

2022

Vampire Crusades: The Separation of the Crucifix and Wafer from Their Intended Purpose in Dracula

Olivia VanVoorhis
Liberty 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

VanVoorhis, Olivia (2022) "Vampire Crusades: The Separation of the Crucifix and Wafer from Their Intended Purpose in Dracula," *Journal of Dracula Studies*: Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/dracula-studies/vol24/iss1/6>

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.

Vampire Crusades: The Separation of the Crucifix and Wafer from Their Intended Purpose in Dracula

Cover Page Footnote

Olivia VanVoorhis graduated with an English B.A. from Liberty University in 2022, with minors in linguistics and studio art. Her areas of study included Victorian literature, monster studies, deconstruction theory, pop cultural analysis, and cultural studies. She plans to continue her education at the master's level with a renewed focus on cultural studies.

***The Vampire Crusades: The Separation of the
Crucifix and Wafer from Their Intended Purpose
in Dracula***

Olivia VanVoorhis

[Olivia VanVoorhis graduated with an English B.A. from Liberty University in 2022, with minors in linguistics and studio art. Her areas of study included Victorian literature, monster studies, deconstruction theory, pop cultural analysis, and cultural studies. She plans to continue her education at the master's level with a renewed focus on cultural studies.]

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the horrifying battle against Dracula and his vampire slaves merely provides the backdrop for the broader theme of the novel: spiritual warfare. In their fight against Dracula, Jonathan and Mina Harker, the infamous Van Helsing, the dashing Dr. John Seward, the brave Quincey Morris, and Arthur Holmwood—the vampire hunters—often utilize spiritual icons to repel their hellish foe. These spiritual icons, although they appear to cement the hunters' God-ordained "vampire crusades," are not as directly attached to God as the protagonists claim that the tools are. By the end of the novel, the crucifix and holy wafer, the hunters' favored tools, become as alienated from God as Dracula himself. The crucifix and the wafer that the vampire hunters utilize throughout Stoker's *Dracula* to combat vampiric evil are separated from the traditionally Catholic

The Vampire Crusades

sacramental purpose for them because of the way the vampire hunters instrumentalize and weaponize these icons in their quest to defeat Dracula, thus exemplifying the transfer of the objects' authority from God to man.

Stoker's characters use explicitly Catholic holy icons and sacraments throughout *Dracula*. Sacraments, generally, as defined by Catholic author Michael Root, are "signs that communicate in a physical way the same content that preaching communicates, the promise of the Gospel" (1071). The Catholic Church's statement on sacraments, however, teaches that sacraments not only have a teaching function, but also "make people holy, . . . build up the body of Christ, and finally, . . . give worship to God" ("Sacraments of the Catholic Church"). The Catholic Church affirms seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders ("Sacraments").

Of these seven sacraments, however, only two are prevalent in *Dracula*: the Host of the Eucharist and the crucifix. The Eucharist, also known as the Lord's Supper, is a ritual practice involving bread and wine to remember Jesus' death and resurrection. While both the Protestant and Catholic churches recognize the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, the Catholic Church is unique in its stance on transubstantiation during the Eucharist. "For the wheat bread and grape wine," the Catholic Church states, "are transubstantiated . . . into the flesh and blood of Christ so that only the appearance of bread and wine remains"

("Sacrament of the Eucharist"). Essentially, for Catholics, the bread and the wine transforms into Christ's physical body and blood at the moment of consumption in a moment of mystical, magical transformation. Transubstantiation marks one of the most notable differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestants, although they view communion as being sacramental, do not attach the same degree of holiness to the bread or wine. To them, the bread and wine remain just bread and wine, and the Catholic stance of transubstantiation, they regard as blasphemy. More than just transubstantiation, the Catholic Church is also unique in its use of the crucifix. The crucifix, according to authors Fredrick Mark Gedicks and Pasquale Annicchino, differs from the religious image of the cross in that it depicts a realistic Jesus upon it (101). Though Protestant sects make abundant use of the traditional image of the cross, the crucifix remains a symbol of the Catholic faith in particular. Aside from being a religious symbol, the crucifix's main role now is to act "as the quintessential Roman Catholic sign" (101). While the crucifix holds power against evil because of its connection to God in the Catholic faith, this same assertion of the crucifix's power does not carry over to the Protestant faith.

