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## The Regendering of Van Helsing: Sister Agatha's Unique Approach to Investigating Dracula's MMethods and Mental Processes

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### Cover Page Footnote

Taylor Holden is a first year doctoral student in Education at the University of California, Davis where she serves as an associate instructor for the University Writing Program. Before coming to Davis she received a B.A in English Education and an M.A in English Literature from North Carolina State University where she served as the instructor of record for English 101 - Writing and Rhetoric courses. Her research interests focus on multimodal options, scaffolding, and diversifying material in the classroom.

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**The Regendering of Van Helsing: Sister  
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Readers know Van Helsing as a traditionally masculine physician who epitomizes nineteenth century patriarchal values. This character is completely reimagined by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, in their Netflix mini-series, as an empowered and indelicate nun named Sister Agatha Van Helsing. This comparison between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the Netflix adaptation, of the same name, begins with an introduction of the character and a new framing of the familiar plotline. The streaming series includes a reconceptualized cast with unique interpersonal relationships and personality markers. Van Helsing is presented in a drastically different fashion. The events in the

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television show mirror that of the original novel but have been adapted in significant ways that lend themselves to a modern perspective regarding the Van Helsing character.

Agatha Van Helsing is distinctly female and determined to discover Dracula's internal motivations. Agatha subverts viewers' expectations of the Van Helsing character. She is a fusion of Professor Abraham Van Helsing and Sister Agatha of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This discussion will focus directly on the implications of changing the Van Helsing character. I will discuss how the re-gendering of Van Helsing provides space for a strong and intelligent female character to emerge. The original Van Helsing's motivation was to preserve the purity of Dracula's victims by killing him. Agatha desires a better understanding of Dracula's actions. She seeks this knowledge through research and communication. This change creates a character that is emotionally intelligent, void of nineteenth century masculinity, and interested solely in discovering the motivations behind Count Dracula's behavior. Agatha Van Helsing is an investigator and is primarily interested in solving the mystery that is Dracula by unraveling him psychologically. The culmination of this analysis will coincide with the end of the relationship between Agatha Van Helsing and Dracula.

Gatiss and Moffat reconceive the events surrounding Johnathan Harker's confession. Harker is taken to a convent and questioned by Sister

Agatha Van Helsing. The interrogation persists in hopes of some divulgence of his sexual misconduct with Dracula. Physically, Agatha is presented as a traditional nun but immediately squashes all expectations of a genteel, womanly character with her sharp wit and direct language. Agatha challenges stereotypes that would be associated with the ideal nineteenth century performance of the female gender. Her actions oppose the Victorian womanhood that the original Van Helsing was working so tirelessly to protect in the novel. This reversal enables a new exploration of gender roles. Gatiss and Moffat chose to present their lead character as a captivating, intellectual, and likeable woman. This transformation of the Van Helsing character also reveals the complications associated with gender performance, sexuality, and persuasion. Sister Agatha can build a relationship with the Count that the male version of her character could not have fathomed and was not openly interested in pursuing. This relationship and emotional connection leads to the revelation of intimate parts of the vampire's character.

### **Sister Agatha Van Helsing**

“Are you hungry, Mr. Harker?”<sup>22</sup> These are the first words that viewers hear from Agatha Van Helsing. The theme of both the novel and mini-series is revealed immediately: the need to satisfy a

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<sup>22</sup> *Dracula*, Season 1, Episode 1, “The Rules of the Beast,” directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan, written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.

