Journal of Dracula Studies

Volume 19 Article 5

2019

“That Smileless Mouth of Him”: Humor and the Malice of Delay in Dracula

Matthew VanWinkle
Idaho State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
VanWinkle, Matthew (2019) "“That Smileless Mouth of Him”: Humor and the Malice of Delay in Dracula," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 19, Article 5.
Available at: https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol19/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Dracula Studies by an authorized editor of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact czerny@kutztown.edu.

“That Smileless Mouth of Him”: Humor and the Malice of Delay in Dracula

Cover Page Footnote

Matthew VanWinkle is an assistant professor of English at Idaho State University. His research interests include nineteenth-century British poetry, Gothic fiction, and the ways in which current popular culture engages with those bodies of literature. His work has previously appeared in Romantic Circles, Studies in Romanticism, The X-Files and Literature: Unweaving the story, Unraveling the Lie to Find the Truth (an edited collection), Religion and the Arts, and New Ohio Review.]

This article is available in Journal of Dracula Studies: https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol19/iss1/5

"That Smileless Mouth of Him": Humor and the Malice of Delay in *Dracula*

Matthew VanWinkle

[Matthew VanWinkle is an assistant professor of English at Idaho State University. His research interests include nineteenth-century British poetry, Gothic fiction, and the ways in which current popular culture engages with those bodies of literature. His work has previously appeared in *Romantic Circles, Studies in Romanticism*, *The X-Files and Literature: Unweaving the story, Unraveling the Lie to Find the Truth* (an edited collection), *Religion and the Arts*, and *New Ohio Review*.]

> "This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last."
> --Gwendolen Fairfax,
> *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The most conspicuous instance of laughter in *Dracula* occurs at the conclusion of Lucy Westenra's funeral. After Arthur Holmwood equates transfusion with marriage, unwittingly rendering his departed fiancée a figurative polygamist, Van Helsing is seized with a "regular fit of hysterics," barely able to contain his indecorous outburst until he and Seward reach the privacy of a carriage. Seward ascribes this fit to Van Helsing's weakened condition, a result of the rigors of having watched and bled for a number of days over the patient they both have loved and lost. Van Helsing instead takes his eruption of hilarity as an indicator of laughter's strength: "Keep it always with you that laughter who knock at your door and say, 'May I come in?' is not the true laughter. No! he is a king, and he come when and how he like. He ask no person; he

choose no time of suitability. He say, ‘I am here’” (*Dracula* 157). Like much else in the novel, this personification of laughter locates an unsteady and highly permeable boundary between human beings and vampires. The majesty and command of laughter’s rank aligns it with the threat of the titular count. At the same time, laughter embodies one of the few ways in which human beings retain an edge over vampires: it needs no invitation to enable its entrance, and the hours of the day are all the same to it.

Some recent scholars of the novel have endorsed Van Helsing’s sanguine view of his unnerving hilarity. The editors of *The Lost Journal of Bram Stoker*, for example, suggest that Van Helsing’s fit serves a therapeutic purpose: “laughter has a healthy function in that it provides emotional release from strain. Van Helsing is coping with the death of a beautiful young woman who was about to be married but has met a fate even worse than death—eternal damnation” (79-80). Christine Ferguson finds Van Helsing’s outburst not merely salutary, but heroic. His laughter not only restores his emotional equilibrium; it also “might be seen as a metaphor for [his] role in relation to both Count Dracula as villain and Dracula as text, providing humor and fulfilling the disruptive function that forces the vampire's careful plans to crumble” (240). More than just the medium of darkly comic relief, laughter emerges as a necessary virtue in the campaign against a vampiric threat. For other critics, however, Van Helsing’s oddly humored convulsion indicates how even the novel’s heroes are inextricably compromised by sinister impulses. Connecting the eerie chortling to “just one of several forms of obsession and compulsion, abandon and dispossession” in the novel, Srdjan Smajić asserts that “Van Helsing’s personified ‘King Laugh’ is a despotic puppet master who ‘choose no time of suitability’ and

'make…all dance to the tune he play'" (49). Laughter is no less intrusive and tyrannical than Dracula himself.

