

A study of the role of women in bram stoker's dracula



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In the first fifteen chapters of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the author examines and subtly comments on the role of women in Victorian England through the actions and words of Mina and Lucy. In particular, evidence from the passage that appears on pages 164 through 167 of the Norton Critical Edition of *Dracula* suggests that through the character of Van Helsing, Stoker emphasizes the idea that a woman's purpose is to ensure her husband's happiness, and that a man's happiness should take priority above his wife's. In this particular excerpt, Stoker reveals a lot about Mina's character, but more importantly, about his own view on the role of women and their importance (or lack thereof) in the events that are critical to the plot, i. e. the hunt to destroy Dracula. As such, this passage is integral in understanding how Mina, as a woman, still contributes to Van Helsing's quest to kill Dracula, despite the fact that he views her as a less valuable individual because of her gender. Stoker depicts Mina's success as a boon to her husband as opposed to being evidence of Mina's own intellectual capabilities. Because Mina and Lucy are major characters in *Dracula*, the Victorian ideal of a woman's role becomes crucial to the plot of the entire novel, especially in the passage on pages 164-167. This passage is integral to plot development, because Van Helsing collects much of the information that he needs to kill Dracula, and all this evidence helps him convince others to join his cause. Consequently, the way he obtains this essential information is through Mina, and he seems shocked, not only that these firsthand accounts of Dracula's horrors exist, but also about the source of the information. He says, " Ah, then you have a good memory for facts, for details? It is not always so with young ladies." He is surprised that Mina, a woman, could have possibly been intelligent enough to have recorded these events and typed them up in the <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-the-role-of-women-in-bram-stokers-dracula/>

first place. Furthermore, in Victorian society, there was a widely held belief that a woman should consider her husband's comfort and happiness to be more important than her own. This is plainly evident this passage, especially on page 166. " Husband Jonathan would not like to see you so pale; and what he likes not where he love, is not to his good. Therefore for his sake you must eat and smile." Van Helsing instructs Mina to smile because otherwise she may upset Jonathan, which contradict a wife's duties to her husband. On the other hand, Van Helsing's motivation for bringing this up could be that Jonathan's emotional state is quite fragile because he saw Dracula in England while he was still trying to recover from the ordeal he survived in Transylvania at the hands of the same man and monster.

Whatever Van Helsing's motivation, this quote is still a definite representation of the far-reaching influence of Victorian society's values. These two sentences alone are condescending towards Mina, especially because of the use of the imperative, " you must eat and smile". Van Helsing is ordering Mina, in the same way as a parent would scold a child.

Unsurprisingly, Stoker compares women to children several times throughout the first 15 chapters of Dracula, usually when referring to the sick Lucy. This is a testament to the mindset of most men during the Victorian era, who controlled their wives and were expected to protect them, similar to the way that fathers comfort and protect their children. Throughout a Victorian woman's life, there was always a dominant male presence. The same is true throughout Dracula. Although the letters between Lucy and Mina appear to be an exception to this pattern, the subject of their correspondence is very often about the various men in their lives. Stoker's aforementioned

condescension towards Mina further contributes to the dynamic of
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patriarchal “ control” in the novel. Van Helsing’s command to Mina to smile also alludes to a woman’s perceived tendency to be a follower rather than a leader. Lucy keeps a diary, but this was not of her own volition. Instead, she is just copying Mina. This could imply that many women are not able to think for themselves and need to follow the example of men or other, more mature women. The latter was commonplace in Victorian society, as women were usually under the guidance and control of their fathers, and then their husbands. Moreover, Stoker makes a statement about the way women think in the quote on page 164: “ She sometimes kept a diary...and was made in imitation of you.” The word “ imitation” is important partially because of the negative connotations associated with appearing unoriginal, especially in today’s society that celebrates individuality. This presents an interesting juxtaposition of how individuality was not celebrated in 1897, when Dracula was published. As such, a woman imitating another woman’s actions would have been a good thing, because it is subtly reiterating the idea that women do not have the ability to think as individuals. This also reinforces the Victorian idea of women having a collective identity instead of being individual beings. They were often stereotyped, their rights were ignored, and their protests were often silenced by either force or resignation. At one point in Chapter 8, Mina does sympathize with the ‘ New Woman’, but she is far from becoming one herself, lest she be vilified by the vast majority of Victorian men and women who did not embrace such modern ideas. Through the way that Van Helsing praises Mina, Stoker creates an image of her that personifies the ideals of the Victorian era. At the time of Dracula’s publication, men often put women on a pedestal, not because of the words they spoke, but because of the virtues they embodied. Mina Murray is, in <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-the-role-of-women-in-bram-stokers-dracula/>

