

Dracula: the unjust war for feminine thought



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“ Mere “ modernity” cannot kill.” The year is 1897, and European culture is changing. Skepticism about both Christianity and the introduction of Darwinism into common thought is current, and the concept of what we now call “ feminism” is planting its roots, apparent in the rise and fall of political parties and movements such as the female-friendly Paris Commune in France (Smith 72). For a man like Jonathan Harker, sitting in Dracula’s castle, this is uncomfortable (Stoker 53). These words demonstrate his doubt that the Count’s societal model, as he’ll soon come to know it, can fail.

Stoker created the character of the Count in Dracula to personify sexual promiscuity and various other counter-cultural ideals that supposedly preyed on British society. Seen as obstructing and infiltrating a system that doesn’t need fixing, Dracula embodies the feminist movement. His framework for English society features more radical ideas than what activists considered cutting edge, making Dracula the perfect villain to even progressive readers.

Dracula works primarily through the captivation of women in the novel, luring them into knowing him sexually. He seeks to take over societal thought through the overmastering of the women’s desires. But Dracula isn’t the only one reaching for this kind of control. Although it seems that Dracula is the lone violator of Lucy and Mina’s prerogatives in the story, what goes unchecked is how the other male characters minimize the two females too. In Dracula, we watch the presumably protagonistic men who defeat Dracula at the end of the novel practice similar manipulative tactics to the Count’s. A few examples are the men’s benefiting from but lacking acknowledgement of Mina’s literary contributions, which lead to conquering Dracula, and their ill-dealings with Lucy’s inherent sexual frustrations. Both Dracula and the “

good” men, like Harker and Van Helsing, are at battle throughout the text over whose societal ideals regarding female sexuality will prevail, in a time when sexual norms for women were so conservative. Unfortunately functioning as a means to an end in Stoker’s analysis of Victorian Era ideology, women are minimized; they’re the pawns being played to advantage by the men.

Despite the fact that women are reduced to tools for man’s dominance, Stoker argues for the immensity and importance of female opinion. As the influence over Lucy’s and Mina’s philosophies is the prize to be won, the battle indicates the absolute value of female ideals in culture. Perhaps it’s this realization of self-worth that could empower women to break out of the societal confinements that Stoker illustrates. In Dracula, all men act as antagonists to establish their own societal ideals, specifically involving women’s sexual freedom.

To adequately examine Bram Stoker’s Dracula, providing a brief contextual and historical background of Victorian Era society is necessary. Appearing at the end of the nineteenth century, Dracula takes place in England.

Dominated by male ideals and religious piety, a woman was allowed two reasonable lifestyle options: to marry, or to remain a virgin. Women’s only role in sex was to bear the child; sex wasn’t for their satisfaction. However sexually constrained they were, women were to take pride in subduing their sexual desires (Kline 105). Whether embracing the pressures of near asexuality, as in the Social Purity Movement, or rebelling against it, women hardly had a choice either way. It was important in Victorian thought for man to be sexually dominant: “ If women were more sexual than their man...then

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the man would not be the dominant, active, and highly sexual partner,” (Difilippantonio 4). Published during the popularity of this kind of sexual philosophy, Stoker’s text serves as a commentary on the opinion of the times (Stevenson 139). “ Most critics agree that Dracula should be seen as an excellent example of indulging the Victorian male imagination, mainly regarding female sexuality” (Pektas 1). Sexuality is an oft-explored theme in analysis of Dracula, as numerous scenes in the novel exhibit this tension (Fleissner 418). Harker’s near seduction in Dracula’s castle, Lucy’s desire to marry multiple men, Dracula’s visiting of Lucy, and the blood transfusions that Van Helsing and Arthur Holmwood among others offer are all references to the sexuality of the societal context that Stoker was working in. Gauging the restraint that Victorian women were put under enables us to understand the specific instances in the story in which women serve only as pieces in the men’s game for ideological dominance. But before we look at these examples, let’s look at the text’s main female characters.

