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Desire and Loathing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Nancy F. Rosenberg

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In addition to being a Victorian Gothic masterpiece, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* mirrors the gender and sexual anxieties as well as the cultural fears of the late nineteenth century. Conflicting gender roles present in the novel include the fear of male penetration and extreme male bonding, the mothering instinct and the New Woman, and the logical versus the hysterical male. The novel's sexual anxiety is revealed through three primary scenes of sexual suppression and release. The character of Dracula not only represents the cultural fear of a foreign threat to British shores, but also serves as the novel's catalyst of sexual desire. While *Dracula* can be read merely as an excellent adventure tale of good versus evil, the novel has as many layers as its author. A discussion of the role of gender in *Dracula* commonly brings up the question of whether or not Irish author and Lyceum Theatre manager Bram Stoker was a misogynist. His biographer Barbara Belford aptly equates him with *matryoshki*, the Russian nesting dolls comprising layers which, in Stoker's case, she says lead to an amorphous center (xi).

Dracula is at its core a story of male bonding. As Mina (Murray) Harker writes in her journal: "the world seems full of good men – even if there *are* monsters in it" (198). The good men that she refers to are the novel's gang of five vampire killers: Professor Abraham Van Helsing, Dr. John Seward, Quincey Morris, Arthur Holmwood (Lord Godalming) and Jonathan Harker. Dr. Seward's mentor, Prof. Van Helsing, is the leader of this merry band of hunters. Dracula is the clear monster of the novel, but Mina's use of the plural form suggests the additional meaning of the "monsters" of the late nineteenth century, among them the emerging New Woman, homosexuality, immigration, syphilis, the theory of evolution, and the perception of an overall decay of traditional Victorian values. In terms of Sigmund Freud's version of the original male-bonding experience (presented in *Totem and Taboo*), Dracula is the primal father of the novel, and the five male characters are the brothers. The good men of *Dracula* become comrades against evil, and consistently refer to one another as "friend." Van Helsing is Seward's mentor and Arthur becomes like a son to the professor as well. Van Helsing says to Arthur: "I have grown to love you -- yes, dear boy, to love you" (153).

Mina and her friend Lucy Westenra are the women of *Dracula* upon whom the men project the ideals of Victorian womanhood. Upon meeting Mina, Van Helsing is inspired to say that she has "given me hope ... that there are good women still left to make life happy – good women, whose lives and whose truths may make good lesson for the children that are to be" (166). Analogous to Wendy and the lost boys of J. M. Barrie's early twentieth century *Peter Pan*, *Dracula's* Mina is expected to use her mothering instinct to guide the men. The lost boys cry "O Wendy lady, be our mother" (73) and then immediately proceed to build her a house, while Mina similarly states as she comforts Arthur that "We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above the smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked" (203). (The 1987 vampire movie, *The Lost Boys*, also correlates the immortality of the vampire to Peter Pan and the lost boys' desire to never grow up.) In the same vein, British social critic and Stoker contemporary John Ruskin writes of woman's influence in *Sesame and Lilies* that "it is a guiding, not a determining function" (86). We see this acted out in *Dracula* because, like Lucy, Mina is susceptible to Dracula's corruption and it is the good brave men of the novel who set out to save her. Further, in desiring Mina, Dracula is doubly evil: he attempts to defile the designated mother of the novel, the one who must guide with her moral hand.

The entrance of the feminist, sexually independent New Woman into Victorian society indicates the changing roles of women, and the theme of the New Woman plays throughout *Dracula*. Karen Volland Waters writes, "The New Woman's sexual independence made her particularly troublesome to the patriarchal order" (124). Many periodicals of the day parodied the New Woman; Elaine Showalter

observes that “Scarcely an issue of *Punch* appeared without a cartoon or parody of New Women” (41). When referred to directly in *Dracula* Stoker also describes her, tongue-in-cheek, through the mouth of Mina: “I believe we [with Lucy] should have shocked the ‘New Woman’ with our appetites” (86) and “Some of the ‘New Women’ writers will some day start an idea that men and women should be allowed to see each other asleep before proposing or accepting. But I suppose the New Woman won’t condescend in future to accept; she will do the proposing herself” (86-87). I believe that these remarks reflect the assumptions of the day rather than Stoker’s opposition to the New Woman.