In *Dracula*, the characters, despite their different religious sects, make abundant use of the crucifix and the holy transubstantiated wafer from the Eucharist. The vampire hunters make use of an assortment of weapons against Dracula and his cohorts: garlic, the crucifix, the wafer, Jonathan's

The Vampire Crusades

Kukri knife, and wooden stakes. Of these weapons, some take power from being religious objects, which counteract the Count's damned soul. Other weapons, however, like the garlic, only act against the vampires because they are averse to them. The crucifix and the wafer, however, are the only two traditionally holy weapons in the hunters' arsenal. Despite these objects being perceived as holy, their power does not come from God. The group's use of the Catholic signs is separated from God's intended meaning. As mentioned previously, the purpose of a sacrament as per the Catholic faith is to represent the Gospel, as well as build up the believer and worship God ("Sacraments of the Catholic Church"). The vampire hunters' use of these biblical signs do not follow these stipulations. Instead, the way in which the group uses these symbols weaponizes the icons as tools to fight evil. The Eucharist and the crucifix become devoid of the goodness, forgiveness, and love that the Church attributes to them. "[T]he ability of these objects to connect God with his children (the task for which they were supposedly intended) has apparently vanished," author Elizabeth Sanders aptly observes, "leaving them only as powerful instruments" (87-8). Therefore, because of their separation from their biblically intended purpose, the Catholic icons that the group utilizes in their struggle against Dracula lose their holy meaning—a case of the separation of the signifier from the signified.

The concept of the signifier and the signified was first conceived by Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure in his work *Course in General*

Linguistics. For Saussure, the signifier and the signified must come together to produce the sign. The sign, in this Vampire Crusades 88 case, refers to what conveys the meaning. The signifier refers to that which gives meaning, while the signified refers to the mental image which is evoked in the mind. To give an example, with the word ‘dog,’ the actual word ‘dog’ is the signifier and the mental image of the dog itself is the signified. The word ‘dog’ and the mental image come together to create the sign—the knowledge that the word ‘dog’ conveys the mental picture of the dog. For Saussure, all three of these parts must work in tandem to give a concept or word meaning.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida, however, questioned Saussure’s concept of the signifier and signified. In his work *Dissemination*, Derrida first questioned whether the signifier and signified worked as Saussure had postulated. This theory, called deconstruction, asserted that the signifier and signified could not relate to each other in a linear way to produce meaning. According to Derrida, because the individual’s propensity for personal associations of a given word is endless, so too the signifier is endless. Because the signifier is endless, the relationship between signifier and signified can never become pinned down by the individual. Because the relationship between the two cannot be exacted, the sign—the word with its associations—will never truly have a concrete meaning. This lack of concrete meaning leads to what Derrida termed *aporia*. In deconstruction, *aporia* refers to the point wherein meaning is unable

The Vampire Crusades

to be decided. This point, in turn, undermines the work's argument because meaning cannot be pinned down by the reader.

Derrida's questioning of the relationship between signifier and signified opened the door for critic Homi Bhabha to explore their separation further. The separation between signifier and signified, Bhabha claimed, occurs when the image detaches itself from its intended conceptual meaning. In this work "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," Bhabha describes how the separation of signifier and signified leads to ideological ambivalence—or aporia—, creating a hybrid symbol. The hybrid, while appearing to retain its "authoritative symbol" (Bhabha 157), changes value through the sign's disconnection, leading to the same image contrasted by a different meaning, or "signified." Bhabha writes, "the display of hybridity—its peculiar "replication"— terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery" (157). The separation of the signifier and signified, as Bhabha outlines, assigns new meaning to old images, thereby undermining the original authority of the old in a dangerous inversion of meaning.

