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Cover Page Footnote

Brigitte Boudreau is a Ph.D. student at the University of Montreal. She intends to pursue an examination of Dracula and other Gothic works with a focus on the representation of feminine monstrosity.

**Mother Dearest, Mother Deadliest:
Object Relations Theory and the Trope of
Failed Motherhood in *Dracula***

Brigitte Boudreau

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Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has often been understood as a novel that portrays sexuality as unfixed and where gender barriers are invariably broken. The idea of unstable sex roles and gender inversion can indeed be seen in the text of *Dracula* and is manifest, for instance, in the portrayal of female and feminine characters in the novel. One example of this is the recurring trope of failed motherhood that permeates throughout Stoker's work. The mother or maternal figure repeatedly fails to protect her children against vampires, and some go so far as to prey upon children once they themselves have become "undead." The object relations theory is an interesting way to examine the maternal characters in *Dracula*. This approach "favors a model that ... concentrates ... on the way the self interacts with its social world, especially the initial world of primary caretakers such as the mother ..." (Rivkin and Ryan 438). This psychoanalytic approach was co-founded by and is most often associated with the well-known psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. The theory itself is rooted in the disciplines of Freudian child psychology and psychoanalysis. Both past and contemporary object relations theorists may thus be used to shed light on a psychoanalytical examination of the novel.

Freudian interpretations of *Dracula* have largely contended that the novel may be understood as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex on either an explicit or implicit level. John Paul Riquelme points out in "What is Psychoanalytic Criticism?" that "[w]hat Freud did was develop a language that described, a model that explained, a theory that encompassed human psychology" (467). From this perspective, the small band of men that sets out to destroy the count stands for the sons turning against their father, and the women they must save from Dracula symbolize the mother figures that the sons will in turn repossess from their father (Roth 115). The object relations approach, however, shifts the patriarchal focus and attempts to address the deeper function of the maternal figure. Object relations analysts hold that the mother/child relationship is "dyadic – that is, as being dynamic in both directions" (Riquelme 473), thereby focusing equally on the interaction between mother and child. The object relations theory thus challenges the Freudian classification of clear-cut gender roles, and "underscores the infant's primary erotic connection with the body of the pre-oedipal mother – a connection which is conceptualized as the central organizing axis for all human social relationships" (Elliott 118). In light of this, *Dracula* may be analyzed as a matrix-centered novel, and characters such as the three female vampires in the castle, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray should be closely examined. Even Dracula may be seen as a maternal figure, as he transcends and inverts gender roles throughout the text. In essence, many of the relationships in the novel may be understood as mother/son and mother/daughter binaries, and examined from an object relations approach.

First, in terms of maternal characters in the novel, the "weird sisters" are paramount to the discussion of motherhood in *Dracula* as they both invert and pervert the natural role of the mother. When Jonathan first encounters them in a forbidden part of the castle, he describes them as "ladies by their dress and manner" (Stoker 44). Two of them are "dark, and had high aquiline noses, like the Count, and great dark, piercing eyes, that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon" (44). The other is fair with "great masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires" (44). Curiously, Jonathan recognizes the third vampire: "I seemed somehow to know her face, and to know it in connection with some dreamy fear, but I could not recollect at the moment how or where" (44-45). Moreover, Roth adds that the face that Jonathan remembers but cannot place "is that of the mother (almost archetypally

presented), she whom he desires yet fears, the temptress-seductress, Medusa” (“Suddenly Sexual Women” 119). Indeed, the woman that Jonathan cannot pinpoint may be related to the unconscious, and more specifically to the ghostly figure of the mother.¹

In *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Madelon Sprengnether contends that the body of the mother “becomes that which is longed for yet cannot be appropriated, a representative of both home and not home, and hence, in Freud’s terms, the site of the uncanny” (9). In light of this, Jonathan could be said to remember his mother in the bodily form of these vampiric seductresses, since “[l]ove and desire are born through an erotic union with [the] mother” (Elliott 118). The weird sisters in this scene awaken feelings of desire in the passionless Jonathan for the first time. Indeed, the women’s appeal “is described almost pornographically” (Roth 114) and Christopher Bentley sees the scene as “a masturbatory fantasy or erotic dream” (28). At once both attracted and repulsed by the voluptuous women, Jonathan remarks: “[t]here was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (Stoker 45). The conflicting feelings that Jonathan experiences here are consistent with the object relations notion that the child desires and at the same time wants to destroy the mother (Elliott 118). Just as the women prepare to bite Jonathan, however, Dracula interrupts them and forbids them from going near him. He then offers them what Jonathan believes to be a child in his place:

“Are we to have nothing to-night?” said one of them [the women] ... as she pointed to the bag ... which moved as though there were some living thing within it ... For answer he nodded his head ... If my ears did not deceive me there was a gasp and a low wail, as of a half smothered child. The women closed round, whilst I was aghast with horror. (46-47)

Here, the “living thing” represents Jonathan’s double, who, like a helpless babe, is overpowered and devoured by the forces of evil. In this sense, then, the women consume him, just as they feast upon what appears to be a young infant. This can once again be linked to the trope of failed motherhood, since “female vampires reverse the maternal role by eating rather than nourishing babies” (Belford 14). Moreover, in “The ‘Unconscious’ of Literature,” Norman Holland notes the relevance of the Freudian oral stage in *Dracula*, which becomes a period when “desires for nourishment and infantile sexual desires overlap” (qtd. in Riquelme 472). The weird sisters thus exemplify the oral stage, as they “suck, eat, consume, consume utterly – even inappropriately – which in its most extreme form involves the appetite to eat (and destroy by eating) human flesh” (Riquelme 476).

Furthermore, the consumption of this “creature” and Jonathan (metaphorically) recalls the image of the *vagina dentata*. Indeed, the vampiric women’s mouths, which are described in the novel as dripping with “moisture shinning on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth” (Stoker 62), brings to mind a menstruating vagina. Roth holds that this taboo and uncanny representation is related to feelings of violent hatred towards the mother figure:

The fantasy of incest and matricide evokes the mythic image of the *vagina dentata* evident in so many folk tales in which the mouth and the vagina are identified with one another by the primitive mind and pose the threat of castration to all men until the teeth are extracted by the hero. (119-20)

The sexualized mother figure that is lusted after and feared thus becomes a victorious predator, since her teeth are not extracted. Indeed, the matriarchal vampires become the most fearful creatures in the entire novel, as they are able “to assert their sexuality in a much more explicit manner than ... [the]

¹ A far more prosaic explanation has been proposed by textual critics: that the Englishman’s vague recollection of the blond vampire is due to the fact that she attacked him near Munich, an episode cut from the novel but which survives in the short story “Dracula’s Guest.”

'living' characters" (Bentley 28). They further pervert and invert the image of the idealized Marian figure and set themselves up as whores at the opposite end of this dichotomous spectrum.

Dorothy Dinnerstein explores the depiction of the maternal figure as predator in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. In her work, she proposes that because women in late capitalist societies were solely responsible for parenting, their children became fearful of them. Indeed, "[t]he early mother's apparent omnipotence, then, her ambivalent role as ultimate source of good and evil, is a central source of human malaise: our species' uneasy, unstable stance toward nature, and its uneasy, unstable sexual arrangements, are inseparable aspects of this malaise" (100). Interestingly enough, Jonathan adopts a passive role towards the overpowering maternal figures of the weird sisters, who in turn treat him as a helpless Victorian child who is seen but not heard. Later, when Dracula leaves the castle, he forsakes Jonathan to the women, and the reader is left to decide whether they have succeeded in "penetrating" him or not. Christopher Craft clarifies this point: "Dracula, soon departing for England, leaves Harker to the weird sisters, whose final penetration of him, implied but never represented, occurs in the dark interspace to which Harker's journal gives no access" (6). In addition, both sexes are said to fear the power that the mother yields over them as infants, a fear which leads children to betray the "'engulfing mother' by turning to the father in search of emotional security" (Elliott 118). As such, from the very beginning of the novel, the weird sisters, who are both Dracula's wives and daughters, are portrayed as erotic and predatory maternal figures. Their image thus evokes the trope of failed motherhood throughout the text. The object relations approach in psychoanalytic theory helps to further uncover this recurring theme in the novel, especially through the character of Lucy.

As the central fallen woman of *Dracula*, Lucy is both the child of a mother who fails to protect her, and a maternal figure who preys upon children. Lucy displays negative maternal behavior towards children once she is transformed into a vampire. Like the weird sisters, Lucy preys upon children, although her victims actually survive her attacks, unlike the supposed infant at Castle Dracula. Once Lucy's nightly meetings with Dracula commence, she becomes "infected with his hunger" (Foster 485) and has "an appetite like a cormorant" (Stoker 117). Ironically, the children she preys upon refer to her affectionately as the "bloofer lady" (Stoker 208). This "bloofer lady," which is child-talk for a "beautiful lady" (Hindle 448) is not seen as a threat to the youngsters she attacks, as they heed to her call when she summons. As Foster points out, "the bloofer lady does not frighten children" (488). Indeed, one child who has been bitten by Lucy tells his nurse that he wants "to play with the 'bloofer lady'" (Stoker 209), and other youths play games where they imitate Lucy whisking them away: "a favorite game of the little ones at present is luring each other away by wiles" (Stoker 189). Foster observes that the children, like the main male characters, "are drawn to this motherly, erotically charged woman, giving themselves to her while they also identify with her" (488). As such, Lucy adopts a maternal role wherein she is "the source of both joy and horror to her child, since she is the one who can both give and take life. Lucy's vampiric relations with the children expose the link between the oral and the erotic in the era of childhood and the mutual haunting of mother and child" (Foster 488). Lucy becomes a bloodthirsty predator who brings about death orally and who reverses the natural role of the mother by feeding off her young victims.

