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The Nightmare of *Dracula's* Female Vampires

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"And as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth" (Stoker 45)

Although Count Dracula is undoubtedly one of the most iconic literary figures of monstrosity in popular imagination, the female vampires in Bram Stoker's Gothic novel *Dracula* are the ultimate source of terror. These perverse and glamorous feminine monsters maintain a rampant sanguine and sexual appetite throughout, offering readers an abundance of perversions through richly grotesque and eroticized imagery. Indeed, the narrative's peculiar presentation of female sexuality has been extensively revisited, adding to a growing body of diverse readings and interpretations. Stoker unravels the neat certainties and boundaries of femininity, painting these female characters in complex paradoxes, overflowing the novel with gender inversion, gender slippage and grotesque gender extrapolation that have left many readers in interpretational tangles. In order to navigate the dense mesh of socio-cultural anxieties projected onto the undead bodies of female vampires, unlike many works of criticism, this essay seeks to remain intimately connected to the text. The analysis will start by first exploring the alluring paradoxical nature of female vampire sexuality and its invocation of both terror and delight in audiences. It will then move on to discuss the monstrous presentation of Lucy Westenra's femininity, combining psychoanalytic and feminist lenses to explore male anxieties in regard to female sexuality. Finally, the essay will observe the ambivalence of Mina Harker, the only female character to escape the clutches of Dracula, and the complexity of her gender performance as boundaries become unstuck.

Before I start my analysis, it is essential to stress that the nature of the "female" has itself been made problematic and ambivalent in this text, making it somewhat difficult to reduce the novel to a tale that is exclusively hostile to female sexuality. Groom, for example, illustrates this difficulty in his observation of the "otherworldly discordance of female vampires" as they "teem with much too irreconcilable definition, so that they perplex and confound understanding"(117). It is therefore imperative, when reading *Dracula,* to

acknowledge how these gothic monsters are over-determined, and open to endless interpretations. The transformation of fragmented 'otherness' into one, grotesque body places emphasis upon Stoker's "voluptuous" female vampires, through their refusal to be neatly defined.

The novel's first introduction to female vampirism is Jonathan Harker's hypnotic encounter with the seductive and malevolent vampiric trio, lurking within the depths of Dracula's castle. In this scene of indulgence, Stoker invokes the "bitter offensiveness, as one smells blood," of a "honey-sweet" gender inversion. Here, Harker adopts the position of a swooing maiden as he looks upon the feminine monsters "in an agony of delightful anticipation", awaiting consummation by them in a "languorous ecstasy" (46). Terror bleeds into nauseating delight as we see Harker struggle to resist his unsettling desire to assume complete passivity, in response to these advancing demonic sexual aggressors. The competing imperatives of "wicked, burning desire" and "deadly fear" (45) immobilize him as heawaits erotic fulfilment of this thrilling double passion. The erotically charged nightmare scenario is meticulously detailed; "and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth" (45) We are invited to linger in the excess of fetishized detail provided in the sensory illustration of this menacingly beautiful creature, the reader positioned as voyeur to the perverse titillation of her feline actions. Similarly, the vampiric women also enter Van Helsing's erotic consciousness as he comes face to face with them: "She was so fair to look on, so radiantly beautiful, so exquisitely voluptuous, that the very instinct of man in me...made my head whirl with new emotion" (451) The erotic thrill of these feminine monsters is distilled in the repetition of the intensifier 'so', emphasising their tantalizing, disorientating effect on the male figures. For instance, Van Helsing, like Harker,

falls into a state of momentary paralysis as he too indulges in their striking magnetism. *Dracula* can therefore be read as a narrative of collective dreaming as "[t]his corporal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice" (Cohen 19).

The narrative often seems to slip into states of hallucinatory reveries, unconsciousness and dreams, suggesting that Stoker's narrative is best understood as a collection of perverse fantasies. This supernatural world provided an escape from many of the sexual and psychic restraints prevalent in Victorian culture (Demetrakopoulos 105). Suzanna Nyberg highlights how the supernatural offered a mask to disguise sexual fantasies, stating how "[v]ampires were capable of liberating modern oppressed man from his narrow and confined milieu" (489). This chimes with Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, who observes how this moment of gender slippage, where we see Harker assume the position of passive rape victim and the female vampire as sexual aggressor, suggests "the weariness Victorians felt towards pure, passive, decarnalized females versus bestial, aggressive males" (106). Furthermore, John C. Cawelti explains the importance of formula mass art in allowing an individual to "act out certain unconscious or repressed needs, or express in an overt and symbolic fashion certain latent motives which they must give expression to, but cannot face openly" (389). Thus, it can be argued that Stoker seems to imagine a world of greater erotic freedom as his exquisite creatures circulate the pages of this novel. Emanations of irresistible sexuality break the surface in delightfully grotesque avatars, seductively inviting fantasies of the forbidden.