The two notable women in the story, Lucy and Mina, vary in their opinions on the societal pressure to keep sexual actions inside of marriage and stay out of man’s work. Lucy is doubtful of monogamy’s adequacy, and consequently of why sex is limited to one person. She asks Mina early in the book, “ Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it” (Stoker 87). Lucy brings up the dilemma but quickly dismisses it, knowing that it’s impossible in her given social context to have multiple men and to then be considered acceptable. This quote also reveals Lucy’s lack of absolute contentment with any of her options, which later plays a part in her downfall. Further, Lucy

offers little aid or effort when it comes to conquering Dracula. Almost no reference to Mina's sexuality is made in the novel, and, according to the times, that's the way it should be. However, Mina is bright and collected as she plays a central role in the defeat of Dracula in Chapter 26. Van Helsing tells her she has a "man's brain," a remark she takes as a compliment (Stoker 335) and understandably so, considering her submissiveness to men throughout the novel. She's "practicing shorthand," but not for herself, but to so she can be useful to her husband Harker (Stoker 79). Her scrupulous journal keeping throughout the novel proves to be essentially informative and inspiring for the group in the pursuit of Dracula, only to be belittled by the novel's end. "A woman who engages in inappropriately assertive behavior is put in her place by the novel's end. For Mina, this behavior is not sexual predation but her tireless labor of typing" (Fleissner 418). Her efforts are apparently "nothing but a mass of typewriting," as the child she bore serves as the only legitimate proof of victory over Dracula Harker and Van Helsing are interested in (Stoker 541-542).

Now that we've examined the characters of Lucy and Mina, we can better assess the antagonistic work of Count Dracula. The story's single assumed antagonist, Dracula works to uproot the Victorian sexual norms already in place. Dracula is studying English culture, as is apparent from his collection of English literature and his constant questioning of Harker about what the society there is like (Stoker 29-33): "I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity...and all that makes it what it is" (Stoker 30). Dracula also tells Harker of his family's past military fame and of the power his ancestors held

(Stoker 42-44). All of this is hinting at Dracula's coming attack on English ideals. But the first attack takes place before Harker even leaves the castle. Three sexual vampires attempt to seduce Harker, and Dracula's true intentions come through. He tells the other vampires: "When I am done with him you shall kiss him at your will" (Stoker 57). Once Dracula is finished conquering common Victorian thought that sex is only for marriage, there won't be any need to convince men like Harker to give in. Harker's near submission to the vampires reveals the weakness in Victorian sexual thought that Dracula hopes to exploit. The desire expressed in Harker's dream would be considered sinful, "debauchery" by the day's conservative standards (Foucault 893).

Once in England, Dracula begins his assault by enticing Lucy into multiple sexual encounters. While Victorian men advocate absolute chastity for women, Dracula desires the opposite. Notice how Dracula doesn't pursue the men after arriving, instead targeting Lucy and Mina. In a later confrontation, Dracula mocks the religious men, saying "Your girls that you all love are mine already. And through them you and others shall yet be mine" (Stoker 440). His strategy almost works, as the men watch the now demonized Lucy in the graveyard, until Arthur Holmwood kills her (Stoker 309). This exemplifies the primary method by which Dracula is attempting to take over England, through the repressed sexuality of women. The evil Count desires to work through the women to get to the men, a strategy that the other party also executes upon further examination.

Countering the ways that Dracula attacked Lucy and Mina, the time period's cultural norms are demonstrated through the English men's antagonistic

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outlooks on female sexuality and their contributions to defeating Dracula. Not unlike Dracula, the men in the story manipulate the women out of a desire for order. Aware that vampiric and female sexuality are threatening to patriarchal hegemony, Harker and Van Helsing aim to destroy Dracula and thus recapture the philosophical attention of the day's women (Arata 632). The pretext that women are supposed to contain themselves sexually unravels as both Lucy and Mina have encounters with Dracula. In response to Dracula's attack on their power over sexuality, the men respond by putting to death such a threat to the ideal Victorian women as Lucy was (Stoker 310). As Arthur Holmwood kills Lucy, Mina also tells Harker to do away with her if she shows signs of being a vampire: "There have been times when brave men have killed their wives and their womenkind, to keep them from falling into the hands of the enemy. Their hands did not falter any the more because those that they loved implored them to slay them" (Stoker 475). Mina is repentant for slipping up sexually, steadfast in the society's code that her encounter with Dracula was wrong. Van Helsing praises Mina's character for her adherence to Victorian dogma: "She is one of God's women...So true, so sweet, so noble, so little an egoist," (Stoker 268). It's only when a woman is pure and fits what the men desire her to be that they praise her like this, in sharp contrast to how Van Helsing detests the character of Lucy once she becomes a vampire. To counter the Count's sexualizing of the women, the men attempt to regain control over the women. Just as the Count needs blood to survive, the men need social order. So who wins this battle over female thought? On the basis of the death of Dracula, it would seem that the Van Helsing and the rest of the men are

