
Sexuality in the Victorian Era

The Victorian Era produced a community organized strictly into stratified classes and social positions. Men dominated this cultural structure, with women acting as their inferior counterparts. Women were bound to an expectation of servitude, viewed as lesser-beings to the strong, intelligent men, and required to act as docile subordinates, especially to their husbands. The duties of the women were restricted to household-related endeavors, including keeping the a proper home, raising children, and entertaining guests. The ideal woman of the Victorian age embodied purity and obedience. Sexual interactions were strictly between a husband and wife, and any provocative expression outside of these relationships were prohibited. Sexuality is a fundamental human characteristic, and men feared that women who indulged in these innate tendencies would then seek other freedoms and disrupt the balances of Victorian society. Thus, in order to maintain despotism over the female sex and protect Victorian virtues, it was crucial for men to demoralize and reject women who defied these sexual restraints. In Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*, Lucy Westenra, initially the Victorian woman archetype, is bitten by the evil protagonist vampire, and thus assumes an Undead form. Her transformation into the Undead is accompanied by erotic physical characteristics that oppose the norms of her modest society. In a passage describing an encounter between Vampire Lucy and four Victorian men--Morris, Van-Helsing, Arthur, and Dr. Seward--the author illustrates the expectations adhered to Victorian women by contrasting the modest, pure pre-Vampire Lucy to the transformed, sensual, Undead Lucy. Because her new provocative appearance and actions threaten the core of Victorian values, it is necessary for the men to subjugate the defiant woman, re-establish the patriarchal hierarchy, and safeguard the norms that stabilized the period. To do so, Stoker strips Lucy of her humanity, equating her to an animal, a demon, and a lifeless "thing."

Stoker utilizes Lucy's metamorphosis to expose the dichotomy between the ideal Victorian and her licentious counterpart, and emphasize the society's need to revert Lucy to her previous self. The pre-Vampire Lucy, the paragon Victorian female, is described with words of innocence, "sweetness", and "purity" (187). Stoker describes the pre-Vampire Lucy's eyes as "pure, gentle orbs" (188). Stoker's rhetoric emphasizes the qualities expected in women of her time: virginal and angelic. In comparison, the Undead Lucy's physical appearance is that of lust and free sexuality. Her supposed "purity" is turned to "voluptuous wantonness" (187). However, because her lust openly confronts the female expectations of the era, her enlightened sensuality is condemned. Her new found seductiveness has turned her "sweetness" into "adamantine, heartless cruelty" (187). She is made evil in the eyes of the men due to her challenge of Victorian norms of sexuality.

In this passage, Undead Lucy's sensuality defies the men's patriarchal expectations, and her

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threat provokes a physical reaction among the traditional men. Their responses illustrate the peril she poses to their lives, their established societal values, and their need to vanquish this dangerous being. Taken aghast by her carnal appearance, the men suffer visceral reactions. Dr. Seward is so offended, his “heart grows cold as ice” (187). Her sensuality generates a “gasp of Arthur” and the four men “[shudder] in horror” (187). The men have never seen anything like Vampire Lucy before. Her eroticism so audaciously challenges the norms of the Victorian era that the men recoil in fear. Even the valiant “Van Helsing’s iron nerve...failed” at the sight of the new woman (187). When Arthur, the fiance of Lucy, confronts his transformed bride, he “would have fallen” if Dr. Seward “had not seized his arm and held him up” (187). Through stark contrast between the fiances, a Victorian role reversal is taking place. Arthur is now the weak, faint figure, embodying some of the delicate attributes Lucy once possessed. Lucy, in juxtaposition, is fully emancipated from her Victorian chains, now stronger than the mere mortals that once dominated her. The men are at the mercy of this powerful, supernatural being. However, they quickly realize they must overcome their fear. They must kill the formidable, lustful Vampire in order to protect themselves physically and restore Lucy to her “natural” place in society as a pristine, Victorian doll.