In an effort to illuminate (among other things) the taunting equivocations of King Laugh, this essay will examine moments of humor in *Dracula*, recovering their relationship to late Victorian reflections on the subject, and reassessing the role that these reflections play in the elaboration of Stoker's gothic vision. It begins by situating the novel in relation to a commonly observed shift in Victorian humor, which exchanges the fonder, sympathetic chuckles of Dickens for the more calculated, acerbic snickers of Meredith and Wilde. It then proceeds to connect this sharper sense of humor to a recurrent dynamic in the novel, a dynamic I will be calling the malice of delay. The malice of delay involves one character finding amusement by protracting another character's uncertainty and anxiety, usually through the withholding or painfully casual unfolding of crucial information. This dynamic proves so pervasive that it might initially seem to collapse any distinction between Dracula and his pursuers, or indeed between Dracula and his victims. The malice of delay inspires a dark sense of humor that participates in the habits of mind that make vampires possible. The supernatural predator's smirking voracity is not an unholy innovation; it is precipitated by a recognizably human hunger to forestall the final departure to that undiscovered country. Despite this susceptibility to share a laugh with the very threat they have vowed to root out, a closer inspection nevertheless reveals that the novel's protagonists become increasingly aware of their practice of this perversely procrastinating mirth, and turn this strain of laughter into an occasion for self-scrutiny. This self-scrutiny eventually transforms the fear of death, which drives humans and vampires alike, into a more distinctly human *fear of the fear of death*, which resists the urge to delay fatality at a terrible

cost. Vampires laugh malevolently at the lengths they will go to, the terrible measures of survival they accept, just in order to avoid dying. While Dracula’s pursuers initially shares this sense of humor, their laughter leads them to realize what they are tempted to accept, and ultimately to reject unending life on such horrific terms. They become more afraid of what fearing death might lead them to do, than they are afraid of death itself. Laughter becomes the chilling peal better stuck in the throat than vented through ruby lips and pointed teeth.

Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a range of observers noted two trends in Victorian attitudes to humor: increasingly ambitious claims for the importance of a sense of humor, and the emergence of a rougher, more incisive comedic practice. Leslie Stephen’s 1876 discussion of humor in *Cornhill Magazine* both acknowledges and responds to these trends. His essay begins with the imputation that a sense of humor has become drastically overvalued:

> A fashion has sprung up of late years regarding the sense of humour as one of the cardinal virtues. …It is indeed rarer to meet man, woman, or child who will confess to any deficiency in humour than to a want of logic. Many people will confess that they are indolent, superstitious, unjust, fond of money, fond of good living, or of flattery… but nobody ever admits that he or she can’t see a joke or take an argument. (318)

Stephen devotes most of his attention to exploring, and often regretting, the unearned ascendancy of humor over other, more deserving virtues. Nevertheless, the pairing of humor and reason, of the ability to see a joke and take an argument, persists. While conceding that the milder version of humor popular at mid-century dilutes some of its genuinely objectionable features, Stephen

unexpectedly concludes with the notion that more is lost than gained in the dilution:

> The true humorist might be brutal, but he had real intensity of feeling….The general want of vigour is perhaps after all at the bottom of the deficiency in good hearty reckless humour; and therefore much as we may rejoice at the absence of some of its worst manifestations, I fear we shall not be able to congratulate ourselves unreservedly when we have reached the consummation to
> which we seem to be so rapidly tending, and declare that the humorous has been finally banished from literature. (326)

Even if "true humor" is susceptible to brutality and recklessness, its energy remains a necessary antidote to an overly genial complacency. Stephen suspects such remedy as humor can provide—its "worst manifestations" can themselves be a disease in need of cure—but he concludes that it cannot be dispensed with entirely.

