and the B-52s mocking Cold War culture.

1.2. Steampunk: Characteristics and Historical Roots:

Steampunk has emerged in the cultural landscape of the 1980s, where it began to reinterpret nineteenth-century technology and aesthetics through the lens of contemporary

concerns. Guffey and Lemay in their chapter entitled, “Retrofuturism and Steampunk” in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014) state that rather than following a linear historical trajectory, steampunk often bypasses the second Industrial Revolution and much of the twentieth century, instead merging early Victorian morality and visual style with modern-day science and innovation. Its literary origins are frequently linked to parodic responses to late nineteenth-century scientific romances, particularly those of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. These texts utilize steam-era technologies to explore and often critique systems of power, reimagining the digital revolution through analog, mechanical pasts, and establishing steampunk as both a nostalgic and subversive branch of retrofuturism (440).

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Anthology Steampunk* (2008) offers a foundational framework for examining retrofuturist themes in science fiction. In his introduction, “The 19th-century Roots of Steampunk”, Jess Nevins traces the genre’s roots to 19th century dime novels, stressing their influence on steampunk’s evolution (3). He explained that proto-steampunk literature, exemplified by works like Clark’s *Queen Victoria’s Bomb* and Moorcock’s *The Warlord of the Air*, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. However, steampunk as a full-fledged genre began in the late 1970s and early 1980s when science fiction started to loop back on itself. The genre changed its direction drastically during this time, with the genre increasingly revisiting and integrating themes, motifs, and tropes of the past (Nevins 7).

Nevins argues that the appeal of the Victorian era’s aesthetics, including its visual style, is readily apparent, but the 19th century has an additional attraction for contemporary authors. Unlike other historical periods, the 19th century, particularly the Victorian era (1837-1901), effectively serves as an excellent representation of the modern world. The social, economic, and political frameworks of the Victorian period are fundamentally like those of the present, and how society responds to various events and influences bear a resemblance to

present-day matters such as serial killers and overseas wars (8). He adds that narratives about women's treatment during the Victorian era can be readily adapted to comment on the treatment of women today, and without the authorial contortions of allegory fiction found in earlier historical times. Historical fiction situated in the 19th century frequently utilises the period's capacity to reflect contemporary issues in “Victorian garb” (8).

Jess Nevins provides a watertight argument regarding the continued presence of Victorian style in modern storytelling, as it testifies to a desire to address a period that, though historically distinct, shares many issues and dynamics with the present. Such a style allows for a rich discussion of issues that cut across eras, showing that the Victorian era is a rich reservoir of inspiration and criticism for modern writing. In *The Invisible Library*, Cogman's use of a Victorian-inspired alternate London taps into what Nevins identifies as the dual appeal of the 19th century; its distinctive aesthetic and its relevance to contemporary gender commentary. While the novel's steampunk-infused setting embraces the elegance and intrigue of Victorian visual culture like airships, it simultaneously reimagines this world to foreground empowered female characters.



Fig. 1 Mathhias Hauser. *Steampunk Tea Party 01* (2024). Pixels.

First-generation steampunk writers, including James Blaylock, K.W. Jeter, and Tim Powers, emphasised the complexity and limitation of man's control of society and technology. Steampunk is more sedentary, with its stories usually taking place within the walls of London. Steampunk as a genre is more representative of a static, introspective style, with the machinery of life too complex to be controlled by human beings. Finally, steampunk presents a more complicated worldview that considers the societal implications and complexities of technological advancement (Nevins 8-9). He also argues that steampunk critiques the very systems it depicts (10). The social commentary and power dynamics of the genre offers a biting critique of contemporary issues, making it a relevant and provocative genre.

In the preface titled "Steampunk: 'It's a Clockwork Universe, Victoria,'" Ann and Jeff VanderMeer posit that while their anthology captures three decades' worth of steampunk

variations, it is but the beginning in exploring the richness of this genre. They foresee that the concept of steampunk has so permeated popular culture that a second volume devoted to stories from the previous decade would be a complete and diverse selection. This forward-looking promise is a guarantee that steampunk is ongoing and that there is a necessity for introducing new voices in the genre. Indeed, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer provide a compendium in *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded* (2010), their second contribution in the genre. The book is more comprehensive in examining the themes and evolution of steampunk, building upon the foundation laid in the first book.

In their introduction "What Is Steampunk?" in *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded* (2010), Ann and Jeff VanderMeer highlight how steampunk is now a dominant force in contemporary literature, demonstrating its spread and evolution. They state that modern steampunk fiction is inspired by 19th-century authors like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, who introduced readers to steam-powered inventions, airships, and even mad inventors, often portraying a sceptical view of unchecked progress (9).



Fig. 2 Mathhias Hauser. *Steampunk Zeppelin 03* (2022). Pixels.

Nonetheless, modern steampunk would spring up in the 1970s with Michael Moorcock's *Nomads of the Air* series (1971). Moorcock's novels, which featured epic aerial battles between airship fleets and convoluted political intrigue, served as a critique of imperialism, challenging the idea of a benign empire. Moorcock is consistent with Verne in his cautious approach to technology, emphasising the nuances and more malevolent implications of advancement and advocating for oppressed people (Ann and Jeff VanderMeer 10-9).

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer clarified that the term "steampunk"; however, did not exist until 1987, when K. W. Jeter introduced it in *Locus Magazine* (#315, April 1987) to describe his novel *Infernal Devices* (1987) and his earlier novel *Morlock Nights* (1979). Jeter proposed the term in a letter stating, "Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing if we can come up with a fitting collective term, like 'steampunks', perhaps." (qtd. in Ann and Jeff VanderMeer 10). Jeter, along with other authors like Tim Powers, author of *The Anubis Gates* (1983), and James Blaylock, who wrote *Lord Kelvin's Machine* novella (1992) were the instrumental driving forces of steampunk literary movement (10).

Three years after the publication of Jeter's letter, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling released *The Difference Engine* (1990), widely regarded as the first foundational steampunk novel. This novel was similar in style to Moorcock's works in being more explicit in social and political commentary, in contrast with works by Powers, Blaylock, and Jeter. Set in the year 1855, *The Difference Engine* is an alternate history in which Charles Babbage did construct a mechanical computer, heralding the Information Age alongside the Industrial Revolution. The novel melds Lord Byron, dirigibles, and commentary about the less appealing elements of the Victorian period, with steampunk marvels such as a large and clunky mechanical AI in a fake Egyptian pyramid. Like Moorcock, Sterling and Gibson make

commentary about the place of technology in the expansion of empires (Ann and Jeff VanderMeer 10).

The second wave of steampunk includes a new generation of women writers like Cherie Priest, Gail Carriger, Karin Lowachee, and Ekaterina Sedia who began moving away from purely English or Victorian settings and cultures. The new generation of steampunk was growing in scope and in cultural references, diverging from the classic Victorian and Anglocentric stories that dominated earlier works (11). Second-generation being female is particularly noteworthy since it is reflective of a broader trend towards inclusion and diversity in fiction. Thus, these authors did not only expand the genre but also introduced new perspectives that redefined and challenged the classic narratives and settings.



Fig. 3 Mathhias Hauser. *SteampunkWoman Portrait 09* (2023). Pixels.

Ann VanderMeer, in her thoughtful introduction in the third volume of the series, *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution* (2012), notes that her exploration of the steampunk genre along with Jeff VanderMeer in their initial book, *Steampunk* (2008) was through literature. She states, “At that time we had no idea that an entire subculture had grown up

around this form of retro-futurism (9). This nod points to their journey of exploration in terms of the wider cultural context of steampunk, which they first accessed through works of fiction. She added that they had only touched upon film, comics, and other artistic forms. And it was not until they discovered *Steampunk Magazine* that they gained a new perspective on this rapidly expanding subculture (9).

Ann VanderMeer remarks that Steampunk has garnered much attention, even from unlikely sources like the Weather Channel, as they have contacted her for an interview by the Weather Channel and cited such themes as climate change, alternative energy, and do-it-yourself culture. She notices that since the publication of the first two volumes, the genre has spread in what it tells, moving from strictly science fiction set in the Victorian era to embracing a wider range of stories and cultural outlooks. This spread inspired the idea for a third volume, which attempts to look at Steampunk's ability to spur serious debate about issues in society through the eyes of the past. VanderMeer posits that by critically examining the past, Steampunk can be a force in political discourse and social reform today. In her words she notes, "Steampunk is an opportunity to force us to address those issues of the past, examine what went wrong, what we can do to put it right and make a better world" (10).

VanderMeer argued in the panel that Steampunk could be political, even with the possibility of a Steampunk candidate in the future. While her affirmative response elicited laughter, she maintains that the ideas that sprout from a Steampunk perspective are indeed relevant to political movements. She questions how we can make good change happen without knowing our history appropriately, and she calls for a process that involves facing the past and not running from it. With the study and construction of our narratives in the right way, she believes, we can better address issues that confront civilisation today, such as global warming and human rights (10-11). VanderMeer's argument compellingly calls attention to the importance of historical awareness in shaping contemporary political movements. In

insisting on engaging with the past rather than sidestepping it, she advocates for a thoughtful approach towards change. This perspective reinforces steampunk's legitimacy as a lens for reinterpreting history, which *The Invisible Library* exemplifies by using its alternate Victorian setting not merely as backdrop, but as a space to critically engage with issues of power, knowledge, and gender. Through this steampunk world, Cogman offers a reimagined past that invites reflection on present-day concerns, encouraging thoughtful and imaginative responses to enduring social questions.

ValderMeer is a proponent of innovative approaches that challenge conventional thinking and inspire change, utilising Steampunk as a strong medium. In this respect, she stresses the urgent need of examining our connection with technology, with each other, and with the environment, thereby creating an engaging imagination. She also contends that Steampunk fiction should not be restricted by conventional parameters with steam or in Victorian settings but should evolve as a genre that crosses boundaries and leads to change (11).