The separation of signifier and signified is visible in *Dracula* through the vampire hunters' use of holy icons. As previously stated, the signifier of the crucifix and the wafer separate from their original signified meaning as God's holy sacraments, leaving no central meaning at their core. Sanders notes, "communion wafers appear all

over the novel but no character ever actually takes communion. Similarly, crucifixes function as a kind of armor against evil... but never as an object to assist in meditation or Vampire Crusades 90 prayer” (88). Therefore, the crucifix and the wafer, as seen in *Dracula*, become hybrid signs with newly instilled authority. Whereas God was the original authority behind these Catholic icons, as per their original signified meanings as sacraments and holy items, when the vampire hunters use these icons as tool, inverting their original purpose, the authority vested in these signifiers is transferred from God to the vampire hunters. Sanders, again, catches this separation: “Stoker's text presents these [religious] objects as instruments or tools for human endeavors instead of vehicles for a deeper connection with God” (88). Therefore, the crucifix and the wafer, sacred signifiers, have become disconnected from their signified usage as holy objects, thus shifting these icons’ authority from God to the hunters.

Jonathan Harker’s initial usage of the crucifix exemplifies the way in which the sign of the cross becomes disconnected from its holy meaning in the vampire hunters’ quest to destroy *Dracula*. Jonathan, upon receiving the cross from an old, superstitious woman, writes, “I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous” (Stoker 4). Nevertheless, he accepts her offering so as not to cause offense. Jonathan’s trepidation towards the crucifix reveals an early disconnection between the signifier and signified. Already, Harker does not attach the intended holy

The Vampire Crusades

meaning to the sign of the cross; he sees the icon as merely a source of idolatry, not connected at all to God's power. Jonathan's unbelief, however, does not hamper the crucifix from repelling evil, as revealed in his close-shave with the Count. When Harker nicks his throat while shaving and the Count springs on him, Jonathan, despite his initial unbelief, uses the crucifix to repel him. Stephen Purcell reflects on this unbelief: "To use . . . a crucifix to repel a vampire only requires the belief that some characteristic of the . . . crucifix makes vampires recoil" (300). Eventually, however, Jonathan comes to rely on his crucifix and carries it with him everywhere to ensure his safety. Despite his newfound trust in his crucifix, Jonathan's stance towards the object's religious worth has not actually changed. His positive associations tied to the crucifix come not from its religious worth but from its weaponization. So, although Jonathan does eventually find strength and comfort in the presence of his crucifix (Stoker 24), these positive associations come not from the crucifix's attachment to God, but because of its attachment to repelling vampires.

Not even the group's unofficial leader and only Catholic member, Abraham Van Helsing, defers these icons to the Holy God, nor even treats the crucifix and the wafer with the respect attributed to them in Catholicism. Van Helsing, identified as a Catholic character because of his belief in transubstantiation (180), does attach genuine, spiritual beliefs to the crucifix, and regards it as being holy instead of idolatrous, as

Jonathan does. Nevertheless, Van Helsing's Catholicism does not stop him from using this holy icon as a tool. Whereas Jonathan stumbles on the crucifix's power accidentally, Van Helsing is aware of the crucifix's power from the beginning and actively utilizes it as a weapon against Dracula and Lucy Westenra during her vampire transformation. His simultaneous acceptance of these religious objects' holiness and their use as weapons reveals a disconnect in his psyche. The two translations of the crucifix and the wafer cannot exist side by side, so Van Helsing must choose between the properties the objects offer. "Van Helsing," author Christopher Herbert affirms, "unequivocally settles [for] the magical, superstitious, materialistic doctrine of crucifixes" (109). As the group's unofficial leader, the disconnection between Van Helsing's faith and faithless actions are all the more troubling. He affirms the group's "Christian" mission by asserting that they are bearing the Cross, just as Christ did, through their quest to end all vampires (Stoker 254-55). However, "Van Helsing vows that he will lead the vampire hunters, not just to imitate Christ, but to become God," Purcell writes. "Van Helsing's version of Christ uses the crucifix as the vampire hunters do—as a weapon against evil, rather than as a means of self-sacrifice" (302). The beliefs Van Helsing espouses do not line up with his, or the group's, actions. Therefore, even Van Helsing, the one character that does attach spiritual belief to crucifixes prior to Dracula, views the crucifix as a weaponizing tool, thus removing it from its intended, sacred use.