George Meredith's famous 1877 description of the Comic Spirit attempts a similar balance between potentially productive risibility and an unignorable sense of menace. This extensive description concludes by assigning the Comic Spirit the supervisory task of exposing the follies and pretensions of bourgeois society. In its final expression of amusement, the Spirit both emphasizes the transition taking place within Victorian culture and intensifies its resemblance to the sinister humor of Stoker's novel: "whenever [men] offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter" (Meredith 47). The Comic Spirit's searching

gaze exposes faults and frailties in genuine need of address. Yet, as "humanely malign" indicates, this exposure must at least risk cruelty to serve its intended purpose. The Spirit's "volleys of silvery laughter" might even be heard as anticipating the creepy, and inhumanely malign, tittering of the weird sisters in their initial meeting with Jonathan Harker in the third chapter of *Dracula*: "they whispered together, and then they all three laughed—such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips" (42). In addition to this slender but suggestive resemblance, Meredith's intial description of the Comic Spirit reveals a likeness that is more than grin deep.

> [The comic spirit] has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. …Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. (46)

Two features of this portrait connect humor to a kind of predatory zeal, in ways that become uncomfortably familiar as *Dracula* proceeds. The Spirit's "feasting smile" resembles the vampire's grim postprandial leer. Further, and more pointedly, the unhurried manner in which the Spirit can dispense with "any fluttering eagerness" as it contemplates its prey enacts a malice of delay similar to the smirking procrastinations that frequently shape humor in *Dracula*.

An early version of the malice of delay can be found in Stoker's recently recovered Dublin journal. There, he records an anecdote of bloody, slapstick comedy in

which a well-intentioned man named Murphy, attempting to respond to a little girl's request for help, takes a grievous blow to the head from a woman wielding a bellows, who has mistaken him for her husband. The ensuing wound bleeds so profusely that Murphy goes to the doctor, where he receives medical advice that turns on an agonizingly hilarious pause:

> he examined me very careful and ses I, for I was mighty anxious intirely, 'Dr Jewel', I ses ses I, "Will I die?' And he looked at me an' he ses ses he, "Ye will.'An' then my wife began to yell & bawl till the police kem kickin' up a shindig, at the hall dure—and ses the docther ses he, 'Will ye hould your whistle,' ses he, 'Do ye want to ruin me intirely? Yes', he ses, 'ye will die but not of this.'(*Lost Journal* 198)

The doctor does not bother to correct the mistake he has helped to promote until after he becomes personally inconvenienced and professionally vulnerable. The bawling of Murphy's wife does not hurry the doctor toward offering a clarification. In the context of this anecdote, this hesitation can still come across as inadvertent, and in keeping with the shaggy jocularity that brings Murphy to the doctor in the first place. In *Dracula*, protracting another person's distress is always deliberate, in ways that read as viciously gratuitous.

Jonathan Harker encounters a version of this baleful dawdling before he even reaches Castle Dracula, as the calèche that covers the last leg of his trip refrains from haste, in a way that begins to feel sinister:

> It seemed to me that we were simply going over and over the same ground again; and so I took note of some salient point, and found that this was so. I would have liked to ask the driver what this all meant, but I really feared to do so, for I thought that, placed as I was, any protest would

> have had no effect in case there had been an intention to delay. (*Dracula* 18)

This apparently deliberate delay affords an eerie contrast with the calèche’s speedy intersection of Harker’s previous carriage, and runs counter to one of his fellow passenger’s skittish speculation that, per Bürger’s “Lenore,” “the dead travel fast.” This speculation elicits a “gleaming smile” from the calèche’s unnerving coachman (*Dracula* 17).