Editor Ann VanderMeer presents an array of stories that challenge contemporary issues and provoke reflection by envisioning alternative pasts or imaginative futures. She raises questions such as what might have occurred if Friedrich Engels had successfully liberated a factory and its workers, or how the narrative shifts when a woman pushes back against the societal roles imposed upon her, or can individuals from different classes and cultures respect each other's strengths (11).

Importantly, the anthology does not stop at systemic critique, it interrogates personal relationships, including those across racial and gender lines, such as in Chikiamco's short story *On Wooden Wings* (2011) where two youths from disparate cultures forge understanding amidst prejudice. The concept of family, too, is redefined. Malissa Kent's *The Heart Is the*

Matter (2012) portrays sisterly sacrifice, while Catherynne M. Valente's *Mother Is a Machine* (2005) reimagines motherhood. In *Beatrice*, Tidbeck examines how love itself can be undermined by assumptions (VanderMeer 12). *The Invisible Library*, like these stories, engages with similar themes, questioning power structures, rewriting gender expectations, and using fantastical technology not merely for spectacle, but for critical reflection.



Fig. 4 Mathhias Hauser. *Steampunk Women Portrait 08* (2023). Pixels.

1.3. Theoretical Background of the Study:

1.3.1 Feminist Utopian Theory:

In our analysis we intend to use feminist utopian theory, a critical framework that challenges traditional narratives of gender, power, and societal structure. Lucy Sargisson's *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996) is essential for our analysis; her book examines and engages with contemporary feminist utopian thought, organised into three interconnected sections. The first section focuses on defining utopianism broadly. The second section investigates innovative methods for contextualising and comprehending utopianism, and the third section is thematically orientated, testing and expanding the thesis introduced in the second section through the lens of feminist utopian fiction and theory.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to define *Utopianism*. According to Lucy Sargisson, “utopianism” serves as an umbrella term encompassing a range of concepts; she categorises it to include utopian thought, theory, and utopias. This umbrella also covers utopias, dystopias, and utopian satire. She defines utopian thought as the experience and expression of utopian desires or the act of engaging in utopian dreaming. The terms “utopian theory” and “utopias”, though used in various ways, generally refer to specific genres of political thought and literature that embody distinct forms of utopian thought, unless indicated otherwise (2). Ruth Lavitas, in her seminal work *The Concept of Utopia* (1990), articulates, “Utopia is about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that” (1).

In Chapter Two, “Function-Based Approaches to Utopianism”, Sargisson introduces her rejection of traditional utopian models, referring to this as “the myth of utopia” (39). In her words, “Utopian thought is far more interesting and complex than is allowed by the

standard view of utopia as a genre that represents a perfect society and offers a blueprint for change” (39).

Sargisson explains that utopia is a useful and suitable place for criticism. By creating distance from the present, utopias help feminist thinkers imagine different ways of living beyond current patriarchal systems. She highlights how the word “utopia” itself carries a double meaning; both “nowhere” (outopia) and “a good place” (eutopia), suggesting that utopian thinking is fundamentally about envisioning a space that has never existed but holds transformative promise. The feminist utopian writer, then, writes from or towards a “good place that is no place,” using this imaginative distance to break away from patriarchal norms. In doing so, she is able to develop new languages, relationships, and ways of being that would be impossible within the confines of current structures. However, Sargisson also emphasises that utopian thought remains grounded in its connection to reality; it must maintain some link to the world it seeks to critique and reimagine (41).

Sargisson notes that Angela Carter’s reworking of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) is widely seen as a feminist project. Carter uses familiar tales to subvert patriarchal norms and explore female agency, sexuality, and power. Her utopian satires, Sargisson explains, are flooded with fairy tales’ echoes marked by fantastic settings, characters who lack psychological depth, and a pervasive sense of magic (44).

Sargisson points out that transgression of gender roles and stereotypes is an essential theme in feminist utopian literature and theory (204). She provides the example of *A Door into Ocean* (1986) by Joan Slonczewski to illustrate how feminist utopias imagine radically different social orders. The novel contrasts the patriarchal, hierarchical societies of planets like Valedon with the all-female, oceanic world of Shora. Shoran society is grounded in ecological harmony, non-possession, and shared power, rejecting the acquisitive logic of the

Protectorates. Even their language reflects these values, and all words contain a sense of their inverse meaning. The word to speak, for instance, means also to listen. Through the outsider perspective of Bernice, a sympathetic spy from the patriarchal world, the novel critiques dominant systems of control and presents a radically different model of social order, one based not on power over others but on empowerment and relational ethics (205-206).

Carol Pearson, notes in her article “Women’s Fantasies and Feminist Utopias” (1977) that feminist utopian fiction writers often begin their narratives by laying bare the constraints that patriarchal society imposes on women before introducing the reader to an alternative society where women could feel at home (50).

Feminist utopian narratives have gained significant traction as women seek to envision societies that reflect their desires for equality and freedom. These narratives serve as a powerful tool for exploring alternative social structures that prioritise justice and inclusivity. Krishan Kumar, in his book *Utopianism* (1990), states that women’s gravitation towards utopias was an expected step; they wouldn’t be free and equal anywhere else because they have never been granted material or symbolic equality with men in any known civilisation throughout history (102).

Central to this framework is the “transgression of reality and truth” (210), and “transgression of stereotypes and codes of social normality” (202) expanded in Sargisson’s chapter entitled “Feminist Utopian Transgression of Codes and Genre.” Sargisson’s emphasis on challenging both the concept of order and the linearity of time allows for an exploration of how feminist Neo-Victorian texts disrupt Victorian ideals by reimagining historical narratives. According to her, a key concern in feminist utopian literature is the transgression of gender roles and social norms, particularly the ideologically constructed binaries of male

and female behavior. She highlights how many feminist utopias challenge essentialist ideas by creating alternative societies where gender does not dictate labor, power, or identity (204).

Sargisson used as a basis Carol Pearson's essay "Of Time and Space: Theories of Social Change in Contemporary Feminist Science Fiction" (1984), where she explores how feminist utopian literature challenges conventional understandings of time, truth, and reality. For Pearson, feminist science fiction offers a political vision grounded in non-linear theories of time, where the past, present, and future are not fixed but coexist and are equally real (Pearson 260-61). This reframing allows for a kind of narrative and philosophical transgression, where absolute truth is destabilized, and reality is reimagined as fluid and conditional. Such works propose that transformative change occurs in the present through individual agency, even as they reject the illusion of full control over outcomes. Sargisson suggests that this move away from linear causality and binary thinking reflects a "feminine economy", a shift toward multiplicity, ambiguity, and relational ways of knowing. Rather than striving for mastery or certainty, these utopias embrace the complexity of existence and the conditionality of different possible futures (Sargisson 212-13).

Sargisson concludes her book by stating that the new approach to utopianism values ongoing change and fluidity over static ideals of perfection. Rather than envisioning a flawless society that ends conflict and political engagement, she argues for a dynamic, evolving model, one aligned with feminist utopianism. This open-ended vision challenges the traditional, rigid blueprint model of utopia, which she links to a masculine economy rooted in control and finality. Instead, contemporary feminist utopias embrace complexity, uncertainty, and continual transformation (230).

1.3.2. Neo-Victorianism and Feminism

We are going to use the Neo-Victorianism critical framework, as it provides a unique terrain for feminist critique by reimagining and reinterpreting 19th-century gender ideologies through a contemporary lens. Feminist readings of Neo-Victorian texts often center on how such novels reclaim, rewrite, or subvert the lives and voices of women who were historically marginalized and silenced in Victorian literature and society. Thus, we are going to use famous Victorian feminist critics like Virginia Woolf, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to examine how *The Invisible Library* reimagines and reconfigures Victorian values, aesthetics, and social structures from a contemporary perspective. This framework is especially useful in analysing the novel's use of steampunk elements, which are a cornerstone in empowering Cogman's female characters. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn are also foundational voices in shaping the concept and are especially influential in their book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century* (2010).

Neo-Victorianism, as outlined by Heilmann and Llewellyn, is more than simply fiction set in the nineteenth century. It is a genre and critical practice that is self-consciously engaged in the acts of reinterpretation, rediscovery, and revision of the Victorian past. This means that neo-Victorian texts do not merely imitate Victorian settings or characters but actively interrogate and rework the ideologies, narratives, and social structures of the period (4).

Aleksandra Trynieckathe in her article "The Revisionary Influence: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Past Redeemed" (2015), argues that the popular themes present in Victorian novels such as social hierarchy, family values, industrialism, crises, disbelief, morality, marriage, money, spiritualism, visuality, disguises, double standards, and performance are still relevant and present; therefore, deserve rethinking in a contemporary context (255).

Adrienne Rich, in her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972), explored the transformative power of writing, particularly for women. She argues that the act of writing is not just a creative endeavour but a means of re-visioning one’s identity and experiences. Rich emphasises the importance of reclaiming women’s voices in literature and critiques how traditional narratives have often marginalised female perspectives. By advocating for a renewed approach to writing, she encourages women to reflect on their realities and assert their agency through their stories. Rich explains, “Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18). Adrienne Rich’s concept of re-vision powerfully captures the feminist impulse behind reimagining established narratives.

At the heart of feminist Neo-Victorianism lies the desire to expose the limitations of the Victorian ideal of womanhood, especially the binary construction of women as either “angels” or “monsters,” a concept famously articulated by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar 35). This study will also draw on Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to support its feminist analysis. Woolf’s emphasis on the need for women to have intellectual and physical independence in order to create (90), is particularly relevant in examining Irene’s access to knowledge, space, and agency within *The Invisible Library*. Her ideas help frame the novel as a reimagining of literary and gendered authority

This feminist impulse intersects with the broader Neo-Victorian agenda, which not only revisits but also interrogates the past through a distinctly self-reflexive and metafictional lens. As Heilmann and Llewellyn note that what distinguishes Neo-Victorianism from other historically inspired genres is its self-analytic drive, which encourages critical engagement with Victorian ideologies rather than passive nostalgia. The term “Neo-Victorian” itself, they

explain, has gained popularity in both creative and critical contexts because it allows for this dynamic negotiation between past and present, unlike earlier terms such as “post-Victorian”⁶ or “faux-Victorian”⁷ that lacked the same conceptual depth (5).