In the scene where Lucy is finally caught with a child by the band of men inside her tomb, her attitude towards the youngster recalls Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. In *Dracula*, Stoker writes: "With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone. The child gave a sharp cry, and lay there moaning" (226). Comparatively, in *Macbeth* Shakespeare ascribes to Lady Macbeth the following lines: "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (1.7 55-59). Lucy, like Lady Macbeth, displays a cruel and even animalistic behavior towards children. Similarly to the weird sisters, youngsters have become no more than food to her. The trope of failed motherhood is thus personified by the character of Lucy once she has become a vampire.

Lucy may also be viewed as a maternal figure to her three suitors; John Seward, Quincey Morris, and Arthur Holmwood, the last of whom she chooses to marry. Like Dracula's relationship

with the weird sisters, the uncanny union between Lucy and the small band of men is both motherly and sexual in nature. First, when Lucy receives her proposals, she finds it difficult to reject John and Quincey, like a mother who loves each of her children equally: "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it" (Stoker 67). Roth points out that when Lucy turns down John and Quincey, she becomes a "rejecting figure, rejecting two of the three 'sons' in the novel" (117). Later, Arthur believes that he alone has given a blood transfusion to Lucy, and announces that this fluid exchange "made her truly his bride" (Stoker 187). However, because Van Helsing, Dr. Seward, and Quincey Morris have also donated their blood to her, Van Helsing insinuates that Lucy "is a polyandrist" (187). Besides the sexual allusions, the exchange of blood reinforces the bond between Lucy and the men, suggesting that she is truly a maternal figure to them. In terms of the object relations approach, the desire to destroy the mother is once again relevant here. For instance, when Lucy receives her proposals, she notices that John fidgets with his knife as he asks for her hand in marriage. Lucy finds this odd behavior for someone proposing: "he [Dr. Seward] wanted to appear at ease he kept playing with a lancet in a way that made me nearly scream" (65). Quincey also never fails to carry a bowie knife, and Arthur Holmwood, turned Lord Godalming after the death of his father, ultimately dispatches Lucy with a stake.

Aside from the phallic insinuation here, the weapons carried by the men may also suggest the love/hate relationship they share with Lucy, which is once again consistent with the object relations approach: "The paradox of desire is that the infant loves the mother, but hates her as well" (Elliott 118). Once vamped, Lucy learns to become a visceral sexual being that goes after what she wants and is no longer inhibited by Victorian rules of conduct for young women. For instance, right before her first "death," when she is fighting for each breath, she makes advances towards her would-be husband: "Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!" (Stoker 172). Lucy's lewd forcefulness is echoed later when she has become a vampire, and commands Arthur to join her: "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!" (226). The aggressive sexuality that Lucy exudes leads to her second and ultimate "death" by staking. Indeed, the contradictory sentiments of love and hate towards the motherly Lucy culminate when Arthur drives a stake through her heart:

The Thing in the coffin writhed, and a hideous, bloodcurdling 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 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 mercybearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it. The sight of it gave us courage so that our voices seemed to ring through the little vault. (230)

This scene resonates of an honor killing where the entire family stand as witnesses to the punishment of what is deemed a sexually liberated woman. Further, Arthur and the other men seem to gain a certain amount of satisfaction in destroying Lucy in a sexually-laden manner, and Roth believes that the scene is also incestuous, as all the other "sons" gain visual pleasure in observing Lucy's killing. From a Freudian perspective, these deep-seeded feelings would not be consciously registered in their minds, but instead would be repressed into the unconscious. Riquelme underscores that the theory of repression explains how "much of what lies in the unconscious mind has been put there by consciousness, which acts as a censor, driving underground unconscious or conscious thoughts or instincts that it deems unacceptable. Censored materials often involve infantile sexual desires" (467-68). As such, from an object relations perspective, vampirism becomes "a disguise for greatly desired and equally strongly feared fantasies" towards the figure of the mother (Roth 115). From an object relations point of view, Lucy clearly displays the trope of failed motherhood first as the child of a mother who does not succeed in protecting her, and later as a perverted maternal figure towards the children she preys upon. She is also

the wanton mother to the small band of men until her untimely death when Mina, the “mother spirit” of the novel, replaces her.