If Dracula’s dawdling during his final approach is indeed deliberate, its purpose is hard to fathom. As Leslie S. Klinger, editor of *The New Annotated Dracula* (2008), observes, “why Dracula delays Harker’s arrival at the castle is unclear. Midnight is regarded as the most important hour on the eve of St. George’s Day, Harker has been told, when the power of evil spirits is at its height. But Dracula makes nothing of this opportunity” (37, n. 92). Dracula’s insistence on prolonging Harker’s stay in the castle raises similar questions. After consulting with his guest for a week, Dracula demands that Harker stay for another month (*Dracula* 37). The two most plausible reasons for such an order have already been addressed. Early in their acquaintance, Dracula desires conversation with Harker to refine his English, but even prior to this request one of the first things that Harker notices about the count is that he speaks “in excellent English” (*Dracula* 22). Nor is it likely that Harker’s legal expertise is necessary any longer. Dracula has just been informed that he may retain as many lawyers as he sees fit, and in Harker’s estimation “[Dracula] would have made a wonderful solicitor…For a man who was never in the country, and who did not evidently do much in the way of business, his knowledge and acumen were wonderful” (*Dracula* 37). As he becomes more fully acquainted with the terror he faces, Harker develops a third hypothesis as he sees

Dracula exit the castle in his typically lizard-like fashion, dressed in Jonathan's clothes: "This then is his new scheme of evil: that he will allow others to see me, as they think, so that he may both leave evidence that I have been seen in the towns or villages posting my own letters, and that any wickedness which he may do shall by the local people be attributed to me" (*Dracula* 47). Yet neither of these emergent motives really stands up to scrutiny. No one in the vicinity seems to remain unacquainted with the extent of Dracula's evil; there would be no need for him to frame someone else for his wickedness. Nor would it be strictly necessary to create a false trail implying that Harker leaves the castle alive. Everyone in the hotel at Bistritz, and on the coach through the Borgo Pass, seems to assume that he is already as good as dead.

Harker's final night in Castle Dracula suggests a darker, more compelling explanation for his host's delay in dealing with him. Fearing for his life and doubting the sincerity of Dracula's professed intention of letting him depart on the following day, Jonathan asks to leave immediately, despite the perils of travelling after dark. Dracula seems at first to acquiesce, but a pack of howling wolves throngs toward the barely opened door. In despair, Harker withdraws his request. Later that evening he overhears Dracula addressing the weird sisters: "Back, back, to your own place! Your time is not yet come. Wait. Have patience. Tomorrow night, tomorrow night, is yours!" (*Dracula* 52). The sisters answer in "a low, sweet ripple of laughter" that waxes into "a horrible laugh" when Harker throws open the door of his room to confront them. At this point, Harker is no longer merely superfluous; his knowledge renders him a liability. There can be no tactical reason to forestall his fate, even by a night. The sisters' laughter betrays the vicious purpose of the postponement;

Jonathan’s plight, his sheer distress at the security of their power over him, amuses them. Harker finds confirmation of this malevolent mirth on Dracula’s catatonic face the following day, as he desperately searches for the key to his prison: “I felt all over the body, but no sign could I find of the key. Then I stopped and looked at the Count. There was a mocking smile on the bloated face which seemed to drive me mad” (*Dracula* 53). Surfeited on fresh blood, impervious from his antagonist/victim’s interference even in sleep, Dracula’s smile displays a bemusement that gains in zest the longer its object’s affliction endures.

As Alana Fletcher has recently observed, the leisurely malevolence with which Dracula savors the panic he inflicts derives from one of the key differences between him and his pursuers: “In *Dracula*, Stoker foregrounds the vampire hunters’ collective reliance on external significations of time, such as clock time, calendar time, and standard railway time, while Dracula’s sense of time is outside such constraints” (56). Van Helsing gives voice to the most awful consequence of this difference at the conclusion of Chapter 24. When Mina asks him if it is really necessary to pursue the count after driving him from England, Van Helsing responds emphatically in the affirmative, “because…he can live for centuries, and you are but mortal woman. Time is now to be dreaded—since once he put that mark upon your throat” (*Dracula* 273). Mina, and those who love her, are urgently aware that they cannot afford to be so cavalier as to wait to see what unfolds. Even if the heroes of the novel usually recognize this distinction between mortal limitation and vampiric privilege, their sense of humor often reveals a twisted mirth in procrastination ominously similar to Dracula’s. And the first person to indulge in this comic pursuit is Mina

herself, more than a week prior to her horrific baptism of blood.