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life-threatening hunger. Sister Agatha, like the original Van Helsing, works to find and eradicate Dracula and those like him. Although she chooses to accomplish her goal through less violent means, Agatha does not maintain an emotional distance from Dracula in the same way that Van Helsing does in Stoker's nineteenth-century creation.<sup>23</sup> As the show begins, Sister Agatha addresses Harker immediately in a firm, warm tone. She continues a dialogue with him as she prepares for a more formal interview, keeping wooden stakes close by in the event that Dracula himself makes an appearance. She initiates her intimate questioning very directly. Harker is shocked by this and evades the question until he feels more comfortable, circling back to it after a few moments he says, "What you asked before, if I had..." Agatha completes the question for him, "If you had ever had sexual intercourse with Count Dracula?" This is the aggressive line of interrogation that Sister Agatha Van Helsing uses throughout the entire series. She chooses to address Harker and to ask about his sexual conduct regarding Dracula. Despite her openness in conversation, Sister Agatha's sexuality is not highlighted during this scene. She is dressed in traditional religious garb and manages to have open discussion about sex, even to joke about intercourse, without seeming desirous or threatening

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<sup>23</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* ed. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997)

to Harker. She is increasingly intimidating as it becomes clear that she intends to extract the information necessary to achieve her goal. Her gender or sexual desire are not placed at the forefront of the conversation. Agatha can ask important, intimate questions without involving her own sexuality. This is something that the original Van Helsing would have deemed inappropriate and irreconcilable.

Jonathan seeks further clarification regarding her concerns about his sexual encounters, “Why did you ask that?” And Sister Agatha responds succinctly, “Clearly you have been contaminated with something. Any contact you had with Count Dracula, sexual or otherwise, is therefore relevant.”<sup>24</sup> The audience can see clear markers of a sickly Jonathan Harker. His face is riddled with scabs, he has lost his hair, and his skin has a distinct yellow hue. He seems to agree with this logic and continues his story. Sister Agatha’s character is focused on eradicating an illness. She has determined that this sickness is caused by Dracula, and she is knowledgeable about the dangers of working closely with Dracula’s victims. This mirrors the Van Helsing that exists in the novel. Contamination and disease were topics of great interest during the Victorian period. The discussion surrounding disease coursed deeper than the obvious desire for Victorian health-workers to

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<sup>24</sup> *Dracula*, Season 1, Episode 1, “The Rules of the Beast,” directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan, written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.

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rid the world of infection. Martin Willis establishes Stoker's intent to create conversation surrounding disease:

The extent of Stoker's knowledge of disease theories allows him to employ their rhetoric and explore some of their public positions; but it is his desire to evoke these theories in order to critique variant discourses and practices of social order that should alert us to the sociopolitical diversity and complexity of his work.<sup>25</sup>

The conversation surrounding disease and infection persists in the mini-series, alongside the creators' desire to address relationships and the social orders that accompany them. The focus of the show shifts away from disease as it relates to purity and moves in the direction of psychological and emotional investigation. Diseases of the mind are brought to the forefront. Agatha's theory is that Dracula has mental and emotional blocks that keep him from existing as a typical person. His victims inherit these tribulations from him. Agatha becomes a character who is obsessed with finding clarity regarding Dracula whereas Abraham's central focus was maintaining innocence and virtue. This difference manifests in Agatha's desire to get close to the Count through his victims. She does not wish to protect the purity of womanhood and the bravado

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<sup>25</sup> Willis, Martin. "'The Invisible Giant,' 'Dracula', and Disease." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2007, pp. 310.



associated with the Victorian man, but to get intimately close with Dracula to understand his impulses. Agatha continues her questioning of Johnathan Harker in the first episode, and the two are joined by a seemingly anonymous sister who serves as a chaperone. Any hesitations that Stoker felt when creating a novel about bodily fluid transfer and sexual encounter are not shared by Sister Agatha. She continues to blatantly ask Harker if he has had any sexual encounters with Count Dracula and urges him to tell his story in full. She reminds him multiple times that he will not offend her and that every gritty detail must be revealed.

This interrogation offers viewers immediate insight into Agatha's methods. She is taking steps to protect those closest to her and ultimately society as whole. In her analysis of Dracula and the origin of his obsession with satisfaction via blood Barbara Almond defines the original Van Helsing's behavior in the following way, "It seems that Abraham Van Helsing is really protecting his 'sons' from women in general, the latter seen as the source of all wicked desires and from the bad, incestuously transgressing father, Dracula."<sup>26</sup> This language, while not directly applicable to the female version of Van Helsing, does mirror Sister Agatha Van Helsing's situation. She is working to protect her sisters, and eventually, all of humanity from Dracula. Gatiss and Moffat frame Agatha as a woman of God and advocate for

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Almond, "Monstrous infants and vampyric mothers in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 88, no. 1 (2008): 226.

