
Sexuality in Bram Stoker's Novel Dracula

Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, written in 1897 during the Victorian era depicts and delves through the historical context of what society was like in the past. His extraordinary piece places a strong emphasis on sexuality by contrasting it with the conventional and stereotypical views towards sexuality that was once embellished during his life time. By painting an elaborate picture of the conservative society Stoker once grew up in, I contend that through his main female characters, he pursues to epitomize and challenge the Victorian notion of sexuality by incorporating female characters with strong sexual desires.

Stoker explicitly links vampirism and sexuality from the early chapters of the novel, when the three vampire beauties visit Harker in Dracula's castle. Because the prejudices of his time barred him from writing frankly about intercourse, Stoker suggests graphic sexual acts through the predatory habits of his vampires. The means by which Dracula feeds, for instance, echo the mechanics of sex: he waits to be beckoned into his victim's bedroom, then he pierces her body in a way that makes her bleed. In the mind of the typical Victorian male, this act has the same effect as a real sexual encounter—it transforms the woman from a repository of purity and innocence into an uncontrollably lascivious creature who inspires "wicked, burning desire" in men. We witness such a transformation in Lucy Westenra, who becomes a dangerous figure of sexual predation bent on destroying men with her wanton lust. Because of her immoral mission, the men realize that Lucy must be destroyed.

In this sense, Stoker's novel betrays a deep-seated fear of women who go beyond the sexual boundaries Victorian society has proscribed for them. If women are not hopelessly innocent virgins, like Lucy before Dracula gets hold of her, or married, like Mina, they are whores who threaten to demolish men's reason and, by extension, their power. The fact that such temptresses are destroyed without exception in *Dracula* testifies to the level of anxiety Victorian men felt regarding women's sexuality.

In *Dracula*, Bram Stoker writes characters that come face to face with sexuality--sexual repression is at the core of this theme. Both men and women are sexually repressed, as witnessed by Jonathan Harker's thoughts and actions during his imprisonment at Dracula's castle. His sexual repression is best described in the following quote:

'I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck, she actually licked her lips like an animal...I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited--waited with beating heart.'

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Jonathan Harker is about to be bitten by Count Dracula's three daughters. The vampire women are voluptuous and highly sexualized; they are free to act on their sexual desires, which is the exact opposite of men and women in Victorian society. The fact that Jonathan must close his eyes demonstrates his inability to handle open sexuality. At the same time, he feels his desire to be ravished by the female vampire bubbling up when he states that he closed his eyes and waited in a dreamy state of ecstasy. He wants the woman to take advantage of him, but he feels shame for that, as he struggles with viewing her sexual expressiveness as both desirable and repulsive.

Women are defined on a continuum in *Dracula*. Mina is pure and chaste throughout the novel and embodies the ideal Victorian woman. Van Helsing says, 'She is one of God's women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and other women that there is a heaven...so true, so sweet, so noble, so little an egoist - and that, let me tell you, is much in this age, so skeptical and selfish.'

Mina embodies the ideal woman in all respects. She is prudent, intelligent, caring, understands her place in society. Stoker develops Mina as ideal so he can present what is considered as unacceptable behavior for women through the character development of Dracula's daughters, the 'weird sisters'.

The three women serve as the opposite of Mina: impure, radical and evil. They are everything a Victorian woman isn't supposed to be in society. The women are referred to as 'monsters' by Jonathan. The women seduce men, which the novel is clearly arguing against. A woman must be pursued by men in an appropriate manner and should not seek out a relationship independently.

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain; but it is the truth. (3.29)

Jonathan's repressed sexual desire comes bubbling to the surface when he sees the sexy vampire ladies in Castle Dracula. He's both attracted to them and repulsed by them, and ashamed to admit that he kind of wants them to kiss him.

[...] we recognized the features of Lucy Westenra. Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness. (16.17) Jack Seward can't believe how much "Lucy Westenra" has changed—he keeps repeating her full name, emphasizing that it's now just an empty label. "Lucy Westenra" is no longer herself; this over-sexed she-demon is not the girl he fell in love with. This vampire

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lady might be sexy, but she's sexy in a totally freaky way. 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 [...] as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake. (16.45) Whether or not you want to read the stake as phallic symbol, this scene is pretty sexual.

"Yes, I was moved—I, Van Helsing, with all my purpose and with my motive for hate—I was moved to a yearning for delay which seemed to paralyse my faculties and to clog my very soul." (27.30) Even the great Van Helsing felt the sexy power of the "weird sisters." Of course, he gets over it, and stakes all three of them.

I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck, she actually licked her lips like an animal. . . . Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed about to fasten on my throat. . . . I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart.

Things go from bad to worse rather quickly during Harker's stay with the count. In this passage from Chapter III, three beautiful vampires visit the Englishman and come dangerously close to draining him of his blood before Dracula halts them, claiming that Harker belongs to him. This passage establishes the vital link between vampirism and sex that pervades the novel. These undead women are unlike any of the living women in the novel. Whereas Mina and Lucy are models of virtue and purity, these "weird sisters" are voluptuous, aggressive, and insatiable. The position that the vampire assumes over Harker's body suggests a sexual act, and this display of female sexual aggression both attracts and repulses Harker. In a Victorian society that prizes and rewards female virginity and domesticity, the sexually adventurous vixen is bound to be the subject of fantasy. But because of these same rigid strictures of acceptable social behavior, she is also bound to be considered dangerous. Here, Stoker takes the fantasy of the dangerous whore to its most extreme manifestation, suggesting that Harker stands to lose not simply his reputation, but also his life.

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