During her first meeting with Van Helsing, Mina is surprised to discover that he has not only read her letters to Lucy but also Lucy's diary. The surprise stems in part from not knowing that Lucy had started keeping a diary, but it might also well be inferred that Mina takes unconscious offense at the intrusion into Lucy's private thoughts, even posthumously. Mina then lets Van Helsing know that she kept a full account of the time that she and Lucy spent in Whitby, and accedes to his request for her journal. At least, she eventually accedes to this request, but not without having a little teasing fun with her new acquaintance first: "I could not resist the temptation of mystifying him a bit—I suppose it is some of the taste of the original apple that still remains in our mouths—so I handed him the shorthand diary" (164). After the lively pleasure she takes in Van Helsing's initial befuddlement, Mina dutifully provides an entirely legible, typewritten transcript. She has nevertheless made her point in a way that unites her sense of humor with the malice of delay: women reveal only what they choose to reveal, and even clever men can decode them only with their deliberate cooperation[1]. If arguably the most virtuous character in the book engages in the self-congratulation of laughter fostered by a passive-aggressive pause, it testifies to the pervasiveness of this vicious glee in Stoker's text.

If Mina first applies the hard-edged synthesis of humor and delay in England, it is nevertheless Van

[1] Alison Case notices something similar when she observes that Mina's "'little joke'…claims a higher level of understanding than has been officially permitted to her." See "Tasting the Original Apple: Gender and the Struggle for Narrative Authority in *Dracula*," *Narrative* 1 (1993): 230.

Helsing who employs it most frequently and extensively. Initially, as in the case of the doctor in Stoker's journal, the humor arising from Van Helsing's taste for procrastination reads as probably inadvertent. In Chapter 14, Van Helsing presents Seward with the *Westminster Gazette*'s account of the "bloofer lady" and asks him to draw a conclusion from it. Seward correctly notices that the marks on the throats of the child victims resemble those on Lucy's throat, but sees no further into the matter than that the marks have "some cause in common." Van Helsing grants Seward's hypothesis to be "true indirectly, but not directly" (*Dracula*170). The path that Van Helsing lays out to the immediate cause, however, exceeds indirection and becomes utterly meandering. He opens with examples of parapsychological phenomena such as telepathy and astral projection, subjects that inculcate only a vague sense of the inexplicable being technically possible.

There is no obvious connection to death by loss of blood. He follows up with examples from legend of incredibly prolonged lifespans: Methuselah, Old Parr, a giant spider in a Spanish cathedral sustaining itself for centuries on the oil of the lamps (171). While these tales raise the possibility of life proving unexpectedly durable, it omits the most conspicuous feature of Lucy's case: not merely continuing to live, but actually returning from the dead. Van Helsing draws closer to the most relevant comparison when he turns his remarks to vampire bats of South America and the western seas (171-172), but then turns back rapidly to other unusually long-lived members of the animal kingdom: elephants, parrots, even "toads shut up in rocks for thousands of years" (172). Van Helsing's examples are not merely diffuse. They are oblique, protracted in their own interest in protractedness. Seward is understandably upset when Van Helsing finally advances the hypothesis that Lucy

herself is inflicting the same marks on children's throats that were once found on hers. He is even more distressed due to Van Helsing's delay in disclosing his thoughts, and at having been left to flail for so long among the less than focused elements of Van Helsing's disquisition. Even as readers sympathize with Seward's exasperation, they might indulge a chuckle at his expense, gratified by the contrast between the directness of their knowledge and the still circuitous opacity of his.