In contrast to Lucy, Mina Murray (later Harker) is the good mother figure, and arguably the central heroine of *Dracula*. Acting as Lucy’s foil, Mina represents the Marion mother type, who is generally “chaste but somewhat sexless” (Bentley 28) throughout almost the entire work. Unlike Lucy, Mina is an orphan, having “never [known] either father or mother” (Stoker 168) and thus does not feel the effects of failed motherhood as a child. Mina replaces Lucy as the maternal figure for the band of men, and also experiences motherhood first-hand at the end of the novel. First, she becomes the emotional confidant of John, Quincey and Arthur when Lucy dies. As Peter K. Garrett observes, “After Lucy’s ‘true’ death, the interest transfers to Mina as the three grief-stricken men each get emotional release and solace from her powerful ‘mother spirit’” (131). Indeed, there are several instances where one could imagine Mina as a statuesque Madonna cradling her child. In one episode, Mina tells of how she comforts the heart-broken Arthur:

We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked; I felt this big man’s sorrowing head resting upon me, as though it were that of the baby that someday may lie on my bosom, and I stroked his hair as though he were my own child. (Stoker 245)

Mina also comforts Quincey who suffers from Lucy’s loss. She notes in her journal that “[h]e bore his own trouble so bravely that my heart bled for him” and assures him that she can provide the shoulder to cry on that he desperately seeks: “Will you let me be your friend, and will you come to me for comfort if you need it?” (246). Dr. Seward also receives kind treatment from Mina, who sometimes regards him as having “the naivety of a child” (235). Mina is thus an important maternal figure throughout the novel. The pre-Oedipal mother/son bond is referred to as “anaclitic object-attachment,” which signifies that mothers relate to their sons “as different and other from themselves. Mothers thus lead their sons to disengage emotionally from care and intimacy. This prepares boys for an instrumental, abstract attitude towards the world” (Elliott 122). In *Dracula*, Mina encourages this attitude of emotional withdrawal when she convinces the men that she must go with them to Transylvania to help defeat the evil Count: “You men are brave and strong. You are strong in your numbers, for you can defy that which would break down the human endurance of one who had to guard alone” (Stoker 348). Later, she makes them vow that if she turns into a vampire, they will dispatch her immediately: “You must promise me, one and all, even you, my beloved husband, that should the time come, you will kill me” (352). Mina thus becomes the prototypical maternal figure to her “sons,” and encourages the manifestation of the “anaclitic object-attachment” relationship by forcing her “boys” to be emotionally strong and to set their feelings aside.

Mina’s maternal role is shifted to that of a child in the episode where she is attacked by Dracula and forced to drink his blood. Described as “the primal scene in oral terms” (Bierman, qtd. in Roth 114), the sexually-laden encounter rivals Lucy’s staking, and many critics consider it to be “a symbolic act of enforced fellation” (Craft 20). Dr. Seward recalls the scene in his diary:

With his left hand he [Dracula] held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension. His right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white night-dress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare chest which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink. (Stoker 300)

In this scene, Dracula takes on a maternal role towards his would-be child/wife Mina, and nourishes her with his “plague-carrying” blood. As with Lucy, it seems that “this horrible hunger that we would psychically repress turns out to be an infectious, communicable appetite. First Lucy, then Mina, is

subject to ‘vampiric conversation’ thanks to the carelessness of four suitors...” (Riquelme 476). Although Mina is being forced into the act of sucking Dracula’s blood, she clearly experiences a “primitive oral desire” in this scene. Foster contends that Mina becomes the “‘sucking child,’ the ‘child drinking at her mother’s breast,’ and a ‘vampire: in drinking Dracula’s blood, she enjoys the pleasure normally reserved for the vampire’” (qtd. in Riquelme 476-77). Through Dracula’s advances, Mina is arguably tainted and becomes a less than perfect maternal figure for the rest of the novel.