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the protection of the soul. The women in the novel are turned into dangerous, over-sexualized, and soulless beings after they are influenced by Dracula. Stoker discusses the change that comes over one of these victims, Lucy, after her interactions with Dracula through an entry in Dr. Seward's diary, "Lucy Westenra, but yet how she had changed. The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness."<sup>27</sup> This is not a sentiment that Agatha Van Helsing shares with Abraham Van Helsing and his associates. She does not wish to pick apart any female character, but to dissect Dracula himself.

Lucy being a killer of small children and a sexual being were paired together naturally in the novel, as though the evil and the sexual could not exist as two separate entities. Lucy's role in the mini-series, entirely void of predatory behavior, serves as an addition to the answers that Agatha seeks. Sister Agatha does not wish for Dracula to hurt Lucy. She is less interested in Lucy's sexual encounters and more interested in the emotional impact that the Count has on Lucy as she spends increasing amounts of time with him. Sister Agatha Van Helsing subverts the focus on sexual impurity and desire. Agatha herself is not a sexual being and does not seem to be concerned with the sexual activities of anyone other than Dracula. The obviously sexual is removed from her person. She

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<sup>27</sup> Stoker, *Dracula*, 187.

uses nuance and flirtation within her word choice but not in her behavior. She is able to blatantly ask Johnathan Harker about his sexual misconduct with Dracula because she is a woman of God and is chaperoned by one of her sisters, even if she does not behave in ways that are typically associated with her occupation. Her station in the show enabled her to have the space to ask challenging questions. Lucy's position in the novel hindered her more than it enabled her. Her sexuality and relationship with the men around her became her defining attributes. Her character in the show is not as harshly judged and serves more as an extension of Dracula's emotional turmoil. Removing Lucy's violent tendencies and ensuring a lack of sexual appeal from Agatha allows the Van Helsing character to examine Dracula in a modern, socially conscious way.

Stoker was limited in his approach to discussing sex and sexual activity. Christopher Bentley notes this with the following commentary:

Stoker avoids any overt treatment of the sexuality of his characters. The obscenity laws, the tyranny of the circulating libraries, and the force of public opinion were, throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century, powerful constraints on any author who wrote for the general public; but it is probably that for many writers, including Stoker himself, an even stronger reason for avoiding sexual matters

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was a personal reticence amounting to repression.<sup>28</sup>

Even among relatively recent advances in entertainment content freedom, Agatha is not positioned as an overtly sexual character. She can openly discuss Johnathan Harker's sexual history without becoming an object of his sexual attraction. The show's creators position Agatha Van Helsing within the confines of religion so that her sexual questioning cannot possibly be misconstrued as desire. This decision to move the feminine away from the overtly sexual reveals new possibilities for Agatha. She is able to gain access to the interrogation of Harker, and to blatantly question him about his assumed sexual history, because she is not an intimate threat to Harker's morality.

### **Mina and Van Helsing**

Van Helsing and Mina develop a relationship in the novel. This relationship is formed from Van Helsing's strong desire to protect women; specifically, women who embody the perfect Victorian female. Van Helsing wishes to protect the sanctity of femininity in the novel through the eradication of Dracula and his negative influence. Mina, in opposition to Lucy, is viewed as a woman who could be saved. Dracula targets both women,

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Bentley, "The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Studies in Speculative Fiction*, No. 19 (1988): 26.

but Mina is spared from his most evil influences, and her purity is upheld. Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio discuss the complexities of Harker's relationship with Mina and the comparison that is required for him to locate himself with society and within his sexuality:

Harker's rather desperate reading of Mina's unquestionable purity largely parallels Van Helsing's later in the text – without a clearly defined, passive femininity against which to define himself and his world, Jonathan Harker crumbles into a nightmare of uncertainty, confusion, and vampiric 'brain fever.'<sup>29</sup>