Feminist Neo-Victorian works thus emerge not only as imaginative reconstructions but also as acts of resistance against the gendered discourses of the nineteenth century. In this research, particular attention will be paid to the subversion of “the Angel in the House” role, highlighting how Neo-Victorian narratives challenge and rewrite this dominant Victorian ideal through empowered, transgressive female characters.

In this way, Neo-Victorian fiction is deeply intertwined with second- and third-wave feminist concerns. It engages with the recovery of women’s histories, reclaims the female body as a site of knowledge and power, and reimagines women’s roles outside of patriarchal constraints. For example, women characters in Neo-Victorian texts often resist surveillance and control, rejecting the social roles Victorian society prescribed for them. This is in line with feminist theory’s ongoing critique of how power operates through gendered norms and institutions.

⁶ *Post-Victorian* means “occurring or existing after the Victorian era,” and is often used to describe cultural or historical shifts that took place following Queen Victoria’s reign.

⁶ “Post-Victorian.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-Victorian>. Accessed 26 June 2025.

⁷ *Faux-Victorian* describes modern works such as novels, designs, or architecture that imitate the style and sensibility of the Victorian era without being self-reflexive or framed by a contemporary perspective.⁴

⁷ Kate Mitchell, “‘Making it seem like it’s authentic’: the Faux-Victorian Novel as Cultural Memory in *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*,” in *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*. Palgrave, 2010. 118. Print.

Feminist Utopian theory and Neo-Victorianism pair well for *The Invisible Library*. In our analysis we seek to take a close look into how the novel, revisits Victorian aesthetics, and reconsider the importance of Steampunk world not just for nostalgia, but as a space to imagine alternate futures for women, especially through characters like Irene who subvert “The Angel in the House” role, as we shall see in the next chapter.

2. Genevieve Cogman’s Life, Literary Influences, and a Summary of *The Invisible Library*

2.1. Cogman’s Life and Literary Influences:

Genevieve Cogman is a British author and game designer, best known for her contributions to fantasy literature. Cogman developed an early passion for the works of Sherlock Holmes and J.R.R. Tolkien that influenced her professional life. She has an MSc in Statistics with Medical Applications and utilised her qualification in a series of careers, such as clinical coder, data analyst, and works as a classification specialist for the National Health Service (NHS). Her hobbies include knitting, patchwork, beading, and gaming.

Prior to the publication of her first novel, *The Invisible Library*, she was a freelance writer of role-playing games. Her writing career began with her first novel, *The Invisible Library*, published in January 2015 (*The Invisible Library* 278). A successful series was born, in which Cogman thrills readers with a real mixture of fantasy elements featuring steampunk, supernatural creatures, and magic. Continued by *The Masked City* (2015), *The Burning Page* (2016), *The Lost Plot* (2017), *The Mortal Word* (2018), *The Secret Chapter* (2019), *The Dark Archive* (2020) and its final title, *The Untold Story* (2021).

Cogman’s *The Invisible Library* is a harmonious fusion of literary homage, speculative imagination, and self-aware character construction. Her comments in the “Virtual Author Talk” hosted by *Cobourg Public Library* channel reveal the thoughtful process behind

her worldbuilding and character development, particularly through a candid reflection on her inspirations, preferences, and frustrations with genre conventions.

One of the most direct personal influences emerges in the creation of Irene, the novel's protagonist. When asked if Irene mirrors her personality, Cogman responds with humor and self-awareness: "Maybe in my daydreams... but occasionally I've been reasonably quick thinking that I'm afraid I couldn't claim most of the rest of it... I would like to be a cool adventurer like that so I mean and certainly I've got loads of books" (*Virtual Author Talk* 00:04:41–00:05:03). This candid admission suggests that Irene represents not just a narrative agent, but an aspirational figure, a constructed ideal of feminine intelligence, poise, and resilience.

The interviewer lists Irene's impressive résumé; linguist, martial artist, thief, diplomat, and strategist, and Cogman agrees with its aspirational nature while distinguishing Irene from the traditionally "hard-boiled" male hero archetype. Instead of relying on rudeness and rebellion as symbols of competence, Cogman crafts Irene as someone who "was quite capable of making herself be polite if it is appropriate for the situation... biting your tongue is sometimes useful in the real world and in fiction as well" (00:07:24–00:07:53). This reflects Cogman's feminist sensibility, one that resists masculine norms of assertiveness in favour of emotional intelligence and adaptability.

Cogman's literary influences are not limited to character design; they are paramount to her world's magical systems and broader narrative architecture. One of the most striking examples is the use of "The Language," a magical means by which Librarians manipulate reality. The concept, as Cogman admits, owes a "lot to other authors before me," especially Ursula K. Le Guin. "When she wrote the *Wizard of Earthsea* and the *Earthsea* books... the wizards have to learn the true names of everything in order to command them," she explains,

adding, “I’m hardly doing anything credibly new. I’m just putting my own new touch on it” (00:08:56–00:09:31). This modest claim belies the elegance of Cogman’s system, which pays homage to traditional fantasy lore while adapting it to a multiversal, neo-Victorian espionage setting. Her acknowledgment of the literary lineage positions *The Invisible Library* within a dialogic tradition of fantasy writing, where innovation arises from respectful reworking rather than wholesale invention.

Cogman’s taste in literature also plays a role in shaping the tone and intertextuality of her work. When asked which fictional characters she would like to meet, she references a wide array of genre influences: the Phoenix Guards (a homage to *The Three Musketeers*), Sherlock Holmes, Terry Pratchett’s Vimes and Granny Weatherwax, as well as characters from Barbara Hambly’s vampire and historical mystery series (00:28:16–00:29:34). This eclectic reading taste underscores her narrative style, which blends detective fiction, fantasy, and historical pastiche. Peregrine Vale, for instance, is openly described by the interviewer as “the perfect Sherlock Holmes type” (00:05:16–00:05:21), adhering to Cogman’s work with the rich tradition of Victorian detective fiction. However, as with Irene, Cogman’s treatment of Vale is affectionate but critical, he is not a flawless intellectual machine but a dynamic partner and foil in Irene’s journey.

In sum, Cogman’s *The Invisible Library* is both a product of and a response to her literary influences. Through Irene, she constructs a protagonist who embodies the best qualities of traditional heroes while resisting their patriarchal flaws. Through The Language, she adapts ancient magical motifs into a new epistemological framework. In addition, her allusions to Holmes, Pratchett, Le Guin, and others, she creates a layered reading experience that celebrates the very act of reading itself. As Cogman herself puts it, “I’ve got loads of books”, and it is precisely from this literary abundance that *The Invisible Library* draws its strength.

2.2. Summary of *The Invisible Library*

The Invisible Library follows Irene, a professional spy and librarian who works for a mysterious, interdimensional organization known as the Library. The Library exists outside of time and space and sends its librarians to various alternate worlds to retrieve rare and unique books, helping maintain the balance between chaos and order.

The novel opens with the protagonist, Irene, going undercover as a cleaning maid at Prince Mordred's Private Academy for Boys to obtain *Midnight Requiems*, a rare book. Irene steals the book successfully, but raises an alarm, and a hasty getaway ensues during which she masterfully manipulates reality with "The Language", which allows her to lock and unlock doors and control magical beings like the gargoyles and the hellhounds chasing her.

Back in the library, Irene rushes to submit her report and reflects on her busy life and her distant relationship with her librarian parents, which may even be superficial. Shortly after that, her supervisor, Coppelia, assigns her to mentor a recruit, Kai. Their mission is to obtain the original *Grimms' Fairy Tales* book from a chaotic alternate London referred to as B-395. On their way to the Alternate, they cross paths with fellow librarian Bradamant, who disrupts their mission with her underhanded demands. Irene stands firm as tension develops and refuses to give up the mission. Following that, they meet Dominic Aubrey, a librarian in charge of classical manuscripts, who informs them of the murder of Lord Wyndham, a vampire who is connected to cat burglar Belphegor, who is believed to have stolen the book from him.

In Lord Wyndham's house, while investigating, Irene meets Silver, the Liechtenstein ambassador, who is a Fae, and after a hard-won agreement, he invites her to a grand ball. While dining in a restaurant, Irene and Kai, meet Peregrine Vale, the fifteenth Earl of Leeds, also a famous inspector. Their conversation proves so fruitful that Vale suggests a second

meeting to further discuss and share information. Chaos erupts when a mechanical centipede attacks; revealing Irene's quick thinking as she defends herself and solidifies their alliance.

As they proceed with their mission, Irene and Kai find that their cover is blown, and as a result, must divide to outsmart people chasing them. Irene gets caught under the menacing, shadowy presence of a legendary figure, Alberich, as she moves through crowded streets, proving her aptness under stress. In a hotel, they contemplate Alberich's threat and decide to find their ally, Dominic Aubrey. Nevertheless, they find a disturbing truth: Dominic's skin with the mark of the library's seal, which indicates dire consequences connected to Alberich. While Irene tries to unlock the library's door, a malicious trap binds her hand painfully. Kai saves her and seeks shelter in Vale's house, who did not hesitate to offer help, a gesture that solidified their connection.

Irene proposes that they infiltrate a high-stakes embassy ball to seek evidence about thefts connected to the Fae. The event spirals into chaos when alligators invade, forcing Irene to take charge and attempt to regain control using the language. At the ball, tensions rise when they confront Bradamant, who intervenes in their mission trying to get the book first. After securing their escape, they regroup, and Vale learns more about the library's purpose. Discussions about Alberich's intentions intensify their mission, leading them to the Natural History Museum, where they hope to uncover Wyndham's hidden book. A confrontation with Lord Silver escalates the urgency, highlighting the dangers from both Silver and the Iron Brotherhood. Silver and his pack of werewolves launch a savage attack and Irene is forced to work with Bradamant.