However, given the fact that there are no real New Women in *Dracula*, Stoker can hardly be considered a supporter of the movement. Although Mina is certainly closer than her flighty friend Lucy to being a New Woman, Mina is not a doctor or professor or journalist, but an “assistant schoolmistress” (55), an accepted occupation for women of the period. Additionally, while she is clearly intelligent (she not only learns but masters the new technologies of shorthand and typewriting), she states early in the novel that her intent is that “When we are married, I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan” (55). Not only is Mina described as “sweet-faced,” “dainty-looking,” and a “pearl among women” (194), but Van Helsing gushes to Jonathan that “She is one of God’s women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and women that there is a heaven where we can enter, and that its light can be seen here on earth. So pure, so sweet, so noble, so little egoist -- and that, let me tell you, is much in this age, so skeptical and selfish” (168-169). This is another instance of Stoker reminding the reader that Mina belongs in the category of “angel” as opposed to “devil,” the term assigned to husband Jonathan’s three vampire seductresses and the post-bitten Lucy. The reader is made further aware of this Eve/Mary dichotomy throughout the novel. Elizabeth Lee states in “Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality” that “women were portrayed either frigid or else insatiable. A young lady was only worth as much as her chastity and appearance of complete innocence, for women were time bombs waiting to be set off. Once led astray, she was the fallen woman, and nothing could reconcile that till she died.”

Significant to Victorian ideology was the sanctity of -- and the mother’s fixed role within -- the home and family. “Written during the demise of decadence and the birth of psychoanalysis, *Dracula* celebrates Stoker’s final quest to safeguard embattled Victorian values from modernism, to preserve the romance of the family,” writes Belford (xii). But what a family Stoker has created in *Dracula*! The word “dysfunctional” takes on new meaning. If we look at the novel’s characters in terms of a family unit, their home is an insane asylum, three of the brothers have proposed marriage to a mother who later dies despite their male-bonding attempts, and their second mother is corrupted by the primal father who is an amalgam of all that is evil.

Ruskin writes of the importance of men going outside the sheltered domestic sphere and returning to the home and the family to be refreshed: “This is the true nature of the home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter; not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” (87). That Dr. Seward’s home is a madhouse is the perfect setting for this Gothic horror novel. The insane asylum is where the characters eventually base themselves, and it represents the safe place in which desire is controllable and reason prevails. However, Mother Mina is not safe in this home, a further example of how *Dracula* embeds conflicting gender roles. Terror in the form of Dracula not only penetrates the peace of first Lucy’s mother’s home, then the insane asylum; it also penetrates the women. Ruskin writes, “By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial: - to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded or subdued, often misled and *always* hardened” (87). The men of *Dracula* do go out into the dangerous world to fight evil, but the way in which they attempt to protect Mina at her home in the insane asylum leaves a lot to be desired. Mina becomes pale and fatigued, and to the reader this is an obvious sign of Dracula’s influence. The men, however, do not clue in on it and their protection of her is so incompetent it is almost as if they personally open the door to Mina’s (and Jonathan’s) bedroom for Dracula.

In addition to attacking the women, there is also an undercurrent of fear that Dracula may penetrate the men as well. He is at his most threatening when he declares of Jonathan: “This man belongs to me!” (43). This exclamation does have homoerotic overtones, and is important in its implication of power and

control, as well as its reflection of the gender controversy of the nineteenth century. The debate over sexuality was active; two years prior to the 1897 publication of *Dracula*, Oscar Wilde stood trial for sodomy. According to Christopher Craft, “the novel’s opening anxiety ... derives from Dracula’s hovering interest in Jonathan Harker; the sexual threat this novel evokes ... but never finally represents is that Dracula will seduce, penetrate, drain another male” (446).