Agatha Van Helsing and Mina also develop a relationship in the Netflix show. This relationship enables Harker to have a firm foundation within the identity of a female. Harker's sexual involvement with Mina is something that Agatha feels she can address and joke about because it anchors him. If he is having sexual encounters with a woman, it seems to lessen the impact of his consorting with Dracula. His relationship with a woman gives him something to define his sexuality around. He can connect with Agatha and provide the intimate details of his encounter with Dracula to her and their chaperone. The audience first, and unknowingly, sees Harker and Mina together in the opening scenes of the

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<sup>29</sup> Charles E. Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio, "Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, No. 33 (2005): 487.

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series. Mina is brought in as the chaperone for Sister Agatha and Johnathan Harker's interview. Harker, in his traumatized state, is unable to distinguish that his betrothed is in front of him. This interview becomes tense as Agatha delves into the sexual history between Harker and Dracula. Mina is present throughout this portion of the interview. Her role as an amiable young Victorian woman with a complicated history of desire is reflected in the series. Part of Harker's story involves dreams of sexual encounters with Mina. Agatha satirically deems that these are perfectly normal, "There is no shame in it (erotic dreaming). Dreams are a haven where we sin without consequence. Believe me, I know, some mornings I can hardly look Sister Rosa (Mina) in the face."<sup>30</sup> This declaration further separates Agatha from the Van Helsing in Stoker's novel. Television audiences are presented with an evolved Van Helsing, one that does not feel that sexual purity is necessary. She soothes Harker as he divulges his fantasies to her and uses a mixture of comedy and overt sexualization of Mina to relate to her interviewee. Agatha simply wants to achieve the truth from Harker. She does not want to shame him into changing his behavior but wants to hear every detail. She believes that these intimate details will lead her closer to finding the truth of Dracula's existence. The Van Helsing of Stoker's novel

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<sup>30</sup> *Dracula*, Season 1, Episode 1, "The Rules of the Beast," directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan, written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.

wanted to rid the world of sexual impurity. Phyllis A. Roth emphasizes this focus on the purity of women in her criticism of the novel, “Perhaps nowhere is the dichotomy of sensual and sexless woman more dramatic than it is in *Dracula* and nowhere is the suddenly sexual woman more violent and self-righteously persecuted than in Stoker’s “thriller.””<sup>31</sup> Agatha wants to rid the world of *Dracula*, not of the women that he has impacted. She hopes to save those women from the same emotional and physical turmoil that inflict Harker and *Dracula*. The distinct motivation and the taboo nature of Sister Agatha’s interview brings the difference in character to the surface within the first few moments of episode one.

In the series, Mina is incorporated into the plot via her relationship with Harker. Initially it is unclear that the chaperone nun brought in to accompany Agatha Van Helsing is Mina. The audience is given small indicators and this fact is fully revealed by the end of the first part of the mini-series. Mina embodies the damsel in distress archetype and feels fearful upon meeting *Dracula*. Agatha eventually goes as far as to stand in between *Dracula* and Mina, risking her own life. These actions mirror those undertaken by Van Helsing in the novel. Agatha takes on the role of protector almost immediately. This reflects the role of Sister Agatha in the novel. Agatha of the Netflix series

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<sup>31</sup> Stoker, *Dracula*, Phyllis A. Roth “Suddenly Sexual Women”.

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tries to protect the sisters in her convent as well. She brings the tools that are necessary to defend herself, and subsequently Mina, from Harker if he were to turn into a vampire. She also attempts to keep the women safe from Dracula. She believes that she has learned enough to ward him away. Agatha wants to keep Dracula out of the convent but not too far away as she deeply desires to study him. As a show of her knowledge of him, she presents her throat, the most enticing part of her body, to Dracula upon one of their initial encounters. She does this to distract the vampire from Mina, but also to taunt him and to establish her knowledge of his desires. Agatha, in this dire instance, is willing to demonstrate vulnerability to entice Dracula directly. This only comes when her attempts at using her knowledge of the Count fail to keep him away from the nuns that she aims to protect. This is not a successful endeavor for Agatha, and she realizes that a more intimate knowledge of Dracula will be necessary for her to fully understand his actions.