The group's investigation into the Iron Brotherhood intensifies as they prepare to retrieve the Grimm book. Tension mounts when they arrive at the museum and uncover Wyndham's crate. Just as they think they can find safety, Alberich attacks them and takes

Vale as a hostage. Irene attempts to work out an agreement for Vale's safety. Harnessing Kai's draconic power and Irene and Bradamant's skillful manipulation of the Language, they were able to vanquish Alberich.

After their return to the Library, Irene confronts her past with Bradamant, advocating for collaboration. As she recovers, her supervisor, Coppelia, offers her a new role as Librarian-in-Residence, preparing the scene for further adventures. Irene resolves to embrace her responsibilities and confront the challenges ahead, ready to plunge into a world filled with mysteries and dangers.

Conclusion

The first chapter of this research offers the necessary socio-historical, literary, and theoretical foundation for analyzing Cogman's novel in its wider intellectual framework. It begins with the historical and literary contexts of retrofuturism and steampunk. The chapter then moves on to explore the theoretical framework, focusing on the development and importance of feminist utopian theory, particularly through the work of Lucy Sargisson. Prominent Victorian feminist perspectives are also central to this research, notably Virginia Woolf, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar which remains a key reference in feminist literary studies. Additionally, the chapter incorporates major concepts from Neo-Victorianism, drawing on the scholarship of Heilmann and Llewellyn. The final section presents an overview of Genevieve Cogman's biography, a discussion of her literary influences, and the summary of *The Invisible Library*,

Chapter Two: Utopia, Gender, and Power in *The Invisible Library*

Introduction

Genevieve Cogman's *The Invisible Library* offers fertile ground for a combined Feminist Utopian and Neo-Victorian analysis from a feminist angle. Set in an alternate, steampunk-infused Victorian London, the novel reconstructs the past through a retrofuturistic lens that challenges and reimagines traditional gender roles. This re-envisioned London becomes a space of new possibilities, where women are not only present but central agents of knowledge, as they frequently outwit their male rivals in a realm where steam-powered contraption and faerie magic play vital roles. We aim to examine how the novel reimagines power, gender, and knowledge. Ultimately, our analysis seeks to uncover how Cogman's work engages in a revisionary project that fits with the goals of feminist utopianism, and how the neo-Victorian setting emerges as a critical arena in which the historical past is interrogated and reshaped. The following concepts are explored in our analysis: the myth of utopia, transgression of reality and truth, Transgression of Stereotypes and Codes of Social Normality, Subversion of the Angel in the House Role, and the significance of steampunk elements in women's empowerment and shift in power dynamics.

1. The Neo-Victorian Setting of the Novel

In feminist utopias, the setting plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting alternative social ideals. These imagined worlds are intentionally crafted to challenge patriarchal norms, grant spaces where gender equality and empowerment can flourish. Far from being passive backcloths, these settings actively absorb feminist values, making them essential to the narrative's critique of the present and its vision for an unbiased future.

1.1.The Library as a Feminist Utopia

In the opening of her book entitled *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), Lucy Sargisson writes, “Utopia: the good place which is no place” (1), a concept that resonates deeply with the very title and purpose of novel. The Library in *The Invisible Library* is not bound by geography or time, hidden and intangible, literally a “no place”, which symbolically reinforces its role as a feminist utopian space in Cogman’s words:

That was the whole point of the Library—as far as she’d been taught, anyway. It wasn’t about a higher mission to save worlds. It was about finding unique works of fiction and saving them in a place out of time and space. Perhaps some people might think that was a petty way to spend eternity, but Irene was happy with her choice. Anyone who really loved a good story would understand (Cogman 17).

The Library’s mission to collect and preserve unique works of fiction in this timeless realm makes it not a blueprint for a perfect society, but a conceptual site defined by its otherworldliness and its devotion to knowledge, creativity, and preservation beyond the bounds of ordinary existence. Within its walls, diverse realities converge, allowing for the exploration of infinite possibilities and the celebration of intellectual freedom. This commitment to knowledge empowers its inhabitants, encouraging them to challenge social norms and envision new futures.

1.1.1. Transgression of Reality and Truth (Time and Sequential Orders): Ongoing Transformation and the Fluidity of Truth

In her chapter entitled “Function-Based Approaches to Utopianism,” Sargisson draws on Margaret Whitford explanation that, “Feminist utopian visions... do not seek to offer blueprints of an ideal future... They are intended more to bring about shifts in consciousness (paradigm shifts)” (qtd. In Sargisson 52), and argues that feminist utopias are usually more

about inspiring change than laying out a detailed plan for a perfect future. Instead of giving step-by-step instructions, they aim to change how people think and see the world that Sargisson calls: “utopia process” (52). This model of utopia is not about projecting a final, perfected society, but rather about reimagining the present through alternative ways of being and relating. In this context, the Library is not a static sanctuary; it is the imagined shifting, multiversal network through which women like Irene can exercise agency, resist authority, and carve out space for new possibilities.

This process-oriented utopia is illustrated clearly in the closing of chapter 18 and the opening of chapter 19, when Irene, Vale, and Kai are fleeing aboard a noisy zeppelin in the Alternate London. Confronted by a suspicious attendant, Irene resorts to using the Language, a powerful tool that can reshape perception to get them past their obstacle. Though her decision is strategic, it is not without hesitation: “Irene considered the possible mental damage of what she was about to do. Librarians were generally supposed to avoid it, because of the risks of imposing on people’s minds, not to mention the universe occasionally backlashing in interesting ways” (211). This moment captures the Library’s flexible approach: ethical actions should be determined by the situation, not dictated from a position of superiority.

Irene’s explanation to Vale further reinforces the complex, utopian logic of the library at play. Sargisson argues, building on Rosi Braidotti’s essay “The Politics of Ontological Difference” (1989) that feminist utopian fiction doesn’t just tweak existing idea; it completely shifts how we view reality and time. Instead of showing the present as a natural outcome of the past (which would suggest the future will be similar), these stories break that chain. They suggest that the present is not fixed and can be changed (210-12).

This was underpinned when Irene stated, “I can tell someone that they’re perceiving something other than what they’re actually seeing... But that’s not the same as what I just did, and it won’t last like a glamour does, either” (215). Rather than exerting control or illusion for personal gain, Irene makes a tactical, temporary adjustment to reality in order to protect her companions from their enemy, Alberich. This fits Margaret Whitford’s idea that utopia is not about prescribing a perfect world but about creating shifts in awareness. Irene understands the psychological consequences of this intervention and chooses it carefully, in full awareness of its risks and limits. As she says, “At the moment, Mrs. Jenkins’s mind is telling her that, no, she did not see full authorization... But would you rather I’d just let Silver catch us?” (ibid).

This interplay of power, ethics, and improvisation embodies the kind of feminist utopia Sargisson describes, one that rejects rigid solutions in favor of continual transformation. The Library, and Irene’s role within it, thus exemplify a feminist utopian vision grounded not in prescribing a future, but in opening up new ways of being in the present. The Language itself becomes a metaphor for this process: it is not a universal command, but a careful negotiation between will, reality, and perception. In this way, *The Invisible Library* explores the radical potential of “the good place that is no place,” situating utopia not as an end-state but as a method of resistance, reinvention, and survival.

1.1.2. The Myth of Utopia: Acting for Change, Not Control

The complex nature of the Library’s power further reveals its limitations, while the Library possesses extraordinary abilities such as controlling human minds through the use of Language, its control is not absolute. The Library can shape minds and manipulate perception, but it cannot fully dominate reality itself. There is always resistance: from the chaos of alternate worlds, from the unpredictable nature of human will, and from the tension between order and disorder. Cogman explains, “The problem is that the universe resists, as

with objects asked to do unnatural things. Specifically, the person's mind resists, and continually resists... but generally the results aren't pretty" (215).

This resistance underscores the idea that utopian visions, no matter how carefully constructed, are never immune to the messiness and unpredictability of real life. The Library's struggle to maintain stability while moving through chaotic realities mirrors the limits of any ideal system, especially one that tries to impose structure on a diverse and dynamic world. In doing so, the novel reflects a more nuanced understanding of power: not as total control, but as a delicate negotiation between influence and resistance.

Through characters like Irene, who negotiates knowledge, language, and power in multiple realities, the novel presents a form of utopianism that is grounded in process, movement, and agency, rather than rigid ideology. As such, *The Invisible Library* becomes not a prescriptive vision of what should be, but a subversive and imaginative reworking of what could be a true "good place that is no place" (Sargisson 1).

Lucy Sargisson contends that according to feminist and postmodern contexts, that instead of being perfect, utopia is filled with unresolved tensions, and it actively acknowledges that it is not perfect. She cites Thomas More's *Utopia* as an example, noting that the idea of a fixed, flawless blueprint for a utopia excludes many contemporary feminist visions. This misconception is also mistakenly applied to various utopian models from the past. For instance, it would be inaccurate to claim that More's work presents a static or definitive vision of an ideal society. The subtitle of his text, "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia", indicates that the term "best" does not imply perfection or an ideal state. Rather, it suggests a nuanced understanding of governance that accepts complexity and change (24).

Sargisson's theorization that "Utopia is full not of perfection but rather of irreconcilable tensions, and is, I should like to suggest, self-consciously not perfect" (24) conforms to the seemingly ordered and powerful institution the Library itself which despite its utopian promise of knowledge preservation, is haunted by internal threats and betrayals. In chapter six, this contradiction becomes starkly visible when Irene's escape is interrupted by a painful warning from her Library tattoo, signalling the presence of Alberich. Cogman writes: "With each step the reality of the message from the Library sank more deeply into her guts. *Beware Alberich. Beware Alberich. Beware Alberich*" (82). This urgent message unsettles Irene. Cogman adds, "Alberich was a figure out of nightmare" (82).