many ways, a dream wife for a typically conservative man during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She is demure, sweet, and ever-attentive to her husband. Even when she has success for which she is praised, her achievement is seen as her husband's doing, since he is the man who has married her, "...your husband will be blessed in you." It appears as though Stoker has to mention Mina's husband right after Van Helsing adulates her to remind her that her positive qualities are not her own, rather, they indirectly belong to her husband, since she "belongs" to her husband. The words that the men in *Dracula* use to describe Mina and Lucy are important because they reflect the role of women in Victorian society. On page 165, Stoker writes, "I, who have read your so sweet letter to poor Lucy". Stoker repeats the words "sweet" and "poor" countless times throughout Chapters 1-15 to describe Lucy and sometimes, Mina. The only time Stoker uses an adjective that actually depicts a real, substantial character trait is when Van Helsing calls Mina clever: "Oh, you are such a clever woman!" (Stoker, 164). This passage provides the only example in the first fifteen chapters of a man actually acknowledging a woman's intellectual contribution, which is Mina's journal, letters and her idea to transcribe Jonathan's journal. The specificities of Mina's contribution to Van Helsing's quest are significant, because part of her contribution involves typing out her husband's journal and translating it from shorthand. The metaphorical significance of this act lies in the simple fact that Mina is copying Jonathan's words instead of writing her own. At the time, a woman's opinions were usually expected to be a reflection of her husband's opinions, and so the fact that Mina is highly extolled by Van Helsing for copying her husband's words is an important cultural reference.

Mina and Lucy are both respectable young ladies, but the big difference
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between them is that Lucy becomes more sexual as she turns into a vampire. An example of this appears in Chapter XII, when Lucy is dying as a mortal being and transforming into a vampire. Her voice becomes more “voluptuous” and she wants to kiss Arthur, who has to be physically restrained by Van Helsing so he will not reciprocate. Van Helsing holds Arthur back to protect Arthur from becoming a vampire himself, but there is symbolic significance in the fact that Van Helsing is the barrier between an unmarried man and woman, who were expected to remain “pure” until marriage. In this passage, Mina seems to be a bit flirtatious with Van Helsing because of the biblical allusion on page 164: “I could not resist the temptation of mystifying him a bit-I suppose it is some of the taste of the original apple that remains still in our mouths.” Her justification for almost flirting with him and holding back her journal at first is that she believes the old idea that sin originates with women, and it is in her nature to try and tempt Van Helsing a bit. The last sentence of the passage is particularly resonant for several reasons. “So he took the papers with him and went away, and I sit here thinking-thinking I don’t know what” (Stoker 167). On the surface, it seems that Mina is overwhelmed, and she needs time to process all that’s been happening to her. However, it is possible that that Stoker meant to imply that once Van Helsing (a man) is no longer engaged in conversation with Mina (a woman), she has no more relevant thoughts to record. Stoker seems to insinuate that Mina doesn’t know what to think when a man isn’t instructing her, however, this would be contradicted by her journal entries in previous chapters that definitely show original thought. It is also possible that she doesn’t know what to think because after her conversation with Van Helsing. The female characters greatly affect the plot

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of Dracula. The way that stoker describes Mina in this passage, and the way that he portrays all women in the novel is an accurate reflection of Victorian values. Stoker reinforces the Victorian ideals about how women should speak and act through his descriptions of Lucy and Mina.