Van Helsing attempts to alleviate Seward's frustration, claiming a benevolent motive: "Oh, my friend, why, think you, did I go so far round, why take so long to tell you so simple a thing? Was it because I hate you and have hated you all my life? Was it because I wished to give you pain? ...Ah, no! ...My friend, it was because I wished to be gentle in the breaking to you" (173). We might take Van Helsing at his word here, and accept that his drawn-out approach to confronting Seward with the truth of Lucy's condition was meant to soften the blow. Seward himself seems largely placated by this appeal. This does not explain, however, why Van Helsing, faced with a similar task a short time later in the novel, resorts again to a strategy that did not serve its intended purpose the first time. In Chapter 15 Van Helsing must deliver the same horrific news to Arthur. Rather than breaking the astounding revelation all at once—one might expect the extremity of the shock to be diluted in the sheer enormity of incredulity—Van Helsing begins by eliciting a blind promise of cooperation from Arthur. Then, instead of informing Arthur of one singular ordeal, he breaks the awful project into a series of four discrete affronts, each carrying with them a substantial sting. First, he proposes the return to the churchyard, itself an occasion to re-experience a grief still raw. Only after Arthur has acquiesced to this trial does Van Helsing declare his

intention to enter the tomb. At this second step, Arthur is already trying to convince himself that this is a "monstrous joke" (*Dracula* 183), but, reassured of Van Helsing's earnestness, he continues to listen. Arthur's temper is roused again when Van Helsing suggests opening Lucy's coffin (neglecting to mention that he has already opened the coffin once), and it is only after Arthur is temporarily quieted once more that Van Helsing, apparently as an afterthought, requests permission to "cut off the head of dead Miss Lucy" (184). As readers, we might laugh, even as we wince, at Arthur's repeatedly renewed apoplexy, and think that we are also laughing at Van Helsing's inadvertent ham-handedness in doing so. Yet, because we have reason to believe that Van Helsing is fully aware of the effect his delayed and segmented revelations are likely to have, it is likelier that we are laughing with Van Helsing at Arthur's benighted and protracted distress.[2] It might be worth noting, for instance, that Van Helsing at this point makes no mention of driving a stake through Lucy's heart, or that it would be a good idea if Arthur performed that specific task himself. Apparently the good doctor is saving that for a surprise.

If humor and an indulgence in a malicious delay were linked only at this pivotal moment in the novel, if Van Helsing were the only figure to connect them in this fashion, their intertwining might be seen as essential to "the disruptive function that forces the vampire's careful

[2] Cruel as such an audience response might seem, it would be in keeping with the "new humour" frequently identified and discussed in the 1890s. One feature of the new humour was a tendency to "treat as comic matter news involving the idea of pain, misfortune, or calamity to persons other than the humorists." See "Humourists and New Humourists," *The Speaker: The Liberal Review,* no. 9 (17 Mar. 1894), 303.

plans to crumble" (Ferguson 240). The malice of delay, however, exceeds any effort to localize it to a particular moment in the plot, or to confine it to a specific character. Dracula toying with Jonathan's terror, Mina quickly but pointedly jesting in handing Van Helsing her incomprehensible journal, Van Helsing savoring his younger comrades' benightedness before leisurely dispelling it: these all indicate a common delight in wringing laughter from every prolonged second of another's perplexity or even suffering.

If this perverse humor, aligned with the malice of delay, threatens to draw monstrosity and humanity ever closer together, it ultimately also alerts the members of the hunting party to their ominous psychological proximity to their prey. The attitude toward delay begins to shift after Dracula attacks Mina. Initially, it seems as if the appeal of delay's mean teasing remains intact. Seward, though still exasperated by Van Helsing's habit of keeping his confederates in the dark as long as possible, comes to accept that it might have its uses. While he chafes at Van Helsing's extended deliberation as to how to enter Dracula's house in Piccadilly, Seward admits that "if [Van Helsing] wished to delay he had a good reason for it" (*Dracula* 255). Jonathan, driven by concern for his wife, urges an immediate expedition to their adversary's lair. Van Helsing responds by offering a ghoulish reassurance that they could not be proceeding more slowly than the count: 'Do you forget,' [Van Helsing] said, with actually a smile, "'that last night he banqueted heavily, and will sleep late?'" (258). The callous joviality of the remark, alluding so clinically to Mina's ordeal, extracts a shudder and a moan from her. Although incensed himself, Jonathan tries to ascribe Van Helsing's pitiless calculation to the intensity of his "intellectual effort" on behalf of their cause. Upon recognizing his mistake, Van Helsing becomes

"horrified at his thoughtlessness" (258).[3] In justifying his hunting party's grounds for proceeding in an unhurried manner, he realizes that he has accepted the basis for Dracula's horrifically casual sense of time as his own. Previously both Van Helsing and Mina have indulged in smirking forestallments. At this moment they recognize that such gestures belong more properly to something far more sinister than they had assumed. The humor that has led them to think like a vampire now becomes the instrument of a wrenching but invaluable self-scrutiny.

