

# Dracula as feminine



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The title character in Bram Stoker's "Dracula" is a sexually perplexing figure. Nietzsche wrote of a creative being called the "Übermensch", or "superman". Men who overcome their handicaps and identify with God are potential supermen; as models of this concept, Nietzsche named Socrates, Jesus, Leonardo DaVinci, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Goethe, among others. Adolf Hitler took this idea to a new level during World War II, proclaiming that all Aryans were supermen and fit to control who lived and who died. Hitler did not only identify himself with God, but took for himself a godlike title. Dracula is another of these "supermen": he has supernatural powers surpassing any mere mortal's, and decides who is to die, and who is to become immortal. There are, however, a number of discrepancies within the text that indicate that Dracula is far from the masculine, all powerful persona of the true superman. In fact, he embodies several notably feminine characteristics, and is closely associated with several important feminine concepts. The question at hand is whether Stoker intended Dracula to be interpreted as a superman, or as a gender-ambiguous character whose feminine aspects undermine his masculinity. The first issue to take into consideration is Dracula's physical appearance. Though Dracula is a man, he has some notably feminine anatomical features. When the reader is introduced to Count Dracula, he is immediately given a few important descriptors. The first is that Dracula has a beard; this is important because it can in no way be interpreted as a feminine trait. However, this masculinity is immediately undermined by the fact that Dracula has "very red lips" (10), which are generally associated with women. This feminine trait is then undercut by a masculine one: the count's immense strength. Jonathan Harker writes, "Then I descended from the side of the coach, the driver

helping me with a hand which caught my arm in a grip of steel; his strength must have been prodigious" (10). Later, Harker says that the count's hand "grasped mine with a strength which made me wince" (15), thereby reinforcing the count's physical power. The count's face also lends credibility to his superman persona: a strong – a very strong – aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly thin nostrils, with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely everywhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion...the chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin. (17) One can hardly call this the face of a feminine man; it is harsh and bears little resemblance to a woman's visage. However, Dracula's masculine countenance is undermined by the fact that the count is described as shockingly pale: his hands are "white and fine...the general effect was one of extraordinary pallor" (18). The importance of this fact is determined by the era during which Stoker was writing. Just prior to the publication of *Dracula* in 1897, a culture of invalidism had run rampant. Women sought to appear thin and infirm, on the verge of death. It was considered highly fashionable to be pale and sickly-looking; the hope was that the appearance of near-death would lend one an angelic quality. Dracula takes on a similar pallor, though the effect is somewhat different; though he is already dead, he looks more like a fiend than an angel. Dracula's wan countenance was a sure sign of femininity during the Victorian era. After feeding, the female vampires in the story are flushed and appear more alive; this is not so with Dracula. Upon seeing Lucy in her coffin after a night spent feeding, Dr. Seward remarks that "she was, if possible, more radiantly beautiful than ever...and on the cheeks was a delicate bloom"

(200). Dracula, however, is described as having a “waxen hue,” and “pallid skin” the very morning after feeding on Mina Harker’s blood. In this sense, he is even more feminine than the women in the story; while they are able to shed the delicate demeanor so popular amongst women at the time, the count cannot rid himself of his fashionable pallor. An understanding of Dracula’s mind-set is crucial to a discussion of his femininity. His emotional state, as well as the actions that result from it, improve his superman status, in contrast to his physical description. To begin with, Dracula is extremely educated. He has studied everything necessary in order to succeed at his ambitions. Before embarking on his trip to London, the count learns to speak English “thoroughly” (22), and “he clearly had studied beforehand all he could get on the subject of the neighbourhood, for he evidently at the end knew very much more than [Harker] did” (22). Such a high level of education was a trait associated mainly with men during the Victorian era.