The Vampire Crusades

This weaponization of the crucifix, marking its function as a hybrid sign, becomes readily apparent in the other members of the group's utilization of it as a form of armor and an unconsecrated tool. Dr. Seward, upon recounting his use of the crucifix, attributes no spiritual language to it, but only recognizes its protective value. "Instinctively I moved forward with a protective impulse," he says, recounting an interaction with the Count. With the crucifix and sacred wafer in hand, "I felt a mighty power fly along my arm; and it was without surprise that I saw the monster cower back" (Stoker 263). Dr. Seward is no exception. Throughout the novel, the characters refuse to attach spiritual or holy terms to the sacraments, but refer to them only by the power they bring or the protection they offer.

The vampire hunters further assert their use of the crucifix as a mere tool through their unconsecrated treatment toward it. The group, for example, always organizes both the spiritual tools, the crucifix and holy wafer, and the non-spiritual tools, garlic and knives, together. Seward, again, describes this mindset well: "we held ready to use our various armaments—the spiritual in the left hand, the mortal in the right" (261). The characters never separate these two classes of "armaments," neither physically nor mentally. To the vampire hunters, both the crucifix and garlic alike are simply "instruments in a rare, specified science" (Sanders 88). This lack of differentiation between spiritual and non-spiritual tools further proves that, although the group does recognize the crucifix's power, this

power, to them, is not sacred but of equal status to their other vampire-hunting equipment. The group, then, does not meaningfully attribute this power to God, therefore demonstrating that the crucifix is completely separated from its spiritual purpose.

Furthermore, the placement of the weapons outlined in Seward's description is also significant. The vampire hunters carry their mortal weapons in their right hands, and their spiritual weapons in their left. The left hand, traditionally, is marked by godlessness and by evil. The right hand, conversely, carries biblical implications, as the right hand is associated with blessings and honor. Therefore, the characters do not just strip the sacraments of their spiritual worth; they blasphemy the objects, as illustrated by the men carrying them in their left hands, by inverting these holy sacraments into killing tools. The wafer and the crucifix transition from living-giving objects to life-taking objects. The vampire hunters, because they only use the sign of the cross as a tool against vampires, have successfully detached this power from God, transferring it, instead, to their mortal quest.

The "holy wafer" functions in a similar way throughout the novel. The wafer, just like the crucifix, is utilized only as a tool throughout Stoker's novel, thus desecrating a holy object and further removing it from its intended sacramental purpose as the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Just as with the crucifix, Van Helsing stores the holy wafer, a true Catholic sacrament and deeply sacred artifact, in the same bag as his other vampire-hunting tools, with a white napkin as its only

protection (Stoker 179). “Van Helsing,” Purcell writes, “repeatedly treats the wafer as no holier than a screwdriver or a hunting knife” (302). Van Helsing, furthermore, in his utilization of the wafer as a tool, desecrates the “Host” so deeply that his treatment becomes blasphemous. When Van Helsing blocks the doors to Lucy’s tomb with the wafer, he crumbles it up and rolls it together to force the Host to serve his purpose by whatever means necessary (Stoker 179). Sanders further condemns the doctor for this vile display: “Van Helsing, a Catholic and thus a believer in transubstantiation, twists and contorts the body of Christ without a prayer or a word of ceremony” (89). A disconnect must be present in Van Helsing’s acceptance of the Host containing Christ’s transubstantiated body and its being a tool against vampires. If Van Helsing was treating the wafer with the respect it deserves as a sacrament, he would not contort and separate it as a tool. His use of it varies drastically from its intended purpose. Therefore, as demonstrated by both Van Helsing’s unholy treatment of the holy wafer as an unconsecrated tool, one can see that the signifier, the Host, has become disconnected from the signified, Christ’s mortal body.