The novel's concluding movement leaves little room for delay, malicious or otherwise, as the pursuit of Dracula accelerates across Eastern Europe. Even so, Van Helsing engages in one final reflection on the malice of delay, and it drives home the realization of its corrupting potential. Like King Laugh, Van Helsing has arrived unannounced in the very heart of Dracula's castle, prepared to dispatch the vampire's undead brides. He finds himself pausing before the first coffin, transfixed by the unholy beauty before him. As the pause lengthens, he recognizes that it is just such a hesitation as this that has contributed to the cursed endurance of the evil he has sworn to destroy.

> She lay in her Vampire sleep, so full of life and voluptuous beauty that I shudder as though I have come to do murder. Ah, I doubt not that in the old time, when such things were, many a man who set forth to do such a task as mine, found at the last that his heart fail him, and then his nerve. So he delay, and delay, and delay, till the mere beauty and the fascination of the

[3] Leslie S. Klinger notes that the abridged 1901 version of the novel "omits this terrible faux pas and Van Helsing's apology, in an obvious effort at rehabilitation of his cold character." See *The New Annotated Dracula* 405, n. 16.

> wanton Un-dead have hypnotize him; and he remain on, and on, and on, until the Vampire sleep be over. …Yes, I was moved—I, Van Helsing, with all my purpose and with my motive for hate—I was moved to a yearning for delay which seemed to paralyse my faculties and clog my very soul. (*Dracula* 319).

Mina's anguished cry from outside snaps him out of his beguilement, and Van Helsing sets to his grisly work. But the delight in delay, the enjoyment of an expanse of time unavailable to others who can be safely ridiculed, has been exposed as more than a mere guilty pleasure. In its most dangerous and alluring form, the malice of delay congratulates its practitioners for cooperating in their own perdition.

In *Dracula*, as in the cultures that inspire and return compulsively to it, a perversely gleeful mirth can arise from a variety of sources, and serve a range of purposes and interests. If the novel's sense of humor features characters entertaining the malice of delay, only to then question such privilege as the laughter dependent on it grows less welcome, it remains to consider more precisely such emergent self-scrutiny reveals, and what it leaves under-examined. Despite Mina's joke on Van Helsing and the weird sisters' mocking laughter at Jonathan, for example, Van Helsing's final meditation on delay suggests that a sense of superiority predicated on gender persists. In pausing before Dracula's brides, he does come to recognize the male gaze as a kind of trap, or at least a susceptibility, but he is wrenched from its enticements by a reminder of his duty to protect a vulnerable, wronged woman. In contrast, Van Helsing's professional accomplishments and his emphatic religious sensibility receive some harsh illumination. These sources of pride, linked to the extent that "Christian religion…is equated in this novel with modernity in its

struggle against atavistic prereligious influences” (Herbert 102), diminish in significance as Van Helsing performs his grisly tasks in the castle. His medical deftness is absorbed and obscured in “butcher’s work” (*Dracula* 320). His Christian mission might seem at first to fare better, as he is able to draw reassurance “from the repose in the first face, and the gladness that stole over it ere the final dissolution came, as realization that the soul had been won.” This zeal soon ebbs, however, and Van Helsing describes his parting sanctification of the castle in a listless, functional way: “I so fixed its entrances that never more can the Count enter there Un-Dead” (321). The crusader has been reduced to a custodian.