Not only is the figure of the mother once again perverted, but this scene also inverts gender categories by having a male “breastfeed” a female. Craft elaborates upon this point: “In this initiation scene Dracula compels Mina into a world where gender distinctions collapse, where male and female bodily fluids intermingle terribly” (20). Indeed, the idealized maternal figure of Mina is rendered child-like, and Dracula, the supreme maternal force, takes the stage. As such, Dracula robs Mina of her role as “mother spirit” of the novel after their encounter. Later, the marking caused by Van Helsing’s wafer on Mina’s forehead further reflects her post-lapsarian, tainted condition. Although Dracula is defeated in the end, and Mina bears a child, the once unspoiled and Marion mother figure arguably becomes slightly blemished, albeit she still remains the central heroine of the novel, even more so than any of the male protagonists. Indeed, her attitude seems more aligned with Lucy’s, as she has named her son in honor of all the men. As Jonathan notes, “His bundle of names links all our little band of men together. But we call him Quincey” (Stoker 402). The decision to name the child after the central males in the group may be interpreted as Mina’s symbolic marriage to them, thereby fulfilling Lucy’s desire to join in matrimony with as many men as she wishes. It also creates a somewhat incestual aura over the text, since it implies that Dracula’s blood flows in the child’s veins, as Judith Halberstam points out: “Blood circulates throughout vampiric sexuality as a substitute or metaphor for other bodily fluids (milk, semen)” (345). It also leaves the reader with the sense that compulsive heterosexuality has been defeated at the end of the novel, as Halberstam suggests:

[E]ven though monogamous sexuality appears to triumph in the birth of Quincey ... the boy is as much the son of Dracula as he is of the ‘little band of men’ ... after whom he is named. Blood has been mixed after all; and like the ‘mass of material’ which tells the story of the vampire but contains ‘hardly one authentic document,’ Quincey is hardly the authentic reproduction of his parents. Monster, in fact, merges with man ... and the boy reincarnates the dead American, Quincey Morris, and the dead vampire, Dracula ... (349-50)

Essentially, *Dracula* ends on a polygamous note, and implies that with the birth (or re-birth) of Quincey, the next generation will not easily accept established and unshakable identity categories. Here also, the themes of maternity and incest are conflated, which ultimately indicates a sort of unnatural motherhood. In sum, Mina, who may be viewed as the good mother figure of *Dracula*, is also depicted in a negative light following Dracula’s attack upon her. The object relations approach, more specifically the anaclitic object-attachment, helps to uncover how she displays traits of the failed maternal figure. Dracula too displays maternal qualities, thus inverting traditional gender-set categories.

This approach challenges the traditional Freudian reading of Dracula as the evil father figure of the novel. Instead, an object relations approach might consider him as a powerful maternal force. As aforementioned, the attack upon Mina clearly inverts his role as a potent phallic male, and transforms him into an effeminate mother figure. Foster argues that as the symbolic matrix of the novel, Dracula “teaches the women he assaults to be vigorous in their pursuit of enjoyment as men usually are” (489). Dracula also acts motherly towards Jonathan in his castle, when the latter is attacked by the weird sisters. As Foster points out, Dracula, “[l]ike a parent speaking to a child, ... warns Harker not to venture out of his room at night” (490). When Jonathan disobeys and finds himself the prey of Dracula’s daughters/wives, the Count saves him from certain death:

I was conscious of the presence of the Count, and of his being as if lapped in a storm of fury.... In a voice which, though low and almost in a whisper seemed to cut through the air and then ring in the room he said, 'How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me!'(Stoker 46)

As such, Dracula displays the possibility of being a good maternal figure. In the next scene, however, he gives the weird sisters the bag containing what appears to be the "half-smothered child" (47), thus reverting back into an evil mother figure. Further, he eventually abandons Jonathan, as the latter states: "I am alone in the castle with those awful women. Faugh!" (61), thus demonstrating once again that the Count is a neglectful "mother." In short, Dracula possesses some significant maternal traits that might not always be considered negative to the modern reader, especially since he promotes and encourages sexual liberation. He does, however, invert and pervert the natural role of the mother and in this sense represents a failed maternal figure as well as a good one.

Overall, the trope of failed motherhood is an important recurring motif in Stoker's *Dracula*, and one that may be examined using the object relations approach. Exemplifying this theme of perverted and inverted maternal behavior are the characters of the weird sisters, Lucy and Dracula. Although Mina cannot be categorized with these vampiric predators, she nevertheless remains a tainted maternal figure after Dracula's attack and thus loses her ideal mother status. Further, the anaclitic object-attachment theory focuses on the bonds shared between maternal figures and their sons, such as the small band of men with Lucy, and subsequently with Mina. Throughout *Dracula*, children and child-like figures are both sexually drawn to and repulsed by their mothers, such as Jonathan towards the weird sisters. In addition, uncanny feelings of matricide regularly surface in the minds of the incestuous sons, who sexually desire their mothers yet at the same time will their destruction. The object relations approach thus complements and completes an analysis of the phenomenon that is *Dracula*, and helps make sense of the theme of unfixed and adaptable gender roles as well as sexuality issues that appear throughout the novel.

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