

Bram Stoker's Anxieties Concerning the Emancipation of Women

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Abstract

Through Bram Stoker's Dracula, this essay illustrates the anxieties concerning what was known as the "Woman Question." During the Victorian Era, the more independently-minded New Woman arose as a figure representing a rebellion from social norms, and the question of women's place in society, whether in the domestic or the business spheres, was debated. By examining the male protagonists' reactions to Mina Harker as well as Lucy Westenra's vampiric transformations, the works and theories of Stoker critics, as well as Dracula's relevant historical background combined with a feminist reading of the book, can broaden our understanding of the emancipation of women in the Victorian Era. Ultimately, two reactions to the New Woman will be analyzed based on the two female protagonists. By examining reactions to Lucy, as well as the theories of other critics, vampirism becomes not just a transformation of the body but a representation of the fears of Victorian men. With Lucy, who embraced her independence, the male characters focus on her destruction. Through her death, Stoker offers one solution to the problem of the New Woman. Upon analyzing Mina Harker, Stoker reveals his other, more likely, solution. Rather than revulsion and violence, Mina's transformation emphasizes how Victorian women should also contribute in upholding the patriarchal values. Dracula is Stoker's answer to the "Women Question."

In *Dracula*, Bram Stoker clearly illustrates his and Victorian society's anxieties about the role of women as the dissimilar fates of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker reveal. Stoker wrote *Dracula* during the late Victorian period, a time of rapidly changing roles for women. This was not change, however, without resistance. "The Woman Question," as the debate over the roles of women was known, troubled many who considered whether women should work the same jobs as men or whether they should continue to be caretaker of the family and home. Many Victorians, Stoker among them, disagreed that women should be given more freedom and instead believed that such pivotal change would be the downfall of society. Wishing to make his conservative views more palatable, Stoker conceals them within his two female protagonists. While the horror genre as a whole typically restricts men and women to specific gender roles, Stoker ventures further by suggesting possible solutions to his great fear that women will abandon their proper station. The conservative consensus seemed to be that womanhood "was under threat from the unwomanly woman" (Crozier-De Rosa 418). Despite the increase in factory-labor jobs, women were still confined to fitting jobs such as seamstress or governess. If a woman did assert more independence than commonly thought appropriate, she was referred to as a "New Woman."

The New Woman debate "encompassed issues such as property ownership, marriage contracts, inheritance law, and female sexuality, among others" (Swartz-Levine 345). The confident and assertive New Woman figures were not readily accepted into Victorian society and were often thought to be going against Nature's intentions. The phrase "nature's intentions," of course, refers to the ability of women to have children and take on the role of family caregiver. The perceived danger of the New Woman was her challenge to the strict societal guidelines. Carol Senf writes of the New Woman that she not only "chose financial independence and personal fulfillment as alternatives to marriage and motherhood" but that also "when it came to sex the New Woman was more frank and open than her predecessors. She felt free to initiate sexual relationships [and] to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood" (35). With the strict focus on paternal lineage, the sexually free New Woman had the potential to upheave Victorian society through sexual intercourse and a rejection of idyllic motherhood. The agitation surrounding "The Woman Question" influenced Stoker, and he embedded his anxious opinion through his only two female characters, Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, and their contrasting vampiric transformations.

From the very beginning of *Dracula*, Stoker describes Lucy Westenra as a New Woman, even before she is transformed into a vampire. The New Woman of Victorian society was a sexually independent woman assertive in decision-making. From her correspondence with Mina, we understand Lucy to have three suitors and, rather than submitting to her father's selection of a husband, Lucy takes the matter into her own hands. Her death opens a whole new set of possibilities. Vampiric Lucy ventures out alone at night and rejects the role of motherhood. When the men witness Lucy's return to her tomb, they see her fling "to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast" (Stoker 188). She has clearly chosen independence and personal fulfillment over motherly obligations, even to the point of violence. Stoker emphasizes the terror of the New Woman by having Lucy drink from children. Rather than a caregiver, a vampiric Lucy only has the parasitic urge to take sustenance from children in a reversal of familial roles.

Mina Harker's complacency regarding her nurturing role contrasts with Lucy's desire for independence. With her male-dependent actions, Mina exhibits the behavior of an anti-New Woman. When writing to Lucy, Mina says, "I have been working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan's studies, and I have been practising shorthand very assiduously. When we are married I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan" (55). Mina has a very different concept of her place in society. Already she spends much of her time learning to be "useful" to her fiancé and studying only what interests him. Just as Stoker created a stereotypical New Woman in Lucy Westenra, he writes Mina Harker as the motherly Victorian woman, one who is extremely content in her societally pressured role.