Another significant presentation of monstrous femininity is in Stoker's nightmarish visual feast of Lucy Westenra's altered vampiric state. Brought extravagantly to the fore within the novel's unsettling imagery, Lucy's abhorrent new sexual assertiveness permeates

the clinical descriptions of her distorted physiognomy; “Lucy’s eyes in form and colour; but Lucy’s eyes unclean and full of hell-fire, instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew” (225). Stoker emphasises her strange metamorphosis in this visceral metaphor of her unfamiliar eyes now “unclean and full of hell-fire” and blazing with an “unholy light” (225). In this disturbing closeup, her intense demonic subversion is foregrounded; “we recognised the features of Lucy Westenra. Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to… cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness” (217). The anadiplosis of Lucy’s name captures Van Helsing’s shock at this horrifying uncanny spectacle; her startling monstrosity is extrapolated in the grotesquerie of her seductive glamour, made simultaneously strange and familiar. She is a nightmarish simulacrum of the original human Lucy. Thus, her aggressive female sexuality horrifies due to its presentation as something simultaneously forerign whilst also serving as a parodic mirror (Stevenson 142). The terror of her monstrosity results not from its completely alien nature, but from her disturbing similarities; elements from her existing form are collapsed into her new identity. Indeed, Veronica Hollinger distils the uncanny horror of the vampire, coining it “the monster of choice” (201) as “[i]t is the monster that used to be human; it is the undead that used to be alive; it is the monster that looks like us” (201).

From her inception in the novel, Lucy’s ethereal beauty is accentuated, her monstrous inversion ever more horrifying as she is infected with overt sexuality. Lucy is positioned on the outside of Victorian normativity when she decides to playfully flirt with the idea of polyandry; ”[w]hy can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?” (67). Her vampiric seduction, therefore, metaphorically represents all manifestations of her excess, intensifying her subversive desires for her other suitors into the encroaching threat of the vampire (Prescott and Giorgio 500). Like the ‘fair lady’ in Harker’s

fever induced encounter, with her possession of "voluptuous lips" and a "deliberate voluptuousness" (46), Lucy is also superfluously described through this adjective; we hear she has has" a voluptuous smile" and that she speaks with a "languorous, voluptuous grace" (226). As is typical when Stoker discusses the characteristics of a particular group, his vocabulary appears to shrink, frequently resorting to the formulas of describing the "good, brave men" versus the *voluptuous* feminine vampires (Stevenson 145). These female monsters are grouped and bound together, collectivized under this reductive sexual label, radically distinguished from the novel's male figures.

Lucy's monstrous femininity is made explicit in the simile comparing her to the ultimate *femme fatale*, the Greco-Roman snake-haired Gorgon: "the brows were wrinkled as though the folds of flesh were coils of Medusa's snakes" (226). In the Western-European psyche, monstrosity has been regarded as quintessential to the construction of femininity; woman has persistently been demonised as succubus, harpy, witch, temptress and any number of horrific supernatural beings, positioning the female beyond the natural order of things (Mulvey-Roberts 106). Helen Cixous, in her deconstruction of 'dangerous' female sexuality in 'The Laugh of Medusa', unravels these phallocentric notions of monstrous femininity, deconstructing patriarchal metaphors that have long painted the female flesh as a poisonous and corrupting force. She highlights how sexual difference in the psychoanalytic system is defined as the difference of having and lacking the phallus; it is a patriarchal construction that "privileges the phallus as symbol and source of power" (Cixous 1948). Moreover, she uses Freud's psychoanalysis of Medusa as an example of how women are dominated and framed by the 'phallocentric system'. In his essay 'Medusa's Head', Freud states how she "displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother" and therefore terrifies and repels the male because she is a grotesque image of castration (Head 105). Hence, when Seward reports Lucy's deadly

paralyzing gaze - “If ever a face meant death - if looks could kill - we saw it at that moment” (250) - it calls to mind Medusa’s symbolism of sexual autonomy and aberration. Like Medusa, Lucy is inscribed as the fearsome monster of oppressed femininity; her powers of petrification, seen as a perverse distortion of the male gaze, can be regarded as the terror of the female gaze - the fear of female desire and sexuality. *Dracula* thus figures the sexualization of women as a grotesque violation and deformation.