Aside from treating it as a tool, Van Helsing also refrains from referring to the holy wafer in theological terms. Throughout the novel, Van Helsing and the other characters refer to the Eucharist almost exclusively as the “the wafer,” “the Holy Wafer,” or “the Sacred Wafer,” with the exception of two times, in which the wafer is called

“the Host” (Stoker 180, 256). This choice of language is significant:

“Host” foregrounds the wafer’s materiality more prominently than the sacramental term “Eucharist,” while “wafer” lacks any theological implications at all. When Stoker’s protagonists say “Host” or “wafer” but not “Eucharist,” they avoid claiming that the wafer is Christ, meaning that they avoid committing to Catholic theology. (Purcell 301)

Even in language, Stoker’s protagonists attempt to distance themselves as much as possible from the theological aspects of their holy wafer. They have gone so far to distance it from its religious purpose that they cannot ever refer to it with religious terminology. This refusal to connect the wafer with its intended function as the Eucharist demonstrates the vampire hunters’ desire to remove their tools from their sacred backgrounds, thus reinforcing the distance between even linguistic signifier and signified.

The most troubling instance of the wafer’s weaponized power, however, occurs not against Count Dracula but against the devout Mina Harker. Count Dracula drinks some of Mina’s blood and forces her to drink some of his own to transform her into a vampire. However, he is interrupted, leaving Mina lingering in the liminal stage between human and vampire. Van Helsing, in an attempt to protect Mina from transitioning fully into a vampire, touches her with the holy wafer and, upon doing so, burns her head, marking her as “unclean” (Stoker

The Vampire Crusades

254). For many critics, Mina's estrangement from God is the only episode in *Dracula* in which God actively takes part (Herbert 108, Sanders 78). Otherwise, the God of *Dracula* occurs only in the characters' invoking of His name. He appears to be missing throughout the vampire crusades, despite the characters constantly proclaim their quest's holiness. He enacts no divine judgment on Dracula directly, leaving the quest, apparently, to the vampire hunters. It is not through the will of God that Dracula is killed, but the will of men.

Nevertheless, Mina, who has remained good and pious throughout the novel, appears to be condemned by God after being essentially raped by Dracula. "This punishment and sign of rejection from Heaven, then, for an evil act committed upon this character but by no means desired by [Mina]," Sanders says, "casts a disturbing light on the loving Christian God" (78). Mina's scourging does not adhere to the picture of the loving God painted throughout the rest of the novel, therefore casting doubt on why God would punish Mina for an act of cruelty done to her. Were this the case, this scene would be profoundly disturbing and imply that God is hardly better than Dracula himself. The God of the Bible seems to lack the love that He is said to be. Mina's condemnation, moreover, alludes to a Deist god, a being who sets the rules in motion and walks away, too detached to feel any emotion for his creation. However, this assertion simply does not work with the theology used throughout the rest of the novel, which constantly proclaims God's goodness. The hybridization of the crucifix and

wafer suggest a new solution to solve the problem of God's role in *Dracula*. As evidenced by the crucifix and wafer's systematic separation from God throughout the rest of the novel, Mina's scourging, instead, marks the culmination of the separation between signifier and signified. The distance between God and these once holy objects becomes, in this passage, insurmountable, finally reaching its aporia.