Another example of gender role anxiety is that *Dracula* illustrates discord with respect to the Victorian assumption that men are rational and women are emotional. As Alan Sinfield writes in *Manly Sentiments*, “By the time of Wilde, the link between the (supposed) feminine and emotional sensitivity ... had long been the ground of substantial cultural contest” (52). The conventional notion is most clearly represented in Van Helsing’s praise of Mina: “She has a man’s brain ... and a woman’s heart” (207). However, a twist occurs with respect to the characters who are directly described as being overcome by “hysterics.” A footnote in the Norton Critical Edition of *Dracula* notes that “hysterics” is a term that “derives from the Latin word for *uterus*” and was therefore “naturally associated with women” (157). Yet in *Dracula* they are men: Van Helsing and Arthur Holmwood. (Renfield is of course in a constant state of hysteria as he awaits Dracula.) Freud writes on the subject of hysterics that “we often find in men a combination of the two neuroses or the replacement of an initial hysteria by a later obsessional neurosis” (96). This premise is interesting if only in that it leads the reader to examine the causes and effects of the men’s hysteria.

In the case of Van Helsing, Seward writes that he “gave way to a regular fit of hysterics” (157), and although it is made clear that this is a “womanly thing” for him to do (as Seward adds “I tried to be stern with him, as one is to a woman under the circumstances” [157]), it is nonetheless a man who is hysterical in this situation, not a woman. The cause of the Professor’s hysterics is his contemplation of Arthur’s belief that the blood transfusion he made to Lucy “made her truly his bride” (158). Because Van Helsing, Dr. Seward and Quincey Morris all donated blood to Lucy, unbeknownst at this point to Arthur, Van Helsing’s distress is due to the fact that “this so sweet maid is a polyandrist” (158). In referring to her as such, not only does he reveal that his hysterics are a result of what he sees as chaste Lucy’s impurity, but by relating the blood transfusions to the consummation of marriage they take on a sexual connotation. In the case of Arthur, his hysterical episode occurs after Mina presents him with her typewritten compilation of diaries and journals and Quincey leaves him alone in her “mothering” care. Now that Arthur is able to release his suppressed emotions regarding Lucy’s final death with a comforting mother figure, he “grew quite hysterical” and “shook with emotion” (203).

The anxiety about gender roles also surfaces through *Dracula*’s depiction of the friction arising from suppressed sexuality. In the Victorian era, sexual impulses were to be resisted. As John Stuart Mill writes in *On Liberty*, “All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others” (486). In *Dracula*, female characters are depicted as being sexually aggressive, and the results of their aggression vary in the novel’s three primary sexually-anxious scenes: Jonathan’s seduction by Dracula’s three brides/sisters; Lucy’s final death at the hands of the brothers-in-altruism; and Mina’s drinking blood from Dracula’s chest as Jonathan lies powerless close by.

The late nineteenth-century struggle with the motif of female sexual independence is first apparent in *Dracula* in the scene in which Jonathan is seduced by the three brides/sisters of Dracula. In the Learning Channel’s *Great Books: Dracula*, narrator Donald Sutherland calls the encounter “Every Victorian man’s nightmare.” Jonathan’s desire for the sexually aggressive women who descend upon him is certainly not acceptable for an engaged middle-class Victorian man aspiring to become a gentleman. In fact, he desires and loathes the women at the same time: “I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (42). James V. Hart, screenwriter and co-producer of the 1992 Francis Ford Coppola-directed movie *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, observes in *Great Books: Dracula*, “That sexuality, that empowerment of women, that admission by Victorian man that these women were that powerful, and he enjoyed it, was a revelation to me.” The concept that woman can be sexual is a radical one, but the women of *Dracula* are allowed no middle ground and are not necessarily empowered. The brides/sisters

are the Eves to Jonathan's steadfast mother/fiancée Mina's Mary and it is made clear that, although he does desire them, it is wrong for him to do so. Jonathan later writes in horror: "I am alone in the castle with those awful women. Faugh! Mina is a woman, and there is nought in common. They are devils of the pit!" (55). We find, nevertheless, that the four women have more in common than Jonathan thought, and that Mina does have the capacity to be like them. *Dracula's* women, unfortunately, cannot be sexual without also being diabolical.