Yet another thrillingly perverse inversion that contributes to the apogee of sickening images of monstrous femininity can be seen in the female vampires’ rejection of motherhoodin their nauseating infanticides. This grotesque departure from the natural order speaks to vampirism’s decay of natural feminine instincts, such as maternal and familial values. For example Lucy Westenra preys on the neighbourhood’s children as the mysterious “bloofer lady” (389). When the men discover Lucy with a child she has abducted, she is depicted through demonic and zoomorphic similes, reminding us of the feline actions of the three vampires in Harker’s thrilling reverie: “With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone. . . . There was a cold-bloodedness in the act which wrung a groan from Arthur” (236). In this cannibalistic image of child murder, Stoker is attempting to horrify his Victorian audiences by defying even the most fundamental of human activities. Stoker here gives us a *tableau mordant* of gender inversion: the child Lucy clutches “strenuously to her breast” is not being fed, but is being fed upon (Craft 120). Devouring babies is an obvious upheaval of the expected domestic behaviour of nurturing Victorian women, and it invokes the deepest disgust within the Crew of Light. It is this grotesque inversion of gender codes that results in a correction of Lucy’s monstrous transgression, and thus the need for her obliteration.

Here, Stoker revels in every brutal second of this theatrical moment of sexualized violence. Such hyperbolic image of masculine dominance is a stark contrast to the passive rape victim we witness in Harker's encounter with *Dracula*'s female vampires. Documented in extravagant, technicolour detail, the slaughtering of innocent "sweet" Lucy has obvious phallic connotations:

"The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his trembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it" (230).

Whilst Stoker presents this butchering as the ultimate chivalry, as they release the woman to a final state of "unequalled sweetness and purity" (231), reinstating the homosocial norms – those of patriarchal control - that Lucy's monstrous titillation brought into crisis, many critics have noted the maniacal brutality of this episode. Lucy is stripped of her female pronouns and is referred to in the symptomatic expression as "The Thing". She is drastically dehumanised in Stoker's synecdoche, as Seward dissects her distorted, monstrous body. He focuses on "the red opened lips", "the body", "the sharp white teeth", "the mouth", "the pierced heart", pulling apart what he deems as incongruent fragments, and echoing this in his gruesome butchery account. As Mulvey-Roberts highlights in her illuminating article 'The Female Gothic Body', women in Gothic literature have "frequently been identified by parts of their bodies, whether it be mouth, breast or genitalia, which have all too often been

separated from the whole in an erasure of individuality and denial of integral personhood" (11). Similarly, Creed asserts how in the horror genre, the "[w]oman's body is slashed and mutilated, to signify not only her own castrated state but also the possibility of castration for men..he enacts on her body the one act he most fears for himself, transforming her entire body into a bleeding wound" (Creed 220). Lucy's mutilated body is transformed into an erotic spectacle for male voyeuristic fantasies of power. For Senf, this sadistic staking of Lucy is "the combined group rape and murder of an unconscious woman" (100); for Jennifer Wicke the 'Crew of Light' is "on a sex hunt" (483). John Riquelme's observation is particularly noteworthy, as he correctly states how even Dracula is not portrayed "in such bloody detail commiting the kind of gruesome violence against a woman's body that the vampire hunters perpetrate" (564). Male authority is certainly repositioned here in this apogee of sexual violence; Lucy is staked into passivity by an unsettling voyeuristic brotherhood in their attempts to assert their patriarchal ideology, which she has has so radically transgressed in her monstrous gender and sexual subversion.

Having explored Stoker's monstrous paintings of the female vampires it is important we next turn to Mina's gender performance, as she is the only female character who is able to escape vampirism. After the violent staking of Lucy, the story does not conclude, as Dracula moves on to begin his assault on Mina Harker. The text continues its flirtation with monstrosity, as Mina is threatened with the seduction of vampirism (Craft 124). It is shocking when Stoker depicts Mina participating in perhaps the most repulsive and enigmatic sexual transgression in the novel. Willingly feeding from the breast of the Vampire King himself, Dr Seward recounts the depraved scene of witnessing Mina becoming Dracula's sexual partner. He states how the scene resembled "a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink" (247). In this grotesque subversion of the maternal image, all gender