Throughout the novel, the vampire hunters only ever utilize these two spiritual icons as tools or weapons, as the case may be. None of the protagonists, prior to this moment, ever attribute the crucifix or the wafer's power to God. Furthermore, as previously noted, they do all they can to distance these holy icons' vampire-hunting properties from God. They do not use the crucifix in prayer, nor do they consume the Host in holy communion. These once religious objects never exist in their intended context throughout the entirety of *Dracula*. Therefore, because the hunters never attributed the power of the vampire-repelling tools to God, thus separating signifier and signified, these holy icons have become separated from God. Therefore, the icons' authority has transferred from God to man, namely to the vampire hunters. While the crucifix and wafer do hold obvious power, God no longer wields this power—man alone does. So, because the crucifix and wafer are so vastly separated from God, when the wafer burns Mina's head, it is not God who ordains Mina's cruel fate, but the power of the wafer acting under Van Helsing's will. To attach God to the power of the wafer now, when the

The Vampire Crusades

context is so deeply inappropriate, would be preposterous considering the wafer's separate role from God for the rest of the novel. Therefore, Mina's scourging is not an act of divine agency. The wafer, now completely separated from the signified of God's love, justice, and goodness, acts through its own power under Van Helsing's agency. It is merely a tool for killing vampires and its reaction to Mina, in her semi-vampiric state, is thus justified through its practiced role. It is Van Helsing who touches the wafer to Mina's head, and it is in Van Helsing that meaning and agency must be found. Therefore, the wafer's mark on Mina's forehead is not an act of God's divine wrath, but the ultimate culmination of the separation of these sacramental signs, in which they act solely under human will, devoid of sacred meaning.

Through Stoker's gothic masterpiece *Dracula*, the protagonists use divine sacraments and holy icons to combat Dracula, ultimately leading to the hunters' defeat of vampiric evil. However, despite these icons' origin coming from God, Van Helsing and his followers do everything in their power to separate the signifier, the crucifix and the Host, from the signified, their holy sacramental purpose. This separation between signifier and signified leads to the group's treatment of holy objects as unconsecrated and even blasphemous, making them into mere tools or weapons to demolish their foe. In the end, these sacraments become so detached from God's goodness and intended usage that, as evidenced by Mina's scourging, the crucifix and the wafer become

wholly separated from God, just like the vampire they seek to destroy.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, University of Chicago Press, Autumn 1985, pp. 144-65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343466.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, Athlone Press, 1981.
- Gedicks, Frederick Mark and Pasquale Annicchino. "Cross, Crucifix, Culture: An Approach to the Constitutional Meaning of Confession Symbols." *First Amendment Law Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2014, pp. 71-139.
- Herbert, Christopher. "Vampire Religion." *Representations*, vol. 79, no. 1, University of California Press, Summer 2002, pp. 100-21. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2002.79.1.100.
- Purcell, Stephen. "Not Wholly Communion: Skepticism and the Instrumentalization of Religion in Stoker's Dracula." *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 67, no. 2, Conference on Christianity and Literature, 2018, pp. 294-311. *SAGE Journals*, doi.org/10.1177/0148331117708257.
- Root, Michael. "Luther and Calvin on the Role of Faith in the Sacraments: A Catholic Analysis." *Nova et Vetera*, vol. 15, no. 4,

The Vampire Crusades

- Fall 2017, pp. 1065-84. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/nov.2017.0062.
- “Sacraments of the Catholic Church.” Catholic Online, www.catholic.org/prayers/sacrament.php. Accessed 25 Apr. 2021.
- “The Sacrament of the Eucharist.” *Catholic Online*, www.catholic.org/prayers/sacrament.php?id=2. Accessed 25 Apr. 2021.
- Sanders, Elizabeth. “An Up-to-Date Religion: The Challenges and Constructions of Belief in “Dracula.”” *Religion and Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, University of Notre Dame, Autumn 2015, pp. 77-98. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26377443.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin, Philosophical Library, 1959.
- “Signs, Signifiers, and Signified.” Oregon State University, oregonstate.edu/instruct/theory/signs.html#:~:text=Simply%20put%2C%20the%20signifier%20is,signified%20into%20a%20meaningful%20unit. Accessed 25 Apr. 2021.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Dover Publications Inc., 2000.