We see this more explicitly in Lucy's final death, which presents the consequence of her released sexuality: death at the hands of the three men who once desired to marry her. She begins as a good, if superficial, woman with hair of "sunny ripples" (146) who is described in terms of sweetness and purity. Following her contamination by Dracula, however, the word most often used to define her is "voluptuous." In her metamorphosis as Woman in White, she becomes dark-haired, symbolic of light versus dark, good versus evil. As "anti-mother" she lures children to the cemetery and throws a baby, "callous as a devil" (188), to the ground. This parallels the anti-mothering representation of the three brides/sisters of Dracula, who eagerly snatch the baby-filled bag that Dracula presents them with as a replacement for Jonathan. The men's reaction to Lucy's transformation is revealing. When Van Helsing informs Seward of what he intends to do with Lucy's "Un-Dead" body, Seward writes: "It made me shudder to think of so mutilating the body of the woman whom I had loved. And yet the feeling was not as strong as I had expected. I was, in fact, beginning to shudder at the presence of this being, this Un-Dead, as Van Helsing called it, and to loathe it" (179). The desire that Seward felt for Lucy has turned to loathing, and there is now no turning back. As Carol A. Senf comments, "The rapidity of the changes implies a degree of latent evil that is easily unleashed by sexual initiation" (52).

At the men's initial encounter at the cemetery with the Vampire Lucy, she beckons Arthur: "Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" (188). Seward writes that her voice is "diabolically sweet ... something of the tinkling of glass when struck – which rang through [their] brains" (188) and bewitched them. This description of Lucy's voice is similar to that of the three vampires who enticed Jonathan with a laugh that was "like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses played on by a cunning hand" (42) and is reminiscent of the Sirens of Greek mythology. It's a trick, the novel seems to be saying: these women are not sweet; they're evil and they want to kill (or at least confuse) men with their newfound sexuality. Another Greek mythological creature used to describe Vampire Lucy is Medusa: Lucy's "brows were wrinkled as though the folds of the flesh were the coils of Medusa's snakes" (188). Medusa in Greek mythology turned people into stone with a look, and while the story of the gargoyle Medusa is generally a story of good versus evil (Perseus versus Medusa), according to *The Encyclopedia Mythica*, "There is a particular myth in which Medusa was originally a beautiful maiden. She desecrated Athena's temple by lying there with Poseidon. Outraged, Athena turned Medusa's hair into living snakes." Richard Dellamora writes of this myth that "Medusa is a victim first of male aggression [rape by Poseidon], then of a vengeful complicity, finally, of the injunction condemning female victims to silence" (138). Applied to the fate of Lucy, Dracula is the rapist, the band of men are the vengeful schemers, and her decapitation is symbolic of her silence (and possibly of castration).

The men return to the cemetery the next night to do what is "necessary" (189). Of Lucy's final death scene, Showalter writes: "The sexual implications of the scene are embarrassingly clear. First there is a gang-rape with the impressive phallic instrument," and Lucy's subsequent decapitation and mouth-stuffing of garlic serve to "shut woman up" (181-182). The stake that Van Helsing presents to Arthur with which to kill Lucy – on what would have been her wedding night – is "some two and a half inches thick and three feet long" (190). The scene is replete with sexual innuendo:

The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor, as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and

deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood fell from the pierced heart and welled and spurted up through it. (192)

According to Belford, “The staking of Lucy, which marks the novel’s real – and the woman’s only – climax, violates another taboo, for it too obviously depicts passionate intercourse ending in orgasm” (7). She continues that “In this scene, Lucy’s fiancé, the shallow aristocrat Lord Godalming delivers her from evil by acting out the wedding-night deflowering” (8). In killing Lucy, the men have not only rid the world of her evil, but have in the process saved her from her own sexuality. Interesting to note, the three female brides/sisters of Dracula are killed in the same manner (by Van Helsing), but the male Dracula is instead “killed” by Quincey’s Bowie knife to the heart.