Stoker emphasizes this need to restore Lucy to her rightful place as an insubordinate in the patriarchy through his degrading diction. Using Dr. Seward as his narrator, Stoker projects the thoughts and mind of the Victorian man to demonstrate the threat Lucy poses to his society, and to debase the provocative Vampire as a response to her cultural challenge. Dr. Seward equates her to a subhuman entity in three degrees: 1) comparing her to an animal, 2) comparing her to a devil, and 3) comparing her to a person-less “thing.” (188).

Because Lucy’s natural sexuality is carnal, Stoker devalues her humanity and likens her to an animal in order to reestablish her as a being lesser than the Victorian Man and safeguard the virtues of the epoch. When Lucy encounters the four men, the vampire “[draws] back with an angry snarl, such as a cat gives when taken unawares” (188). The snarl, which triggers the image of an aggressive beast baring its teeth and growling in the reader’s mind, distorts her face into an animalistic form, removing from her any human physical features. Stoker continues the metaphor, stripping her of any human-maternal instinct, as she “[flings] to the ground...the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone” (188). In depriving her of any motherly tendencies, Stoker transforms the Victorian woman into a cruel, heartless beast. She is the antithesis of her former self, so unlike pre-Vampire Lucy that she is now more equal to a dog. Through Seward’s descriptions, Stoker is re-positioning Lucy into her subordinate role.

This dehumanization continues as Lucy is stripped of her human morality, and compared to a demonic figure, in order to further remove her from the Victorian society and protect the Victorian values she threatens. Lucy’s sexuality so greatly endangers the era’s social structure

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that the woman is described as a “devil” (188). Her temptation is so powerful, its existence can only be that of an evil spirit. As Christianity is at the core of Victorian values, this is one of the most injurious insults. Lucy’s eyes, which often in literature act as a symbol of one’s internality (in cliché, they are “the window to the soul”), are “unclean and full of hell-fire” and “[blaze] with unholy light” (188). By making Lucy satanic, Stoker alienates her from the Christian values of the Victorian society, fully rejecting her and further exerting the men’s superiority over the sexual creature. Additionally, the Victorian men are depicted as saviors of this Christian principle, and thus advance their place in the social stratum.

Stoker’s last attempt to restore the patriarchal domination over Lucy appears in Dr. Seward’s description of the woman being less than human, less than even superhuman, but as a formless, shapeless “thing” (188). Vampire Lucy contradicts every Victorian value, making her worthless in the eyes of the men. She is Lucy only in her name and nothing else, as Dr. Seward writes, “I call the thing that was before us Lucy because it bore her shape” (188). She “had the features of Lucy Westenra” (187), but no more. The new, transformed woman is nothing to them other than a threat that needs to be vanquished.

Through Dr. Seward’s descriptions of Lucy, Stoker comments on the male-dominating cultural structure that organized Victorian society. Although in this passage, Dr. Seward simply dehumanizes and subordinates Lucy through his descriptions, the Victorian men ultimately restore Lucy to her rightful place in the hierarchy by driving a stake through her heart, cutting off her head, and killing her. In her erotic death, in which her “body [shakes] and [quivers] and [twists] in wild contortions” (192), her fiancé brings peace to his lover by ending her sexual, Vampiristic rebellion, and giving her rest in death. Dr. Seward writes, “in the coffin lay no longer the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate...but Lucy as we had seen in her life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity” (192). When the men finally overpower the threatening vampire, Lucy is again described in words consistent with the ideal Old World woman. Lucy is in her proper, dead, place, and the men can view her again as the docile, subordinate woman they expect her to be. The men have justly reestablished the patriarchy, at the cost of Lucy’s life. The author justifies Lucy’s death because it reintegrates Lucy into her subservient role. The Victorian community declares her subjugation necessary, as she threatened the values and virtues that balanced and stabilized society. This dismally demonstrates a prevailing principle of the time: that the protection of cultural values was more important than the individual life of a member of the society.

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