To further confirm the accepted role of caregiving women, Stoker utilizes the physicality of the vampire transformation to connect the New Woman with the concept of monstrosity. As a vampire, Lucy exhibits typically masculine behavior, thus emasculating Stoker's male characters and illustrating society's anxieties concerning the New Woman. He emphasizes much of Lucy's perceived negative alterations through color. When the male protagonists open Lucy's coffin in the graveyard, they note that her lips were "crimson with fresh blood, and that the stream had trickled over her chin and stained the purity of her lawn death-robe" (187). White, often associated with the purity of wedding night sheets, is ironically paired with Lucy's death robes. Stoker's use of the word "purity" makes the implication even clearer. As a vampire, Lucy's actions are now connected with a loss of virginity and sexual impurity.

The use of color to associate the idea of impurity is not limited to the white-

red dynamic. As Phyllis Roth argues, the “facile and stereotypical dichotomy between the dark woman and the fair, the fallen and the idealized, is obvious in *Dracula*” (411). She points out that Seward describes Lucy’s hair “in its usual sunny ripples” but, later, when the men watch Lucy’s return to the tomb, the text describes her as a “dark-haired woman” (qtd. in Roth 417). Though the juxtaposition between Lucy’s fair and dark hair indicates her fallen status to the men, Lucy’s descent into vampirism is a physical representation of her taboo as well as a metaphorical one. Stoker presented the New Woman’s true nature based on the pejorative stereotype that the women’s selfish acts go against Nature’s intent. Lucy therefore loses her human appearance at the same time she relinquishes her caregiving role.

A similar metaphor of transformation can be applied to the men of *Dracula* as well. While women lose their place in society when connected with Dracula, men only grow more pure. Jonathan Harker, the early protagonist who has the most contact with the Count, goes from dark to light hair. His changes are the opposite of Lucy Westenra’s physical alterations. After the events of Dracula’s attack on Mina Harker, Dr. Seward notes that Jonathan’s hair has turned from dark brown to white almost overnight (Stoker 263). Since Jonathan’s encounters with the Count leave him with white hair, it can be surmised that he gained, rather than lost, social approval.

The contrasting reactions to encounters with Dracula resonate with Victorian ideas on male and female spheres of influence. In his influential essay “Of Queens’ Gardens”, Victorian art critic John Ruskin summarizes his opinion of men’s higher place in the Victorian social order by stating that the “man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trials” and that men must be “*always* hardened;” he also writes that a man “guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation” (1587-88). Ruskin emphasizes the popular idea that women extend influence only in the home, and only in support of her husband. When her new husband sees the Count again for the first time, Mina emphasizes her supportive role when she writes, “I do believe that if he had not had me to lean on and to support him he would have sunk down” (Stoker 155). Unquestioningly cooperative, Mina emphasizes the ideal Victorian woman in her response to Jonathan’s momentary weakness. She considers her husband’s stumble a loss of strength rather than a sign of weakness, and she is more than happy to quietly support him though, had Mina stumbled herself, she might have taken it as a character flaw. Not realizing the contradictory nature, she is content in the knowledge that without her strength, her husband would have fallen.

Ruskin goes even further and argues that a man will “guard the women” (1587) from temptation, insinuating that women will not last against the dangers presented by the commercial world. He references the commercial sphere of influence when he discusses the “rough work in open world” with its “perils and trials” as opposed to the female, domestic sphere of the home (1588). Men’s strength was in their ability to navigate the business and political side of Victorian society, while women were meant to stay tucked away from these masculine dangers. In the popular book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, Sarah Stickney Ellis wrote of women that “the sphere of their direct personal influence is central, and consequently small; but its extreme operations are as widely extended as the range of human feeling” (1584). When Jonathan stumbled from the shock of seeing Dracula in a London street, Mina more than happily becomes his emotional support, a role she steadily enforces for the continuation of the story. Stoker also presents the concept of domestic and commercial spheres in the form of the transformative hair. Jonathan with his white hair has gained experience and age from his encounters with monsters while Lucy, having of her own left will the domestic sphere of influence, becomes a woman ill-favored by Victorian ideals.