Third, in what Belford calls “the final primal scene” (8), Dracula is caught in the act of forcing Mina’s mouth to his bleeding chest like “a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink” (247). The scene is essentially about control and who wields that control over whom. According to Phyllis Roth, “the primary preoccupation [of the novel] as attested to by the behavior of both Mina and Dracula in the primal scene, is with the role of the female in the act. Thus, it is not surprising that the central anxiety of the novel is the fear of the devouring woman” (122-23). This is a horrifying experience for Mina and although she could be seen as a “devouring” woman in that she is drinking Dracula’s blood, she is not the aggressor, and is not the one in control here. The fact that husband Jonathan lies in a stupor in the same room as the scene unravels is telling. Jonathan is not able to protect Mina from Dracula and this reveals Dracula’s continued power over him. This leads me to question how much of this scene is about Dracula’s control of Jonathan, rather than Mina.

The issue of gender roles is raised again in the final portion of the novel. The men cannot seem to figure out whether or not they should allow Mina to help them pursue Dracula in the dangerous outside world. They are initially happy for her help, then they say that their work is manly work, then they don’t want her help because of her suspected telepathic link with Dracula, and, finally, they regret not letting her in on their hunting and bring her back into the fold. Consider the following responses: Van Helsing argues “it is no part for a woman” (207); Jonathan concedes “I am so glad she has consented to hold back and let us men do the work” (218) and reiterates “She looks paler than usual ... I am truly thankful that she is to be left out of our future work ... It is too great a strain for a woman to bear. I did not think so at first, but I know better now” (223); and Seward confirms “Mrs. Harker is better out of it. Things are quite bad enough to us, all men of the world, and who have been in many tight places in our time; but it is not place for a woman ” (225). Mina goes along with their Victorian logic, though not without some difficulty: “their minds were made up, and, though it was a bitter pill for me to swallow, I could say nothing, save to accept their chivalrous care of me” (214). However, she does eventually express her annoyance, albeit in a gentle way, telling Van Helsing: “It seemed funny to hear you order me about, as if I were a bad child!” (300). Finally, Van Helsing, the most vocal of all the men regarding Mina’s exclusion from their manly work, states, “Our dear Madam Mina is once more our teacher” (306).

The novel ends in a rush, with Jonathan’s knife going through Dracula’s throat and Quincey’s through his heart. This is not the way to kill a vampire. Where is the stake, the decapitation and the garlic as was seen when the female vampires were killed? Is Dracula truly dead, thus suggesting different rules for women and men? Did Dracula survive? Or did Stoker have a memory lapse? Quincey dies “a gallant gentleman” (326), and using his final breath he says that death was worth it to remove the stain of uncleanness, the burn of Van Helsing’s wafer, from Mina’s forehead. Quincey’s words and the final lines sum up the crux of the novel: the men’s quest was to save good Mina from evil Dracula, and, accordingly, to rescue both Victorian woman and Victorian ideology.

But was it saved? The ambiguous ending is indicative of the entire novel and the contradictions embedded within it. In *Dracula*, Stoker brings to light Victorian anxieties about gender roles and sexuality. He creates a dialogue on the role of gender within *Dracula* through depictions such as the mothering and the anti-mothering female, and the logical and the hysterical male. In the process of doing this, the assumptions of the age naturally seep in. As Senf notes, “Stoker created a work that is somehow larger than the values and beliefs of its characters, a work that manages to criticize many of the traditional

beliefs that its characters hold dear. As a result, readers remember both Dracula and Mina as powerful figures, not simply as characters who are either destroyed or returned to their proper niche when the novel ends” (61). The question is, what is their proper niche? Mina is not destroyed at the end of the novel, yet neither is Dracula (you can’t kill Dracula with a Bowie knife). Both male and female survive, as does the legacy of the adventure, Jonathan and Mina’s baby, Quincey, who is born of the blood of all of the characters (“the children that are to be” [166]).

It is up to the individual reader to decide the ultimate outcome. What we read into *Dracula* is a matter of personal perception. As for what Stoker intended, this has long been a subject of debate among *Dracula* scholars. For example, was Stoker aware of the sexual innuendo present in *Dracula*? Belford argues that “He was many things, but naive was not one of them; he was fully aware of the subtexts of his horror tale” (xiii). Stoker was a man who loved codes and puzzles, she writes, and “In response to the question ‘Who are you?’ I imagine him saying, ‘I am who you want me to be’” (xi). The novel, in turn, is what we want it to be.

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