Alberich is a former librarian who has betrayed the very institution he once served. Cogman cleverly employs metafiction to emphasize the lingering threat posed by Alberich, who is the male antagonist who represents a disruption to the Library's utopian ideal. The inclusion of a book titled *Beware Alberich* within the narrative alerts readers and characters alike to the danger of Alberich, a book within a book that dramatizes the very dangers the protagonists face. This metafictional element does more than heighten suspense; it serves as a narrative device that underscores the threat the Library is facing.

Significantly, Alberich's presence as a male character, reintroduces patriarchal threat and domination into a space that is supposed to empower women. His betrayal disrupts the utopian ideal of the Library, exposing its hidden dangers, and its complicity in both control and gendered violence. Thus, the Library embodies the utopian tension between idealism and corruption, between order and chaos, echoing Sargisson's idea that utopias are dynamic and filled with unresolved tensions.

Cogman's use of metafiction in *The Invisible Library* also serves to expose and challenge tensions within the Library's utopian image. In Chapter 22, when Irene successfully

stole the book and checked that it was the original Grimm manuscript, as it contains the eighty-eight story entitled *The Story of the Stone from the Tower of Babel* and read it, Alberich's intentions are revealed as they delve into the story, it becomes clear that it discusses the origins of a mysterious library that holds books from countless worlds.

The narrative introduces a foundational tale buried within the Library's lore: a brother, once part of the institution, uncovers what was written on his back, an inscription so destabilizing that it fractures his allegiance and drives him to betrayal. His rebellion is not framed as a mere quest for power, but as a reaction to a knowledge, the Library has sought to contain or erase. Irene, encountering this story, comes to a chilling realization: "That's why he wanted this book... It wasn't because he could use it to gain power over this world. It was because..." (256). Her unfinished sentence signals the depth of the revelation, one tied not to political conquest but to the dangerous intimacy of forbidden truths.

This scene reveals a core instability at the heart of the Library's utopian facades. Though presented as a neutral archive dedicated to preserving balance, the Library is exposed as vulnerable to insurrection from within, particularly when its internal contradictions are laid bare. The act of betrayal becomes not just a narrative device, but a symbolic challenge to the Library's claim of omnipotent order.

Through the lens of feminist utopian theory, this moment underscores Lucy Sargisson's assertion that utopias are not defined by perfection, but by the presence of unresolved tensions. The Library's repression of certain knowledges and its attempt to control narrative through exclusion reflects a patriarchal impulse toward regulation and mastery. The story challenges this by revealing that the very system built to maintain harmony can become the source of its own unraveling.

Cogman's metafictional strategy here is deliberate, the story-within-the-story reveals the Library's foundational myth to be unstable, haunted by its own buried conflicts. In this, *The Invisible Library* aligns with feminist utopian projects that reject static ideals in favor of multiplicity, contradiction, and the necessity of confronting power's internal fractures. Utopia, in this reading, is not a perfect world, but a space where competing truths must coexist and be reckoned with.

1.1.3. Transgression of Gender Roles and Stereotypes: Feminist Spatial Reimaginings

It seems that this space is intentionally crafted by the author to reflect the historical eagerness of Victorian women to read and engage intellectually, even within the constraints of their time, this was captured in the closing of the first Chapter of *The Invisible Library* as Irene begins to read the stolen book and reveals her true motivation as a passionate lover of stories and books amid her chaotic job of book retrieval. "There was nothing wrong with being curious about how a story turned out, after all. She was a librarian. It went with the job.... She just wanted – had always wanted – a good book to read" (18). Therefore, the Library can be read as a feminist utopian reimagination of Virginia Woolf's of *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a famous battle cry for physical and symbolic space that women must carve out for themselves in a world that has historically restricted their opportunities. She argued that the concept of 'five hundred a year' and the "lock on a door" extended beyond material needs, representing the "power to contemplate" and "to think for oneself" (90).

This is exemplified in the opening chapter of *The Invisible Library*, Irene, is tasked with retrieving a rare book, *Midnight Requiems*, from the Prince Mordred's Private Academy. Upon entering the room where she believes the book is kept and retrieving it, an alarm is triggered, and she finds herself racing against time to escape before she is caught. Despite her success, Irene faces physical dangers from the monstrous hellhounds and gargoyles sent after

her, resulting in a narrow escape to the Library, a magical place filled with endless books and secrets, her safest refuge. Cogman highlights, “there was a small office had a door she could use to get out of here, and that was what she needed” (15). Within this expansive library, librarians find not only a sanctuary from the chaos outside but also a realm filled with endless possibilities and knowledge. It becomes a place where they can regroup, reflect, and plan their next move, reinforcing the idea that amidst the challenges women face, the library stands as a bastion of safety and empowerment.

As the Library chooses to send Irene to an alternate, Victorian-inspired London, the narrative opens up new possibilities for these women to use the knowledge gained from books in active, adventurous, and world-shaping ways. It reimagines a reality where women’s intellectual pursuits are not confined to the domestic sphere but become tools for agency, power, and transformation.

In *The Invisible Library*, The Library serves as a utopian sanctuary for women, particularly resonating with the aspirations of Victorian women who were often eager readers. During the 19th century, women were typically confined to the domestic sphere, expected to embody ideals of passivity, purity, and submission; qualities famously encapsulated in Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), which became a cultural blueprint for ideal Victorian womanhood. However, reading and literature offered women a powerful form of escape and self-expression. Scholars such as Kate Flint, in *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (1993), explore how Victorian women engaged deeply with reading as a way to access knowledge and explore alternative identities beyond domestic expectations. Within *The Invisible Library*, the Library’s transdimensional collection symbolizes precisely this liberating force. It becomes a space where women are not merely passive readers but active agents of knowledge and imagination, free from the social norms that once limited them.

Cogman's *The Invisible Library* intentionally centers high-status female characters, aligning with Virginia Woolf's vision in "A Room of One's Own" (1929). Woolf argued that for women to write fiction, they must have financial independence and personal space. Cogman's portrayal of women in empowered roles, such as junior librarians like Irene and Bradamant, and senior librarians like Coppelia, reflects this ideal. In the novel, women are integral to the world's fabric, occupying positions of authority and influence without their gender being a focal point. This normalization of female agency suggests a world where women have long had the "room" Woolf advocated for, both literally and metaphorically. By embedding such characters seamlessly into her narrative, Cogman not only honors Woolf's call for female autonomy but also presents a reimagined society where women's empowerment is standard, not exceptional. This will be further explored in our analysis of characters through a neo-Victorian garb.

2. Cogman's Characters as Agents of Resisting Victorian Ideals

In *The Invisible Library*, Cogman crafts a protagonist who resists the traditional Victorian ideal of womanhood, the self-sacrificing, morally pure "angel in the house." Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's influential analysis in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), this study explores how the novel participates in the feminist project of dismantling oppressive female archetypes. As Gilbert and Gubar in their entitled chapter, "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity" argue, "Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy... a woman writer must examine, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (36). In this light, Irene, the novel's central figure, may be seen as enacting a subversion of the angelic ideal. Rather than conforming to passive femininity, she is intellectually autonomous, professionally powerful, and morally

ambiguous. Thus, we will explore how Irene's agency and defiance of expected gender roles reflect a neo-Victorian feminist impulse to "kill the angel in the house" as declared by Virginia Woolf (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 36), thereby reclaiming narrative space for dynamic and transgressive female subjectivities.

2.1. Irene and the Subversion of the Angel in the House Role

2.1.1. Setting the Stage for Subversion: The Role of the Alternate Worlds in Challenging the "Angel in the House" Ideal

In *The Invisible Library*, Genevieve Cogman deliberately introduces the narrative in the deeply gendered space of Prince Mordred's Private Academy for Boys. This setting is significant not only because it is private, but also because it excludes women entirely. The very name of the institution functions as a space where the male elite are trained in seclusion, suggesting a rigid social order where knowledge, privilege, and power are reserved for boys. This boldly accords to Carol Pearson's observation in her article entitled "Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias" (1977), that feminist utopian fiction commonly opens their narratives within the walls of patriarchy, before presenting a contrasting world in which women can truly belong and thrive (50).

Irene's entrance into this alternate world, not as an equal, nor even as a teacher, but as a cleaning maid, "a hardworking menial, sleeping in attics, wearing a plain grey woollen dress" as she herself laments (7), clearly shows the limited roles available to women within this framework. Her fabricated background as a "young woman in her mid-twenties with a poor but honest background, suitable for skivvying" (8) conforms closely with the Victorian ideal of feminine purity and servitude. Among what defines the angel in the house as Gilbert and Gubar put is that she is "Passive, submissive, unawakened, she has a pure white

complexion which betrays no self-assertive consciousness, no desire for self-gratification” (638).

Virginia Woolf in her lecture, “Professions for Women” famously articulates this figure as a ghostly presence in the writing life of every woman. She writes, “I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman... I called her... The Angel in the House” (Woolf). Woolf describes this angel as “immensely charming,” “utterly unselfish,” and entirely without “a mind or a wish of her own.” Irene’s self-fashioned identity as a docile, working-class maid reflects precisely this ideal. Yet, Woolf continues, “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her... Had I not killed her she would have killed me” (Woolf N. pag). Irene enacts this symbolic killing through espionage, deception, and intellectual strategy, subverting the angelic image while still wearing its disguise.

Irene’s self-fashioned identity as a docile, working-class maid reflects the very aesthetic of purity and passivity expected of Victorian women, particularly as she must adopt a narrative of poverty and honesty to justify her presence in this all-male space. Yet, her presence in this institution as a subversive actor, one who only pretends to accept her role, signals the beginning of a feminist reworking. Irene, while appearing to conform to the image of the silent, invisible woman, in fact uses this guise to move through a world that would otherwise reject her authority, laying the groundwork for her larger challenge to the gendered binaries of angel and monster, submission and power.