Feminist readings of *Dracula* often cite Lucy’s letter where she asks, “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her?” and additionally notes that men like “women, certainly their wives, to be quite as fair as they are; and women, I am afraid, are not always quite as fair as they should be” (Stoker 58, 60). On the surface, this appears to be a different definition of *fair*, one more connected with popular Victorian opinion of women’s place in the home, but Stoker’s emphasis on Lucy’s darkened hair later connects the two ideas. In noting the place of men and women, Lucy ironically stumbles upon her foreshadowed death. Having lost her purity and social place, she must not be allowed to live—she is no longer “quite as fair” as she should be both physically and socially.

That Dracula caused Lucy’s transformation is secondary to the discovery that she now represents the opposite of Victorian society’s desire in a woman, specifically in a wife. This fact is shown in Abraham Van Helsing’s single-minded focus on Lucy before ever mentioning a plan to slay Dracula. Once Lucy has been killed, he says, “Now, my friends, one step of our work is done, one the most harrowing to ourselves. But there remains a greater task: to find out the author of all this our sorrow and to stamp him out” (Stoker 193). The reference to Lucy is curious, considering they have not dealt with the main antagonist (and title of the book). Despite calling Dracula the

dangerous “author,” Lucy is perceived as “the most harrowing” because she represents the independence of a New Woman. She is a terrible danger for Stoker and his masculine characters because she craves neither child nor escort. Their “greater task” is to stamp out the creator of their greatest fear. As she does not require the standard husband to care for her, *fair* therefore does not just refer to Lucy’s now-darkened hair but also to the outward sign of the perceived emotional defects. Having discarded the desired characteristics for a husband’s wife, Lucy’s brutal subjugation is more easily justified. Dr. John Seward speaks for the entire group when he writes of his first encounter with the vampiric Dark Lucy:

He recognized the features of Lucy Westenra. Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness. Van Helsing stepped out, and, obedient to his gesture, we all advanced too; the four of us ranged in a line before the door of the tomb . . . but Lucy’s eyes unclean and full of hell-fire, instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew. At that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing; had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight. (Stoker 187)

John expresses bewildered shock at seeing such a change in Lucy Westenra, but there is an underlying sexual reaction as well. He notes with horror her “adamantine” disposition and “heartless cruelty” but also Lucy’s “voluptuous wantonness,” a point at which critic Phyllis Roth observes that “only when Lucy becomes a vampire is she allowed to be ‘voluptuous,’ yet she must have been so long before, judging from her effect on men and from Mina’s descriptions of her” (414). In other words, only as a New Woman is Lucy allowed to be “voluptuous,” indicating that, in the masculine sphere, an independent woman is held to a different, and lower, standard than in the home setting. Just as Lucy has transformed, John’s feelings quickly transform as well, and he seizes upon hatred as an acceptable substitute for his sexual fear.

Lucy is alluring prior to her transformation, but afterward, her open sexuality is seen as a threat to Victorian men. According to critic Eric Kwan-Wai Yu, the “perception of Lucy’s ‘voluptuousness,’ thus, may be interpreted as the men’s projection of their repressed desire: it is not we who want her, it is she who tempts us” (153). In Kwan-Wai Yu’s interpretation, the men are the victims, unable to overcome their own temptation of a “voluptuous” New Woman, an argument supported by the death of Dark Lucy, which is discussed later. His analysis could explain John Seward’s violent reaction to Dark Lucy. Repressed by social standards, none of the men were permitted

to imagine Lucy in a sexual way unless married to her. Once Lucy strongly expresses her sexuality, John worries he too will become unrepressed. Stoker plays on society's fears by heavily emphasizing Lucy's rejection of woman's submissive nature and the helplessness of the men she encounters.

Stoker purposefully positions his male protagonists in situations of powerlessness. John Seward's immediate hatred for Dark Lucy is one example, and Jonathan Harker's fascination with Dracula is another. When attempting to kill Dracula in his coffin, Jonathan writes that his "eyes fell upon me, with all their blaze of basilisk horror. The sight seemed to paralyse me" (Stoker 53). Despite the opportune circumstances, Jonathan falters the moment Dracula looks at him. Stoker creates a scene tense with frantic energy. The mention of the basilisk emphasizes how paralyzed he felt, as basilisks were creatures said to kill with a single glance. At this point, Jonathan has realized his danger and understood that Dracula's murder would likely prevent his own, but his body betrayed him once he saw Dracula's eyes. This weakness in the face of Dracula is seen once more when Mina prevents Jonathan from falling to the ground.