triumphant (Stoker 540). Van Helsing, who was tempted by the aforementioned seductress vampires, is able to avoid giving into them, symbolizing the victory of his sexually conservative ideals over the loose morals of Dracula (530). In the book's closing scene, married Mina is portrayed with Harker's child, further boasting that the traditional Victorian view of sexuality has prevailed (Fleissner 418). But as before, that's not all there is to the story. While the tale seems to have ended happily, it's important to note the methods the men used in defeating Dracula. When we look back at the actions of men like Van Helsing and Arthur Holmwood, we realize that the men ended up compromising the conviction their goals were to protect: the chastity of sexuality. Through their victory, the men's active objectification of women is evident, and looking back at a few key instances, Dracula seems like much more of protagonist than the religious Englishmen.

In one sense, Dracula ended up accomplishing what he set out to do: to compromise the sexuality of Victorian women. By leading both Lucy and Mina out of their sexual repression, he forced the men to react. Van Helsing is wise not only in western medicine but also ancient medicines (Stoker 161). Van Helsing's medical knowledge of older times symbolizes his awareness of Dracula's familial war roots, and Dracula's rekindled desire to conquer. So the doctor seems prepared to combat Dracula's bites. However, Lucy's health depletes until Van Helsing resorts to using blood transfusions in an attempt to save her. Throughout Dracula, blood serves as symbolism for sex (Pektas 11). Further, the significance of blood was connected with sex: "According to medical science sexual intercourse meant a depletion of sperm which signified blood and that was not something to squander," (Pektas 8).

The symbolism for sex is strengthened as he only allows men to provide Lucy blood, not the able female servants whom Van Helsing doesn't trust (Stoker 213). The men react to Dracula's drawing of blood from Lucy's neck with sexual force of their own, taking turns. Her desire for multiple husbands, as mentioned earlier, is heresy. But it seems that her wishes have come true, as all three of her marital suitors give her their blood, undoubtedly symbolic for sexual intercourse. Van Helsing acknowledges her polygamous wishes, surely flustered by the matter (Stoker 251). Blood is important to the story in a religious context as well. Dracula's taking of blood from Lucy and Mina is perhaps a twisted reference to the death of Christ, as the women are saved from their sexual confines. The four men's returning of blood into Lucy might represent the returning of Christ's blood to His own body. Just as they give up their religious mantra and sexual purity, the Christian savior's work is undone in their lives. In this, the morals of the men are compromised as Dracula's executed ideals consequently cause the religiously devout men to act out.

Another scene in which Dracula supersedes the ideologies of the Englishmen takes place in the graveyard, as Holmwood drives a stake into Lucy's heart, killing her (Stoker 308). With the stake as an allegorical penis, Holmwood, "driving deeper and deeper" into his fiancé's heart, acts sexually promiscuously just as the Count wanted him to. It's through the women that Dracula masters the men, who urge Holmwood to keep going as he penetrates her (Stoker 308). "The great drops of sweat sprang out on his forehead, and his breath came in broken gasps," (Stoker 309). This allusion to Arthur's ejaculation concludes the action, and so is the end of Lucy. For

being “ ministers of God’s own wish,” or “ old knights of the Cross to redeem more,” as Van Helsing calls the group upon their decision to chase Dracula over seas, the men’s internal purity seems to be lacking (Stoker 459-460). Dracula departs from England on a ship called “ Czarina Catherine,” the name taken from the Russian empress, implying promiscuity. Again, just as the group performed blood transfusions and put Lucy to death, they follow impurity in an attempt to defeat Dracula. In these ways, Dracula has affected the ideologies of the “ pious” men.

For Stoker, both parties won the battle over the ideologies of women in their own ways. In many ways the misogynistic ideals found in the “ righteous” men of Dracula still haven’t been corrected in societal thought. On the other hand, Dracula’s then countercultural sexual ideals have become more commonplace, as women are considered equals to men in sexuality. The emergence of female sexual opinion and freedom is a relatively new concept, a mindset only men have enjoyed until the recent past. But in a sense, both cases are wrong. If anything, Dracula shows us the deplorable objectification of women that the men practice in attempt to overcome each other. Around the time of the novel’s initial publication, a movement called “ New Women” gained steam. It boasted women’s roles in traditionally male work settings and in education. This development saw women that “ felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood,” (Senf 35). We look back on this campaign as the beginning of the end of something unjust, the use of women by men for personal gain. Bram Stoker’s Dracula seems to have ushered in a new era of women’s rights, as it serves as an excellent warning against misogynistic ideology.

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