Significantly, throughout the first chapter, Irene uses her appearance of the angelic submissive maid as a strategic disguise to outwit the male-dominated society and complete her true mission. “Irene had been sent by the Library to this alternate world to obtain *Midnight Requiems*, the famous necromancer Balan Pestifer’s first published book” (8),

Cogman explains. She “spent a month looking for a copy” while evading necromancers, bibliophiles, and ghouls whose interest had been piqued by her inquiries (8). Ultimately, Irene does not only navigate the restrictive setting undetected, but also manages to secure the original version of the book and escape, proving her competence, and autonomy. Like Woolf’s phantom, this angel is killed through Irene’s actions that include stealing, lying, escaping danger, and choosing her mission over any traditional moral code of feminine obedience.

After completing her assignment at Prince Mordred’s Private Academy for Boys, Irene is reassigned to a new mission in an alternate retrofuturistic Victorian London, this time accompanied by her new recruit, Kai. Their objective is to retrieve a powerful and rare version of The Brothers Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, which holds narrative value for the mysterious interdimensional Library. This Victorian-inspired setting initially appears to confine Irene within the same gendered boundaries of decorum and passivity becomes the ground upon which she continues to subvert traditional ideals of womanhood, specifically the “angel in the house” ideal.

Irene adopts a Victorian-style femininity, poised, proper, and bookish, however she does so strategically, using these outward markers of the ideal woman not to conform but to manipulate, deceive, and gain access to spaces and power typically denied to women. She weaponizes her appearance and demeanor, presenting herself as non-threatening while operating as a sharp-witted, daring agent of the Library.

Rather than remaining in the safe and quiet space of the Library, Irene is thrust into the field, stepping “out of the archive and into the action.” The Library does not just send her on missions; it forces her to make critical decisions, take risks, and confront danger. In doing

so, Irene evolves from a careful, rule-following collaborator to a bold, proactive agent who takes ownership of her actions.

2.1.2. Irene's Development: From a Passive Reader into an Active Actor

In Chapter five, Irene's reaction to Peregrine Vale, a famous detective modelled after Sherlock Holmes, reflects her initial position as a literary enthusiast rather than an active agent. When first encountering him, she is both charmed and unsettled: "She was simultaneously impressed by the man's skills of observation and significantly worried by them. This sort of intellect was splendid in fictional characters" (71). Irene's fascination harmonizes with her identity as a reader immersed in stories of heroic detectives, yet this also underscores a distance between admiration and participation. As she collaborated with him she muses, "She'd always wondered, or even daydreamed, what it was like to actually work with great detectives, rather than just read about them. It was more annoying than she'd expected" (159). This moment signals a shift in Irene's perception, her romanticized notions of detective work give way to the messy, unpredictable reality of being in the field.

As the story progresses, Irene actively participates in resolving their shared mission. "Vale's theory made a great deal of sense and was a step ahead of where she'd managed to get to," she acknowledges, yet she immediately follows this reflection with decisive action: 'I can ask her,' she offered. 'The current mission is definitely more important than these other books'" (159). Rather than retreating into the safety of the archive or relying on others to lead, Irene steps into a position of agency. This evolution reflects the broader feminist reimagining at the heart of *The Invisible Library*: Irene, once a self-described reader and admirer of fictional detectives, becomes a figure of intellectual power and self-determination in her own right.

In chapter twenty-three, Irene's character arc underscores a crucial transition from reader to writer, from consumer of stories to active participant in shaping them. Her love for detective fiction, particularly the Sherlock Holmes tradition is not just a personality trait but a narrative blueprint she begins to embody and then subvert. In one exchange with her superior Coppelion, Irene is confronted with the gap between literary fascination and lived experience:

"Yes." Coppelion sighed. "And yes, I know you prefer crime literature."

"Detective stories," Irene corrected her.

Coppelion raised an eyebrow. "And is there anything else?"

"This from someone who claims to be an investigator." (264)

This moment playfully underlines Irene's shifting role, from someone who merely reads about investigation to someone who must become the detective. It is a metafictional nod to how women were historically positioned as passive readers in the shadow of male-authored narratives like Sherlock Holmes, rarely allowed the analytical authority or agency of the detective figure. Neo-Victorian fiction like *The Invisible Library* consciously disrupts that dynamic. Irene does not just admire Holmes; she performs and redefines detective work on her own terms, applying logic, disguise, and psychological insight throughout her mission.

In addition to this, Irene's promotion to Librarian-in-Residence marks a pivotal moment in her development from apprentice to autonomous agent. The role, unexpectedly bestowed upon her by Coppelion, symbolises institutional recognition of Irene's capability and growth. This was pinpointed in their sisterly conversation:

You will be the Librarian-in-Residence, after all.'

'I will?' Irene said, and blushed again, this time out of genuine humility rather than simple embarrassment. Librarian-in-Residence was a post of some responsibility. It

was something she hadn't even thought about handling for decades yet. Excitement began to give way to panic. 'I don't know what to say—'

.... Go and play detective, Irene, and do a good job of it. Make me proud of you.'
(266-67)

Based on this, Irene subverts the "angel in the house" ideal not by directly rejecting femininity but by inhabiting roles, like that of the detective, that were traditionally masculine and inaccessible to Victorian women. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers "must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art" (36). Irene's transformation from an archivist in the background to an active investigator is emblematic of this process. She's no longer the quiet, decorative figure reading crime novels, she is the crime solver, engaged in direct confrontation with chaos, secrets, and power.

This evolution not only revises the literary role of women in the Victorian canon but also challenges readers to see Victorian femininity as a performance that can be strategically inhabited, revised, and weaponized. Irene's investigative journey becomes a metaphor for the broader feminist project: rewriting the script that once confined women to silence, domesticity, and observation.

2.2 . Coppelia

Coppelia, a senior librarian and Irene's mentor in Genevieve Cogman's *The Invisible Library*, plays a crucial role in the narrative. As a woman of authority, discipline, and intellect, Coppelia stands out not only because of her high-ranking position but also because she represents a significant departure from the traditional, often invisible roles women were expected to occupy in Victorian society.

Despite being a black woman in a field still laden with hierarchical structures, Coppelia is never marginalized. Instead, she occupies a space of mentorship and moral

authority, regularly assessing Irene's performance and issuing commands with subtle authority, "Young woman, even though you're my student, you have overstepped a number of lines on this occasion... Fortunately, as your mentor, I am competent to deal with this matter" (264). Her position in the Library is not solely symbolic, Coppelia has influence and authority. When Irene's behavior risks scrutiny from higher powers, Coppelia assures her: "Naturally I shall give them full consideration. I will also try to present them in a proper and reasonable light to the elder Librarians, should I need to justify your actions. Rather than treating them as a pitiful string of excuses" (265). This moment illustrates not only her disciplinary role but also her protective authority, even though Irene revealed the Library's secrets to Vale and inspector Singh, Coppelia has a voice among the elder Librarians and uses it to shield and shape Irene's professional path.

Coppelia's intellectual authority and strategic thinking illustrate a reclaiming of agency for women in roles typically denied to them in Victorian narratives. In this way, Coppelia embodies both a homage to and a subversion of the woman behind the scenes trope, emerging as a figure of visible, decisive leadership.

3. Themes

3.1. The Role of Steampunk in Women's Empowerment

The retrofuturistic, steampunk world of *The Invisible Library* does more than simply decorate the story with airships, death rays, and biомutated alligators; it actively reshapes the conditions under which women must operate. In a setting defined by constant danger and technological chaos, traditional Victorian gender roles valuing passivity and dependence become serious liabilities rather than an advantage. As Irene notes early on, this world includes "zeppelins, death rays... and other instruments of destruction. Also they have

biomutations, clockwork technology, electrical health-care spas” (45). Survival demands not fragility, but quick thinking, action, and strategic adaptability.

In Chapter Five, Irene is attacked by a disguised thief in a restaurant. She does not wait for male assistance, but instead acts decisively: “She dropped into a semi-squat, balancing on her left heel, then brought her right leg out in a straight wide pivot. It caught him off balance and he fell to the ground with a curse” (73). Even after neutralizing her attacker, Irene shrewdly returns to performing the expected role of helpless womanhood to protect her cover: “I come here on holiday, and this man, this thief tries to snatch my bag, and nobody tries to help me. Not a single person comes to a helpless woman’s defence” (74). This performance stresses how women like Irene strategically navigate Victorian expectations while simultaneously subverting them.

The dangers presented by steampunk technologies also test Irene’s endurance and ingenuity on a larger scale. Chapter Ten closes with a sudden attack on the ballroom. In the following chapter, Irene faces mechanical alligators modified with metal attachments to resist magical defenses. Despite the chaos, Irene refuses to retreat. Cogman writes that Irene “could just stay put. But as she tried to shut out all the unimportant noises, she found herself already acting” (130). Her instinctive move to assist others, even at the risk of her own safety, demonstrates how the steampunk environment forces women to become active agents of rescue and resistance, rather than passive victims.

Furthermore, solidarity among women becomes vital for survival in such unpredictable spaces. Irene seeks Bradamant’s assistance during the attack, acknowledging that survival requires collaboration, not competition: “I have an idea, but I’m having problems with the Language. I need your help” (130). The steampunk setting’s relentless pressures foster alliances between women that transcend traditional Victorian hierarchies,

building spaces for female empowerment and mutual support even amidst mechanical chaos and violent disruption.

The steampunk-infused alternate London in *The Invisible Library* heightens the dangers women face, forcing them to develop new forms of competence, bravery, and leadership. In this world, technologies like “difference engines and calculating mechanisms,” and even zeppelins, exist alongside dangers from Fae magic and mechanical sabotage (186). The retrofuturistic technology does not purely serve as background; it destabilizes traditional gender hierarchies by creating crises where intellect, courage, and collaboration matter more than conventional Victorian decorum.