Furthermore, Dracula is a war hero, and war in itself is symbolic of masculinity. He was a great warrior in his time, conquering whole populations and inspiring fear in the hearts of mortals; he still inspires that same fear in the hearts of the citizens that live in his country. This is shown by the superstitious rituals Harker witnesses as he journeys to the count’s abode. Dracula says that “we Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship” (28). It was he, in truth, who fought those wars so long ago, and his centuries of warring and experience afforded him a certain degree of strategic capability. It is this ability that he uses to his advantage when he is “fighting” Professor Van Helsing and his men. While he is experienced enough to know to run when he is outnumbered, such as when Van Helsing

and the others close in on him at one of his London homes (306), he is also aware of the most productive and efficient way to take down an enemy. He goes straight for the weakest point: in this case, the women that the men love. He takes Lucy before the men are even truly aware of the danger. Even once they recognize the threat Dracula poses, they are still unable to stop him from taking Mina. Through Mina, the count is able to gain knowledge about the men's activities and plans, and to wound their morale. Dracula says to Mina: Whilst they played wits against me – against me who commanded nations, and intrigued for them, and fought for them, hundreds of years before they were born – I was countermining them. And you, their best beloved one...shall be later on my companion and my helper. (288) This seemingly minor victory is, in fact, a significant one; it shows that Dracula has the power to defeat five men at one time, reinforcing his status as a superman. One might view his actual attack, however, as feminine: he does not take his victims by force, but rather lulls them into a state of submission in which there is no need for struggle. Lucy, in fact, does not even remember the seduction, but rather attributes it to a flight of fancy or a dream. When Dracula takes Mina's blood and feeds her his, the situation appears calm and even gentle to Van Helsing and his companions. Mina has her head buried in the count's chest, wrapped in his embrace (although it is not an extremely loving embrace, it is an embrace nonetheless). When Mina relates the events of the evening to the men, it is the only time in the novel that the reader gets to see Dracula actually feeding. The first impression created by her description is, however, false. In fact, Dracula does indeed use the threat of violence in order to take Mina's blood. He preys on her weakness: her beloved. When Dracula finds her awake and alert, he points to her husband

and says, “ Silence! If you make a sound I shall take him and dash his brains out before your very eyes” (287). This is the first time that we hear the count make a violent, physical threat. We see just how successful it is: he is able to subdue Mina and make her drink his blood by forcibly thrusting her face into his chest. Dracula’s actions throughout the story are notably masculine, and support the idea of Dracula as a superman figure. One can go even further with the idea of Dracula’s masculinity: he appears to be a father figure in the novel. He is the only male vampire to whom the reader is introduced; indeed, he seems to be the only existing male vampire. He represents a perfect father figure to the three female vampires living in his castle. They must abide by his rules and follow his commands. When he finds the women about to partake of Harker’s blood, Dracula steps in and says, “ how dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast your eyes on him when I had forbidden it?” (39) Even more importantly, Dracula is a provider for the women. It is as though they are helpless children relying on him to bring them food, even though we see that they are far from helpless. When the three female vampires find that they cannot feed on Jonathan, they turn to Dracula, who satiates their hunger with a bag containing a small child. He totally possesses the women, at one time or another controlling every female character in the text. Dracula’s role, however, is more suited to that of a mother than a father. It is true that he provides for his “ family” and that he is in charge – even Renfield, a non-vampire who wishes to be a part of Dracula’s following does his bidding. However, one cannot escape the fact that Dracula is the only one capable of reproduction. The female vampires never create offspring: their victims die or recover, but never turn into vampires. The three women are assumed to have disposed of the child in the

sack given to them by the count, because we never again hear of it, except for when the mother of the child comes crying for retribution. Lucy's victims consist of small children who soon become well again, and appear none the worse for the incident. Mina is never allowed a chance to feed. The only one who reproduces is Dracula, and he is a male. Later, once he has been cured of her vampirism, Mina is allowed to reproduce. The natural state of her motherhood and the fact that she is a woman only serve to remind the reader that Dracula, even though he is a man, had children as well. Dracula's maternal qualities are reaffirmed when Mina drinks blood from his chest. The parallel to a baby suckling on his mother's breast cannot be missed. Both Dracula and a mother feeding life into their children. While there is a sort of role reversal at the end, as Mina becomes a mother in her own right, here it is Dracula who is the mother figure. He represents a mother far more than he does a father – yet another injurious factor to his already questionable masculinity. There is no doubt that Dracula is able to reproduce himself and control his offspring. It is also unquestionable that he is host to a variety of other capabilities and powers. His powers are so far-reaching, in fact, that Dracula is described as almost godlike in the text. Dr. Seward's zoophagous patient and Dracula-follower, Renfield, often refers to Dracula as "Master", making comments such as "I don't want to talk to you: you don't count now; the Master is at hand" (100). Later, in a more comprehensive statement, Renfield says: I am here to do Your bidding, Master. I am Your slave, and You will reward me, for I shall be faithful. I have worshipped You long and afar off. Now that You are near, I await Your commands, and You will not pass me by, will You, dear Master, in Your distribution of good things? (102) Clearly, Dracula is a godlike figure to Renfield, and Dr. Seward is aware of this as