These targets of reflection might be seen as particularly relevant to Stoker’s initial, late Victorian audience. Without wanting to dismiss these possibilities as contributing to the durable provocations that the novel affords, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the malice of delay, the dark-edged joking that it inspires, locates an even more elemental subject of scrutiny. The most precise, and also the funniest, exponent of this subject is Swales. Mina remarks that he “must have been in his time a most dictatorial person” (*Dracula* 65). In his morbidly cheerful exposure of the euphemistic falsehoods scattered across the tombstones in the Whitby churchyard, he exults over Lucy’s inability “to see aught funny” in the disingenuous consolations (67). His revelation that Lucy’s favorite seat rests over the grave of a suicide distresses her greatly, a distress he attempts to allay with an indifferently morbid quip: “[sitting over the grave of a suicide] won’t harm ye, my pretty; an’ it might make poor Geordie gladsome to have so trim a lass sittin’ on his lap. That won’t hurt ye. Why, I’ve sat here off an’ on for nigh twenty years past, an’ it hasn’t done me no harm” (68). On the unflustered perch he has retained for two decades, the superannuated Swales

proclaims invincibility against one of the most durable taboos, one so unsettling that it must be lied about to secure Christian burial. His triumphant amusement expresses nothing less than the self-congratulation of the living for having outlasted the dead.

Swales's poignant recoil from such humor in his last words anticipates how ominously pervasive it becomes, but also how essential it is to renounce it as best one can. In his ardent apology to Mina, he arrives at an acceptance that runs counter to what vampires embody. It is perhaps no coincidence that this insight is rapidly followed by Swales becoming Dracula's first victim in England.

> I'm afraid, my deary, that I must have shocked you by all the wicked things I've
> been saying about the dead, and suchlike, for weeks past; but I didn't mean them,
> and I want ye to remember that when I'm gone. We aud folks that be daffled, and with one foot abaft the krok-hoal, don't altogether like to think of it, and we don't want to feel scart of it; an' that's why I've took to makin' light of it, so that I'd cheer up my own heart a bit. … For life be, after all, only a waitin' for somethin' else than what we're doin'; and death be all that we can rightly depend on. (*Dracula* 73-74)

In *Dracula* the malice of delay attempts, at its root, to assert superiority over death itself, to pay for time in the blood of others, no matter the cost to anyone's soul, perhaps least of all one's own. Swales's apology arrives at an understanding of how his ghoulish humor bears within it a precarious desire for the superiority Dracula achieves by hideous means. In giving up the condescending laughter he's shared with his cackling cronies, Swales finally refuses the logic by which Dracula accepts his awfully protracted existence, one

corrupted victim at a time. Swales’s premonitory repentance of his bleakly haughty glee doesn’t spare his life. Instead, it performs a more valuable service. It distinguishes him from his killer.

Works Cited

Case, Alison. “Tasting the Original Apple: Gender and the Struggle for Narrative Authority in *Dracula*.” *Narrative*, vol. 1, 1993, pp. 223-243.

Ferguson, Christine. “Nonstandard Language and the Cultural Stakes of Stoker’s *Dracula*.” *ELH*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2004, pp. 229-249.

Fletcher, Alana. “No Clocks in His Castle: The Threat of the *Durėe* in Bram Stoker’s*Dracula*.” *Victorian Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, Spring 2013, pp. 55-69.

Herbert, Christopher. “Vampire Religion.” *Representations,* no. 79, Summer 2002, pp. 100-121.

“Humourists and New Humourists.” *The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, no. 9, 17 March 1894, pp. 303-304.

Klinger, Leslie S., editor. *The New Annotated Dracula*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2008.

Meredith, George. “On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit.” *The Works of George Meredith, Volume XXIII: Miscellaneous Prose*, Russell and Russell, 1968.

Smajić, Srdjan. “*Dracula* and Duty.” *Textual Practice*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2009, pp.49-71.

Stephen, Leslie. “Humour.” *Cornhill Magazine,* no. 23, March 1876, pp. 318-326.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Edited by Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal, W. W. Norton, 1997.

-----. *The Lost Journal of Bram Stoker: The Dublin Years*. Edited by Elizabeth Miller and Dacre Stoker, Robson Press, 2012.