The Van Helsing of the novel engages in similar protective pursuits. His goal is to prevent Dracula from influencing his victims, specifically the young women that he seems to find worthy of his assistance. Van Helsing is doing this to protect the souls of Dracula's victims and the innate femininity that the women in the novel represent. Mina is a character whose salvation can still be preserved. After Van Helsing loses Lucy to Dracula's influences, he is determined to maintain



Mina's perceived feminine worth. He sends her a letter requesting that he come to visit and that she not tell Harker, who is now her husband, about the impending visit:

I should come to Exeter to see you at once if you tell me I am privilege to come, and where and when. I implore your pardon, madam. I have read your letters to poor Lucy and know how good you are and how your husband suffers; so, I pray you, if it may be, enlighten him not, lest it may harm.<sup>32</sup>

Van Helsing feels more comfortable directly working with the women in the novel. He attempts to subvert Dracula's influence by protecting femininity. Agatha works closely with male figures in the reimagined Netflix show. Her relationship with Dracula and Harker is more intimate than the relations that she develops with the female characters in the Netflix interpretation. The reversal of relationship proximity highlights Agatha's central focus on Dracula himself. The original Van Helsing wanted to rid the world of impurity. He wanted Dracula to be eradicated and to stop the spread of sexual and moral destruction that the Count was associated with throughout the novel. His masculinity was established through the protection of those who could not protect themselves, but his view of the sexuality of women

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<sup>32</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* ed. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 161-162.

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was stunted and fully associated with the evil that Dracula also represented. Agatha, on the other hand, wants to grow closer to understanding Dracula completely before ridding the world of him entirely. Her interests do not reside in maintaining the moral quality of others but are focused entirely on defining the problem at its core. This moves the Van Helsing character away from a focus on moral salvation and toward finding a solution to the emotional turmoil that is occurring within Dracula and his victims.

Further differences are revealed in the motivations of the individual Van Helsing characters. Agatha Van Helsing wants to discover the root of Dracula's conditions. She is quick to challenge his strength and prowess. She protects the other nuns in the convent where she lives by keeping Dracula outside of the gate. He shifts form from wolf to man and she is fascinated by his abilities. She taunts and challenges him openly. This puts the lives of those that she knows at risk, but she is determined to understand Dracula. Her need for understanding overrides her desire to protect the people around her. She does what she can to save the other nuns at her convent but is primarily interested in tracking Dracula's movements and discovering his motivations. Bram Stoker's Van Helsing is interested in destroying Dracula's influence and the undead themselves. His masculinity is presented through continuous efforts to protect the women and children who are impacted by the vampire. Agatha maintains some of

those qualities. She risks her life to protect the lives of others, she interviews Harker to gather information to stop the spread of the undead's influence, and she faces Dracula directly to question and observe him. Her vulnerability and determination serve as enticements to Dracula in a way that we do not see in the novel. The Van Helsing of the novel wants to hide any indications of his own vulnerability. Miriam Bjørklund observes Van Helsing's actions with the following words:

“However, from the way that Van Helsing advises Seward and Quincey not to say anything of their own sacrifices, we understand that saving her (Mina's) life is not all there is to it. There is intimacy and vulnerability in the act of giving blood; all three men have to lie down afterwards and eat – the loss of bodily fluids weakens them.”<sup>33</sup>

Bjørklund summarizes an important difference between Van Helsing and Agatha. They are not able to express and discuss sexuality in the same way. Agatha, while exhibiting some similar characteristics to the male Van Helsing, is a female character with a traditionally female occupation. She is presented in the twenty-first century and is able to openly discuss sexuality in a way that audiences will understand. Van Helsing, a male

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<sup>33</sup> Miriam Bjørklund, “To face it like a man: Exploring male anxiety in *Dracula* and the Sherlock Holmes Canon” *A Thesis in English Literature*, University of Oslo (2014): 57.