The Count appears to affect the male's ability to remain always strong in the commercial sphere. Critic Talia Schaffer writes that "Dracula's powerful eyes shift Harker/Stoker into his attitude of stiff, stony passivity. The eyes give him a thrill of horror at his own sensations of pleasure" and that Jonathan's "body is strainingly retentive" (400). She argues that Stoker identifies with his male characters and emphasizes the abnormality of their passivity. Though the male characters do have an undercurrent of attraction to vampires, I would argue that Stoker emphasizes submissive action to encourage fear of more than just passive men. If it were just the fear of non-dominating males, the novel would have focused solely on male vampiric transformation. In actuality, the Count's time-consuming effort is spent granting Victorian women his dominant powers while the men attempt to prevent the newly independence-minded women from harming society.

The subverted sexual feelings on the part of the Victorian men could be an attempt to reinforce their masculinity and Victorian values. Unlike Schaffer, Christopher Craft focuses not on the vampire's eyes, but instead argues extensively for the sexualized "Vampire Mouth." When faced with Dark Lucy, her fiancé Arthur Holmwood "fell back and hid his face in his hands" (Stoker 188), a decidedly uncharacteristic action from the Victorian nobleman, almost effeminate in nature. Upon hearing her seductive voice call to him, Arthur "opened wide his arms" (188). Not only is this action the opposite of Ruskin and Ellis' spheres of masculine and feminine

influence, Arthur opening his arms is also decidedly passive. Craft argues that “the vampire mouth fused and confuses what Dracula’s civilized nemesis, Van Helsing and the Crew of Light, works so hard to separate—the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive” (445). *Dracula* could therefore be argued to deliver not just dominant women, but fear of gender fluidity as well. Stoker emphasizes the confusion over strict gender identities by reversing women and men’s sexual roles. This disorientating concept is particularly relevant to the reunion of the vampiric Lucy with her fiancé. Upon seeing his transformed fiancé, Arthur “falls back” and “hid his face in his hands,” gestures more commonly associated with Victorian females. This “monstrous” female, the New Woman, not only undermines femininity through her actions but also undermines masculinity.

From a narrative perspective, the horror of seeing the transformed Dark Lucy would likely arouse a degree of alarm in anyone. More likely, though, Lucy emasculates her fiancé, breaking the constructed societal norms of the day. In connection with the recurring Vampire Mouth, Lucy has now the ability to take penetrating initiative. The teeth of the Vampire Mouth act as a phallic representation of sexual domination. Upon seeing her fiancé in the graveyard, she says “come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!” (188). The extended use of the word “come” brings to mind orgasm, but also note the tense of the aforementioned verb. Lucy gives an order to her would-be husband, the man that she would normally unquestioningly obey. Her behavior signifies the dangerous change that she no longer behaves as a woman should. Rather than shame, her transformation has allowed her to embrace a different, more sexual side of herself. It is at this point Arthur “opened wide his arms” in agreement of his now more-passive sexual role. Her words thus signal the most terrifying part of her transformation, a complete division from patriarchal and strict gender role standards.

Considering their noble cause is to destroy the now-assertive Dark Lucy, it is ironic that Craft christens the male protagonists the “Crew of Light,” having, he says, “taken my cue from Stoker: Lucy, *lux*, light” (445). In a scene noted for its nonconsensual atmosphere, the male fears of sexual expression are resolved. A long, descriptive paragraph of Lucy’s demise sufficiently sates the fears of an emasculated Crew of Light, as Stoker writes:

Arthur took the stake and the hammer, and when once his mind was set on action his hands never trembled nor even quivered. Van Helsing opened his missal and began to read, and Quincey and I followed as well as we could. Arthur placed the point over the heart, and as I looked I could see its dint in the white flesh. Then he struck with all his might. 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. . . . And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth seemed to champ, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. (192-93)

John Seward's previously-mentioned "savage delight" has now been fulfilled, though Dark Lucy's "blood-curdling screech" and her "writhing" and "quivering" ought to give readers pause. The male protagonists even go so far as to refer to Lucy as "the thing," simultaneously revoking her sex and humanity. Her pain is always followed by an emphasis on this loss. When she screeches, Stoker notes that the sound came from "the opened red lips" and, when she quivered, "sharp white teeth champed together." The careful lack of feminine pronouns further dissociates the woman from the murder. Stoker describes Arthur's face as "set, and high duty seemed to shine through it" (193). The reader is meant to identify with his unfaltering attitude and "high duty" that grants the Crew of Light courage, but what is this high duty exactly? Lucy had neither committed murder nor transformed the children from whom she fed. Her saviors seem to be punishing the crime before it had been committed. Stoker is emphasizing that Dark Lucy no longer has the best interests of patriarchal society in mind. Desiring her independence, Lucy is now a feared woman. Calling such a task "high duty," Dracula hides its true purpose and supports the noble-sounding name given to the male protagonists by Craft.