well. He takes the liberty of capitalizing the words referring to Dracula, though he has only heard the words spoken aloud. According to Renfield, the count will soon be in a position to “ distribute good things”, as a god does. Not only does Dracula have control over men like Renfield, but he controls the other vampires, as well; though readers don’t bear witness to this power, he has the ability to control Mina once she is under his thrall. He tells Mina that “ when my brain says ‘ Come!’ to you, you shall cross land or sea to do my bidding” (288). No less impressive is Dracula’s telepathic capacity: he has the ability to control wildlife, and to command his body to transform into any number of shapes. He can call upon beasts from great distances without having to say a word or raise a finger. Professor Van Helsing says of Dracula: ...of himself so strong in person as twenty men...he can, within limitations, appear at will when, and where, and in any of the forms that are to him; he can, within his range, direct the elements: the storm, the fog, the thunder; he can command all the meaner things: the rat, and the owl, and the bat-the moth, and the fox, and the wolf; he can grow and become small; and he can at times vanish and become unknown. (237) These supernatural abilities are extreme and unparalleled in any mortal; it is not difficult to ascertain why men such as Renfield view Dracula as a god. However, despite this, there are a few moments that cast Dracula as more of a goddess than a god. The fact that Dracula can only come out at night is significant. The night, the empire of the moon, has commonly been associated in literature with the female gender. Folklore, mythology, and the religious traditions of numerous ancient cultures personify the moon as female. This is in part due to the fact that women have noted for centuries that their menstrual periods often are in sync with the moon’s cycles. In ancient Egypt, Isis, the moon goddess, was



the mother and giver of all life. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob observes that in his son's dream the sun represents himself, and his wife is represented by the moon. Geoffrey Chaucer uses the moon in reference to the constant transformation of women in his epic poem "Troilus and Criseyde", written in the 14th century. Everywhere one looks, there are countless connections between the feminine and the moon; because of his association with the night, Dracula is feminized. Another issue that questions Dracula's masculinity is the fact that he must sleep on the earth. The earth, like the moon, is the realm of the female. In Greek, "Earth" is both mythically and grammatically feminine, and is ruled by goddesses, rather than gods. The common phrase "Mother earth" also reinforces this idea. The character of Dracula is infused with feminine symbolism: the moon and the earth both rule him, and are his most devastating weaknesses. It is this knowledge that Van Helsing and his companions use to their advantage when attacking Dracula: they work diligently during the day, when Dracula has no power. They plan to sabotage his sleeping places, placing holy wafers on the earth where the count must sleep. Without the earth, he is lost. Though Dracula may have superpowers that liken him to a god, he is still controlled by feminine elements – his very own kryptonite. Count Dracula is an extremely powerful creature, with numerous masculine attributes that liken him to Nietzsche's "superman". However, though he has the strength of twenty men, the ability to control his own form and the behavior of animals, and the mien of a man, he is more feminine than masculine. Stoker purposely draws attention to his pallor, thereby connecting him with the feminine. Dracula is also closely identified with maternal actions, and is portrayed in an almost motherly light. He controls many entities, but is himself governed by symbols of feminine

power. It may be that Stoker did not wish for Dracula to be victorious, and feminized the character in order to weaken his character without making this weakness obvious. The mortal men that are no match for Dracula are thereby given a chance; it is, after all, the women in the novel who are victims. Though on the surface Dracula appears to be the “berman”, perfectly fitting Nietzsche’s mold, he is in truth far from it. Perhaps if Nietzsche had envisioned a “berwoman”, the novel would have concluded differently.