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character created almost two hundred years before had to revert to subliminal notions of sex and arousal. Agatha is a surprising character that attracts Dracula via the contradicting aspects of her appearance and actions. The decision to make Van Helsing a female with stereotypically male aligning traits creates a sphere of unpredictability that Dracula cannot resist. Abraham Van Helsing would not have been able to capitalize on his masculinity in the same way that Agatha can. The same attributes that made him scholarly, intimidating, and reputable make Agatha alluring, arousing, and unavoidable for their shared problematic relationship: Dracula. This, in turn, created openings for the show's creators to begin their process of reinterpretation.

### **Agatha as Emotional Investigator**

Initially the audience is introduced to Agatha Van Helsing in her role as an inquisitive nun. She begins her interrogative onslaught on Harker immediately. When she is joined by Mina, she continues her line of questioning. She completely disregards the emotions that Mina may be feeling and digs into the root of Dracula's influence on his subjects. Agatha seems to believe that this is sexual in nature, but there are small indications of a deeper emotional appeal are lurking behind her questioning.

In the second episode Agatha reveals another layer of her skills in perception. Dracula is aboard a ship. He can travel because, as readers

learn in the novel and as viewers see on screen, dirt from his homeland accompanies him. He keeps this dirt in coffins. Stoker addresses this baggage and a few of Dracula's belongings on the ship, "We finished taking in cargo, silver sand and boxes of earth."<sup>34</sup> This attachment to the land allows him to travel and to maintain his undead form. Dracula travels to England in the novel as well, but Stoker dedicated very few pages of his novel to time spent traveling via ship. In the same diary entry, Stoker did acknowledge that Dracula attacked several people while aboard the ship and that there were strange ongoings throughout the voyage, "Another tragedy. Had single watch tonight, as crew too tired to double. When morning came on deck could find no one except steersman...Are now without second mate, and crew in panic." Dracula engages in similar activities while traveling in the mini-series, but his activities are expanded in the adaptation. Viewers get a unique glimpse into Dracula's motivations. The vampire sites his own boredom as the primary reason that he had decided to prowl around the ship.

Before the audience is taken on the voyage they are presented with a scene of Dracula and Sister Agatha playing chess together. He begins to tell his tale and warns Agatha not to become too attached to any of the characters that he discusses. Here, the audience is introduced to a unique image of the Count and Agatha Van Helsing. The two are

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<sup>34</sup> Stoker, *Dracula*, 81.

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engaging in a civil conversation. Agatha maintains her questioning, her curiosity obvious, and the Count seems amiable to her requests. He is telling his story to her of his own accord, over a game of chess no less. Yes, she is an active participant in ridding society of the vampire's deadly influence, but she is also interested in understanding why Dracula is motivated to make the choices that he does. Agatha pushes past the surface-level evil that Dracula exudes and digs into his true desires. Her investigation delves into the vampire's emotions. Dracula begins his tale with the following introduction, "At sea, one meets an interesting range of characters, and I would advise you not to get too attached to any of them."<sup>35</sup> This marks another difference in character. One that makes Agatha Van Helsing a distinct entity of her own. The Van Helsing of the novel was also concerned with ridding the world of Dracula's evil, but his efforts seemed to cease with ending the lives of the undead. Agatha seeks to understand the motivations of the undead. She maintains many of the characteristics of the male Van Helsing, but her recreated female image affords her and increased ability to dig into the vampire's emotions.

The audience is made privy to the mental and emotional power that Agatha may hold over

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<sup>35</sup> *Dracula*, Season 1, Episode 2, "Blood Vessel," directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan, written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.

Dracula in episode two as the pair interacts while on the ship. Agatha's primary goal is still to stop the contagion, or the vampiric influence, from spreading to England. She is willing to lose her own life in order to stop the spread. She engages in a competition of intellect with Dracula which ends in her own death. Dracula ends this episode in a watery prison inside his coffin at the bottom of the ocean.