Irene’s quick thinking and strategic mind are repeatedly tested as the novel progresses. When confronted by an insectoid iron automaton, she and Bradamant must act swiftly, without waiting for male rescue: “‘I’ll do the gears if you do the joints,’ Irene said. ‘Right,’ Bradamant said” (198). Their teamwork and use of the Language to jam the machine’s mechanisms denote that women can take the lead in disabling threats in this chaotic environment.

Importantly, the steampunk setting magnifies the unpredictability of danger. During a later confrontation, Irene notes the violent transformation of Silver’s minions into hybrid monsters: “Silver’s minions were getting hairier by the second. Irene could see the spreading patches of iron-grey and black matted fur on their hands, their lengthening nails, their bulging jaws with sprouting teeth” (197). Despite the horror, Irene and Bradamant calmly assess the situation, choosing escape routes and prioritizing objectives. The setting forces women into the traditional role of the hero, making courage, resourcefulness, and quick thinking essential survival skills.

Irene bypasses obstacles using the Language without brute force, showing that mastery of words and intellect, not physical strength becomes the new site of power in this steampunk world. This reflects a feminist reworking of heroism; the heroine's strength lies not in overpowering enemies but in outwitting them, even in spaces typically coded as male, such as museums and airships.

Bradamant too embodies this shift. Though presented as elegant and composed, she participates fully in high-risk activities, such as fighting mechanical beasts and orchestrating strategic retreats. She dismisses Victorian notions of femininity with dry wit, noting, "I may not be able to handle a set of werewolves and an angry Fae, but I can certainly handle one museum official" (200). Both women use the chaos of the steampunk world not just to survive, but to affirm and expand their agency, disrupting traditional literary and social expectations about what women can do.

In Chapter Eighteen, we are introduced to the figure of Mrs. Jenkins, the zeppelin pilot, further illustrates how women occupy positions of mechanical and technological authority in this steampunk alternate world. Despite Vale's urgent demands, "I require your assistance to reach the British Library as fast as as possible" (211) Mrs. Jenkins remains unimpressed and asserts her authority over her airship: "'That and a shilling'll buy you a pound of onions,' the woman said. Unimpressed, she leaned back in her seat" (211). Her casual defiance in the face of male authority subverts Victorian ideals of feminine passivity and demonstrates a new professional self-confidence enabled by the retrofuturistic setting.

However, when urgency demands it, Irene intervenes, not through physical strength, but through mastery of the Language: "'Mrs. Jenkins,' Irene continued, switching fluidly into the Language, 'you perceive that the detective here is showing you reliable and acceptable authorization'" (211). Irene's use of linguistic power to sway Mrs. Jenkins emphasizes

another key mode of empowerment in the novel, not brute force, but verbal and intellectual mastery. Together, both women, one with her piloting skills and the other with her linguistic expertise, help drive the mission forward, refusing to remain passive observers.

Moreover, Cogman's unique depiction of Coppelion's physical presence reinforces the character's commanding position and visually embodies the steampunk aesthetic of *The Invisible Library*, while also raising important questions about race, gender, and power. Cogman describes: "Her bright white hair was braided back under a navy cap, showing in stark contrast to her dark skin...The artificial carved-wood fingers of her left hand"(261). The stark contrast between her white hair and dark skin, along with the artificial carved-wood fingers of her left hand, situates her in the hybrid visual world of steampunk, where the mechanical and the organic meet, and where identity can be both reclaimed and remade. This aesthetic detail is not just atmospheric but symbolic, Coppelion, as a Black woman in a position of authority, disrupts the predominantly white, male-coded imagery often associated with Victorian and steampunk traditions.

Cogman writes, describing Coppelion "The old woman closed her eyes for a moment. She was frail, even for the Library, and her wooden arm and legs were the only solid things about her. The rest was all fragile flesh, spider-web white hair, and eyes as cold as black stars" (267). In this passage, the steampunk elements, the woman's mechanical wooden arms and legs, serve as symbols of empowerment, resilience, and adaptation. Although her body appears fragile, reflecting the historical fatigue of her race, her mechanical limbs suggest strength and durability, challenging traditional ideas of feminine weakness.

Steampunk's blend of human and machine here reimagines the Black female body not as something subjugated by history, but as something that has endured and evolved. The mechanical parts are not a loss of humanity but an augmentation of strength, intelligence, and

survival. By incorporating steampunk aesthetics, the text reclaims and transforms Victorian ideals, a time when both women, particularly black women were heavily oppressed into a vision where marginalized identities wield power and authority.

3.2. Feminist Rewriting of Power Dynamics

3.2.1. Irene and Silver: Negotiating Power with the Forces of Chaos

In Chapter Four, Irene encounters Silver, a Fae ambassador. From their very first encounter, their relationship is defined by an underlying struggle for dominance. His physical appearance is crafted for theatrical effect:

He was of above-average height, with well-squared shoulders and a slender waist. His pale hair, a shade somewhere between silver and lavender, was gathered back in a short tail that fell neatly against his perfectly fitted jacket... His top hat was tilted insouciantly to one side, and he was wearing pale grey kid gloves. (57)

Every detail projects elegance and confidence, reinforcing his aura of superiority and danger. Silver immediately tries to assert control over Irene by physically and verbally intimidating her. His language drips with condescension: “Come out, come out, little mouse. Or shall I come looking for you?” (58). By calling her “little mouse,” he seeks to belittle and infantilize her, framing her as small, powerless, and easily captured.

However, Irene does not submit to this narrative. She meets Silver’s intimidation with calculated composure, refusing to fall into the role he expects. When he grabs her wrist, she warns him coldly, “Take your hands off me, sir,” she said, anger sliding into her voice. ‘Or you will regret it” (58). In this confrontation, Irene subverts Silver’s expectations. Rather than submitting or pleading, she asserts her own agency, challenging the power dynamic between them. For a brief moment, Silver falters: “You’re very self-assured,” he said, and for the first time there was a fraction of something other than malice or purring self-satisfaction

in his voice. Perhaps an edge of uncertainty” (59). Irene’s bold defiance destabilizes Silver’s confidence and asserts that she is more than she looks, as Silver observes, ““I wonder. Are you perhaps a little more than you look?”” a fact she coolly confirms: “Aren’t we all?” (59).

This defiance destabilizes the initial power dynamic Silver attempts to impose. Irene quickly realizes that Fae like Silver “lived roles” and expected others to perform alongside them: “They thought of everything in terms of stories, with themselves as the main characters. They played roles—no, they lived roles—and they saw the world around them in terms of the mental movie in which they were starring. He wanted her to be a meek little agent” (61). Rather than resisting openly, Irene weaponizes his expectations, pretending to be the submissive, obedient “little agent” he imagines, all while maintaining her true independence underneath the performance.

Silver’s predatory charm and attempts at seduction highlight another layer of this power struggle. His language turns from threatening to intoxicating: “I will be everything to you, little one. I will protect and shield you. You will be my adored one, my own special love, my sweet, my pet, my beauty, my heart’s delight.... ‘Say that you’ll be mine’” (62). Yet Irene’s physical and psychological pain, the agony of the Library’s bindings burning across her back, reminds her of her true loyalty and selfhood. She breaks free, rejecting Silver’s domination with the powerful assertion: ““I belong”—to the Library—to the Cathedral of Reason,’ she spat” (62). This act of defiance marks a pivotal moment where Irene decisively claims her autonomy, refusing both emotional and magical manipulation.

Moreover, the closing of their first encounter reinforces Irene’s internal victory. Although Silver tries to maintain a mask of charm and issuing veiled threats, “I’ll see you tomorrow, little mouse. Don’t forget. Or I’ll come and find you” (62). Even after Silver leaves, Irene is keenly aware of how close she came to being overwhelmed, forcing herself

back into control: “Her nails dug into her palms as she forced herself into proper posture and composure” (63). This internal fortitude underlines her growth in a world where men and Fae seek to dominate through charm, strength, or manipulation, Irene chooses self-reliance and resilience.

Thus, the dynamic between Irene and Silver is not simply one of predator and prey, master and servant, it is a constant battle of narratives, performances, and wills. Irene’s triumph lies in her ability to play the game without becoming consumed by it, asserting her agency in a world designed to diminish her. In such a way, Irene’s encounters with Silver reveal a central theme of *The Invisible Library*: the feminist rewriting of power, agency, and identity. Rather than accepting the roles assigned to her, Irene learns to inhabit them strategically and overturn them when necessary.

Silver’s perception of Irene evolves. Although he continues to call her “little mouse,” he gradually recognizes her as a genuine opponent rather than a pawn. His grudging respect becomes apparent when he proposes an alliance: “We both want the manuscript, but we’ll get it faster by working together. A copy could be arranged. A deal can be made” (61).

At the closing of Chapter Sixteen, even when Silver dramatically enters the room, “Then the door in the opposite side of the room slammed open, and Silver strode through, followed by his bland-looking manservant and half a dozen hairy men in cheap suits and bad hats” (191) Irene meets his flair with strategy and resistance rather than awe. Silver’s theatricality, complete with a personal wind that ruffles his clothes but “failed to stir a single hair” on his thugs (192), is no longer intimidating. Instead, Irene focuses on outmaneuvering him, showing that the balance of power between them has shifted.

Silver remains a complex figure a constant temptation toward chaos, power, and surrender. Yet Irene's continued ability to resist his influence, despite the mounting dangers around her, reveals her growing strength and moral clarity. As she later reflects:

'If there is some secret pertaining to the Library in this book, then that might explain why Alberich is so eager to get his hands on it. Silver, too. Some Fae know about the Library and have an interest in it. If Silver believes that the book holds some secret—if only because other people are trying to get their hands on it—that would make it irresistible to someone like him.' (158)

By the end of the novel, it is clear that Irene, once a seemingly vulnerable newcomer, has emerged as a true equal in this game of power, deception, and resistance as she is the one that successfully retrieves the original manuscript of the *Brothers Grimm*. And this was highlighted when Vale says, "Silver is hardly your concern, Miss Winters" (216), Miss Winters is the alias that Irene uses to explore this alternate world. This shows that Silver has ceased to be a threat for Irene. Thus, Silver's failure to seduce or intimidate Irene proves that she is no longer a "little mouse" in anyone's story.