boundaries become unfixed, as all familiar categories are defied and refused: "[h]er white nightdress was smeared with blood and a thin stream tricked down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress" (298). Not only is Dracula perversely feminized, but Mina is complicit, as she admits "strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him" (284). Such fluidity of substitution and displacement entails a confusion of Dracula's sexual identity, or an interfusion of masculine and feminine functions, as here he becomes a lurid mother offering not a breast, but an open and bleeding wound (Craft 111). Mina willingly submits to Dracula's desires in this moment of "anatomical displacement" and "gender dissolution", even with her possession of remarkable self and social discipline (Craft 111). Here, we are offered the most explicit representation of anxieties about the vampiric kiss. Vampirism is the ultimate threat to the imperial subject, as it simultaneously inverts gender boundaries and behavioural expectations. Eric Kwan-Wai Yu has also observed the horror of this scene, which illustrates Dracula's power to "penetrate the imperial center and creep into any room, relishing a decent male's woman in a way which would confound all good Victorians with the most ghastly, revolting, unspeakable excess" (149).

However, Mina ultimately refuses sexualization. On the surface, she is presented as the epitome of all that is good in a woman; a stark contrast to the actively sexual Dracula-diseased vampiric women. Herascetic thoughts are concerned with issues of proprietary and self discipline. In fact, she plays an integral role in the purity crusade against Dracula as she aids in the systematic tracking and destroying of the vampire King; she compellingly types and distributes the journal extracts, phonographic transcriptions and letter fragments that constitute the textual archives that are *Dracula*. Despite Mina's disclaimers of wifely propriety, writing represents for her an attempt to establish a strong sense of self, which in this charged historical moment carries the cultural resonance of the 'New Woman'.

Despite slipping into Dracula's clutches, her intellectual power and vigilant self-control is astonishingly maintained, instead of degenerating into Lucy's animal-like existence (Yu 156). Even after she is 'polluted' with vampirism, Mina is decarnalized and less overtly sexualized. As Wicke has summarized, "[w]ith relentless logic, the keen use of maps, geometrical calculations and brilliant speculation", Mina provides the Crew of Light with a plan of attack even after she is infected with the vampire disease (478). Mina is a "gallant" woman whom Van Helsing observes has a remarkable "man's brain" (232), surpassing even the best male "professionals" in terms of her intellectual labour

However, whilst Mina may display some qualities of the 'New Woman' in terms of her intellectual capabilities, some critics highlight her typical Victorian passivity and repression. Mina's submission is suggested by her abrupt evaporation of power and voice at the end of the novel; she assumes a position of silence, symbolized by her return home to become a traditional maternal figure. Sally Ledger thus presents her as "a woman who, firmly rooted in the maternal paradigm, settles for the 'ideal' of middle-class Victorian womanhood" (105). The natural order is finally restored as conventional gender roles are now stabilized. There is something deeply unsettling about the restoration of the heteronormative status quo in Stoker's conclusion. It seems Mina has been metaphorically staked into passivity, reasserting Judith Weissman's reading of *Dracula* as "an extreme version of the stereotypical Victorian attitudes towards sexual roles" (392).

Ultimately*, Dracula* is a dark and exhausting deluge into the plethora of socio-cultural anxieties and taboos that permeated the fin-de-siecle period. Stoker's eerie gothic tapestry is sprawled with terrifying images of monstrous female vampires who both attract and horrify. They unravel the conventional distinctions between sexual partners and offspring, undermining perceived ideas on identity, family and hierarchy that have been founded on

fixed boundaries of gender and sexuality. Hence, the attempt of some critics to define the nature of these transgressive feminine creatures betrays how female vampirism has been widely misunderstood. For example, critics have attempted to identify the relation between the trio of vampires and Dracula; Craft and Richardson have previously called them Dracula's "daughters" (110, 427), Caroll Frye illustrates them as "wives" (21), Leonard Wolf has termed them the "beautiful brides" of the Count (249), and C.F Bentley comments on the incestuous nature of "Dracula's daughters and sisters" (29). However, their ambivalent gender performance, and their refusal to be neatly categorized, is precisely Stoker's intention. The nature of these subversive creatures is encapsulated in Julia Kristeva's definition of the monstrous feminine in terms of "abjection", as that which does not "respect border, positions, rules" and that which "disturbs identity, system, order "(44). Unfixing the boundaries of female sexuality and gender, these fictional entities violently refuse any sort of stable classification or neat determination, becoming the ultimate source of terror and delight in *Dracula.*

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