The third episode begins with a semi-resurrection and second chance for Van Helsing. Dracula emerges from the waters that held him for over a century to find another woman, a Van Helsing, that looks exactly like her predecessor. Zoe Van Helsing is the leader of the Jonathan Harker foundation and the great-great niece of Sister Agatha Van Helsing. After Zoe accuses Dracula of her aunt's murder he responds, "Killing is healthy competition. Mercy is disrespect."<sup>36</sup> He then transforms into a colony of bats and disperses across the group of people who were waiting for his arrival. Audiences are then launched into a modern rendition of the latter half of Stoker's novel. The same characters are encountered in their modern form and they maintain similar influence. Zoe Van Helsing, however, mirrors Agatha's unique methods to remove the problem of Dracula from the world. She begins to enact the femme fatale in unique ways. She represents an extension of her

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<sup>36</sup> *Dracula*, Season 1, Episode 3, "The Dark Compass," directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan, written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat.

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predecessor and fully embraces her mission to find the core of Dracula's motivations. Zoe is suffering from illness herself. She is suffering from an illness that will kill her. Her desire to continue the investigation into Dracula's life and impact perseveres. As the audience learns about Zoe it becomes clear that she is aware of what will happen to her. Her goal is to end Dracula's influence before her passing. She is still very much distinct from the male Van Helsing and enables Dracula to become his own savior. Elizabeth Bronfen addresses the combination of tragedy and desire to solve a problem with the following comments,

To focus on the femme fatale, of course, also means introducing the question of gender difference into a discussion of tragic sensibility, in the sense that, while she comes to acknowledge her responsibility for her fate, the hero she involves in her transgressive plot is characterized by the exact opposite attitude, namely, a desire to stave off knowledge of his own fallibility at all costs.<sup>37</sup>

The Count and Zoe Van Helsing both fall victim to the fatal actions of the other. This commentary about femme fatale, the fall of the seductive woman, uniquely applies to both Zoe and Dracula in unison. Their characters are connected through

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<sup>37</sup> Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire." *New Literary History* 35, no. (2004): 103-6



the efforts of Agatha, Zoe's distant relative, but they are also connected by illness and a desire for knowledge.

### **The Culmination of the Van Helsing Legacy**

The viewer learns of several implications that Dracula has placed on himself in the third episode of the series. Dracula can go in the sunlight and is able to feel empathy for others. He has prevented himself from doing these things out of fear of what may happen if he does. The creators of the series chose to have a character that formulated his own restrictions and ruined his own relationships. The audience learns that one of the narrators of the story unfolding in front of them is not reliable. The Count is not even capable of realizing his own mental or emotional blocks. Alison Case references similarities in the lack of narrator reliability reflected in Stoker's novel:

“The transgression of conventional gender roles, whether sexual or intellectual, is clearly central to Dracula's power and appeal as a narrative, and it may seem like an open question whether the "play" in gender roles it allows ultimately undermines the security of such roles more than the novel's eventual reassertion of them reinforces them.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Case, Alison. 993. “Tasting the Original Apple: Gender and the Struggle for Narrative Authority in “Dracula”.” *Narrative* (Columbus, Ohio) 1 (3): 239.

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This commentary is important to consider as viewers reach the end of the series. Zoe uncovers that Dracula's weakness resides in his mental inability to overcome the obstacles that he has set for himself. Viewers realize here that Zoe Van Helsing represents the more reliable point of view. This character, born of a lineage based on the merging of two characters within the original novel, is the person who was capable of uncovering Dracula's true motivations and aiding in his demise. She was able to save further devastation caused by the vampire with her wit and decades of prior research. The setbacks that Abraham Van Helsing suffered caused by repressed sexuality, gender roles, and the preservation of cultural purity were no longer an issue in the television rendition that brought viewers and characters into the twenty-first century. The removal of these restrictions enabled Zoe Van Helsing to achieve success and understanding that surpassed the death of the Count resulted in a more permanent solution.

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