Conclusion

Overall, Cogman's *The Invisible Library* skilfully crafts a solid neo-Victorian narrative where traditional boundaries of gender, reality, and authority are transgressed and rewritten. The novel's multiple settings particularly, the alternate steampunk Victorian London serve as active forces that challenge and reshape the roles of women. The Library itself emerges as a kind of feminist utopia where women like Irene and Coppelia occupy influential, world-shaping positions. Throughout the novel, Cogman stages the transgression of reality and truth, particularly through the manipulation of time, space, and history, aligning with feminist utopian critiques of linear and rigid worldviews. Central to this novel is the transgression of

gender roles, vividly embodied in the subversion of the “angel in the house” ideal. Moreover, the themes of the novel amplify this feminist reimagining. The role of steampunk technology does not only intensify the female characters’ challenges but it also creates spaces where they can demonstrate strength, ingenuity, and resilience. Meanwhile, the shift in power dynamics, particularly in Irene’s confrontations with Silver, marks a clash between a contemporary female protagonist with a classical anti-hero that underscores women’s ongoing rejection of being forced into traditional narratives of submission. Ultimately, *The Invisible Library* reclaims the Victorian world through a feminist lens, offering a narrative where women move beyond the glass walls of myth and memory to write and live their own stories.

General Conclusion

The current study set out to explore Cogman's *The Invisible Library* through the dual critical lenses of Feminist Utopianism and feminism within Neo-Victorian context. It brought to the fore how the novel reimagines gender roles, historical dynamics within a steampunk-infused, alternate Victorian London, and how the settings serve as dynamic spaces for negotiating power, identity, and resistance, which are congruent with the feminist utopian project that allows women to exercise autonomy, intellect, and agency beyond patriarchal constraints. Positioned within a genre that thrives on both nostalgia and subversion, the novel offers fertile ground for the interrogation of ideological constructs, particularly concerning women's agency, and the transformative power of literature.

The first chapter of the research has provided a socio-historical, literary, and theoretical background essential to understanding Cogman's novel within its broader intellectual context. It focused on the literary and historical background of retrofuturism and steampunk. It then moved to the theoretical framework of the study. It outlined the emergence and significance of feminist utopian theory, especially drawing on the work of Lucy Sargisson. Victorian feminist voices are omnipresent in this study including Virginia Woolf, whose seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* continues to shape feminist literary discourse. This chapter also engaged with key concepts from Neo-Victorianism, drawing on the ideas of scholars such as Heilmann and Llewellyn, who argue that Neo-Victorian texts do not simply recreate the 19th century but rather reinterpret and contest its values in light of present-day concerns. It concluded with an overview of Cogman life, literary influences, and a summary of the novel.

The second chapter of the research has delved into an in-depth analysis of the novel's settings, characters, and themes, from both feminist utopianism and neo-Victorian

perspective. It denotes how the imagined Library functions as a metaphor for both narrative control and utopian aspiration. The alternate London becomes a stage on which contemporary questions of gender, knowledge, and power are acted out. Irene, as the protagonist, embodies a feminist reimagining of the Victorian heroine. She is neither angel nor madwoman, but an autonomous, intellectual figure with agency over language, perception, and action. The novel also introduces complex female figures such as Bradamant and Coppelia, who, despite institutional hierarchies, function with notable independence and authority.

The study revealed that Cogman's narrative resists static notions of utopia. Instead, it supports Sargisson's idea of "utopia of process," where shifts in perception, identity, and power are more important than fixed ideals. Through Irene's character, Cogman offers a feminist reimagining of Victorian womanhood, one that resists the angelic domestic ideal. Irene is intellectual, assertive, and morally complex; she operates in a professional role typically denied to women in both Victorian and many fantasy settings. Her relationships with other women like the rival Bradamant and the administrator Coppelia further reinforce a world in which female authority and complexity are central. In addition, the novel's Steampunk framework allows it to challenge traditional gender norms by placing women at the center of technological and intellectual power. Through its retrofuturistic inventions, airships, and mechanical devices, *The Invisible Library* reclaims a historically male-dominated genre and aesthetic that creates a space where female characters like Irene manipulate, and ultimately control systems of knowledge and innovation. The theme of power dynamics is also central to *The Invisible Library*, particularly in how authority is distributed, challenged, and redefined through female agency.

The novel provides a rich ground for analysis; however, due to the work's length limitations and time constraints, this research could not cover everything. Therefore, it will be interesting for future researchers to analyse it from different perspectives. For further

research, it would be valuable to explore how *The Invisible Library* revises imperial history through inclusivity and transnational representation. Unlike traditional Victorian narratives that reinforce colonial hierarchies, Cogman's novel reimagines global relationships, presenting India not as a colonized entity but as a respected political ally. This shift is notably illustrated through Inspector Vale's collaborative partnership with Inspector Singh, reflecting a model of cross-cultural respect rather than domination. Additionally, the character of Kai, a Chinese dragon in human form challenges Eurocentric heroic archetypes by positioning an Eastern mythological figure as a powerful and morally grounded protagonist. Future studies could examine how such representations contribute to decolonizing speculative fiction and envisioning alternate histories grounded in mutual recognition, diversity, and global solidarity.

Another promising direction for further research is an ecocritical reading of *The Invisible Library*, particularly through its steampunk elements. Steampunk as a genre often juxtaposes industrial progress with environmental degradation, drawing attention to the costs of technological advancement. In *The Invisible Library*, the presence of mechanical hounds, airships, and other steam-powered inventions reflects a world deeply shaped by human intervention and artificiality. However, this technological landscape is not portrayed as entirely triumphant; rather, it coexists with magical and chaotic forces that resist control, suggesting an underlying tension between human-made systems and the natural order. An ecocritical approach could explore how Cogman's alternate worlds critique the unchecked exploitation of resources and question anthropocentric narratives of domination over nature.

Another fruitful avenue for research is examining *The Invisible Library* in areas such as pastiche and intertextuality, particularly in how it blends genres, detective fiction, fantasy, steampunk, and fairy tale. The inclusion of a Grimm manuscript that metafictionally references the Library's own mythos reflects Cogman's engagement with layered storytelling

and self-aware narrative construction. The blending of classic Victorian literary elements with postmodern narrative techniques positions *The Invisible Library* as a compelling example for a postmodern exploration.

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Résumé

La présente étude est une exploration rigoureuse des récits rétrofuturistes dans *The Invisible Library* (2015) de Genevieve Cogman, à travers les prismes croisés de la théorie utopique féministe et du féminisme. Elle soutient que le roman réinvente l'histoire victorienne et les rôles de genre à travers la fiction spéculative, en plaçant ses personnages féminins comme des figures subversives qui défient l'idéal traditionnel de « l'ange de foyer » qui dominait la société victorienne, le tout dans un contexte contemporain. Cette recherche s'appuie sur les critiques féministes telles que Virginia Woolf, Gilbert et Gubar, afin de mettre en lumière une réécriture du pouvoir genré et de la participation littéraire. La Bibliothèque, en tant qu'utopie féministe, fonctionne comme un espace transhistorique où le savoir, l'autorité et la mobilité sont accessibles aux femmes. De plus, une analyse approfondie du roman montre comment les éléments steampunk jouent le rôle de mécanismes narratifs qui intensifient les défis rencontrés par les femmes, tout en élargissant leur pouvoir d'agir. Ces technologies mettent en avant la négociation entre modernité, technologie et autonomie féminine dans des contextes néo-victoriens. En définitive, cette étude démontre comment l'œuvre de Cogman incarne un projet féministe qui reconfigure le passé à travers une lecture féministe et imagine des futurs alternatifs par la réinvention de l'histoire.

Mots-clés : Néo-victorianisme, Rétrofuturisme, Steampunk, Utopie féministe, Féminisme, Rôles de genre, L'ange du foyer, Futurs alternatifs.

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة بشكل معمق السرديات الرجعية المستقبلية في رواية جينيفيف كو غمان "المكتبة الخفية" (2015)، من خلال تقاطع نظريتي اليوتوبية النسوية والنقد النسوي. وتجادل الدراسة بأن الرواية تعيد تصور التاريخ الفيكتوري وأدوار الجنس من خلال الخيال التأملي، حيث تقدم شخصيات نسائية تتحدى نموذج "ملاك المنزل" التقليدي الذي كان يهيمن على المجتمع الفيكتوري، ولكن ضمن سياق معاصر. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على آراء عدد من الناقداة النسويات مثل فرجينيا وولف، وجيلبرت وغوبار، لتسلط الضوء على إعادة كتابة السلطة الجنسية ومكانة المرأة الأدبية.

تُصوّر المكتبة في الرواية كفضاء يوتوبي نسوي عابر للزمن، تُتاح فيه المعرفة والسلطة للنساء. كما تُظهر الدراسة أن عناصر الستيمبانك في الرواية لا تقتصر على الجمالية، بل تُستخدم كآليات سردية تبرز التحديات التي تواجهها النساء، وفي الوقت ذاته توسّع من نطاق قدراتهن وفاعليتهن. وتُبرز هذه التقنيات السردية التفاوض الدائم بين الحداثة، والتكنولوجيا، واستقلالية المرأة ضمن سياقات نيوفيكترية

وفي المحصلة، تُظهر هذه الدراسة كيف تُجسّد أعمال كو غمان مشروعاً نسوياً يعيد قراءة الماضي من منظور نسوي، ويخلق تصورات بديلة للمستقبل من خلال إعادة ابتكار التاريخ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النيوفيكترية، الرجعية المستقبلية، الستيمبانك، اليوتوبية النسوية، النسوية، أدوار الجنسين، ملاك المنزل، المستقبل البديل