Roth argues that "the central anxiety of the novel is the fear of the devouring women" (419). To extrapolate from this argument, it can therefore be assumed that the non-devouring woman, the woman who allows herself instead to be fed upon, would be an asset. Mina Harker, for example, has a similar situation to Lucy, but the outcome diverges from Lucy's violent death. Having been bitten by Dracula, the same Crew of High Duty that righteously destroyed Lucy now works hard to protect Mina from herself. Ultimately they decide the best course of action is to prohibit her

from further involvement. Mina does not seem to mind and even writes that “they all agreed that it was best that I should not be drawn further into this awful work, and I acquiesced” (Stoker 226). Mina’s opinion is secondary to the male protagonists, and without a protest she submits to their authority.

Their hunt for Dracula touches on the dangers that Victorian women should be neither independent nor venture into the commercial sphere. For Stoker, not only does Mina represent all that is ideal about Victorian society, but she takes an active role in submitting herself to patriarchal authority. Always thinking of her husband first, Mina does not voice her complaints aloud. While they scour the city, Mina writes in her journal “now I am crying like a silly fool, when I *know* it comes from my husband’s great love and from the good, good wishes of those other strong men” (226). Stoker writes Mina as a stereotypical Victorian woman overcome by emotion. Despite knowing that intellect is more highly valued, she cannot help but cry at being abandoned. Because of this perceived weakness in temperament, she associates crying with fragility and the male figures with both authority and strength. Despite her own opinions, she has an overwhelming confidence in the male protagonists’ abilities and “good, good wishes.” Through Mina, Stoker is encouraging not only the men to maintain societal norms, but for women to have an active role in submitting to patriarchal standards.

There is an obvious but very crucial difference between Mina and Lucy: Mina gets married. Not only does she get married, Mina also she spends the first portion of *Dracula* writing about her soon-to-be husband and her desire to be useful to him. Mina’s view on the women’s sphere corresponds to Ellis and Ruskin’s views. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Mina views sexual freedom with loss, and equates Dracula’s actions, not with sexual independence but with betrayal. “Unclean, unclean! I must touch him [Jonathan Harker] or kiss him no more” is her first reaction upon realizing Dracula has forced her to drink his blood (248). Equating female sexual freedom with impurity, Stoker thus implies that female sexuality will degrade society. Despite being the victim, she only orders herself not to touch or kiss her fiancé, as if the Dracula connection was contagious. Significantly, Mina only rejects herself now that she has been associated with Dracula. Critic Stephen Arata notes that both vampire sexuality and female sexuality “are represented as primitive and voracious, and both threaten patriarchal hegemony” (468). Equating female sexuality with something monstrous and animalistic, Stoker thus implies that female sexuality will degrade society but softens his sentiment through a female lens.

While Lucy Westenra embraced her new sexual fluidity, Mina Harker was content in the domestic sphere. When reminded by Abraham Van Helsing of Dracula's successful attacks on her, Mina replies, "No, I shall not forget, for it is well that I remember. . . . Now, you must all be going soon. Breakfast is ready, and we must all eat that we may be strong" (Stoker 258). Mina simultaneously reminds herself of the domestic hemisphere while discussing Dracula's actions to prove her disinterest in his offer. On the subject of women's natural place in society, John Stuart Mill argued that "the rule of men over women differs from all these others in not being a rule a rule of force: it is accepted voluntarily; women make no complaint, and are consenting parties to it. . . . Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments" (1062). Mina has accepted that she will be left behind, but she is so assured of her role that she ensures the men have a hearty breakfast before they venture out into the commercial sphere. Dark Lucy only takes from society, but Mina gives both her emotional and physical support and takes an active role in her own sexual and societal suppression.

Dracula exemplifies the notion that not only does patriarchal society confine women, but that women often willingly submit to these restrictive measures. In Victorian society, women could do very little without the security of husband and marriage. Mina takes an active part in the destruction of Dracula, the creature that offered Lucy sexual and societal independence, because ultimately Mrs. Harker rejects nonpatriarchal values. Not only is she the obedient wife, she also perpetuates the suppression of her sex, fulfilling Mill's observation that men desire not just women's obedience but also their sentiment. Though lonely at being left behind, Mina has confidence that "some day Jonathan will tell me all" (Stoker 226), emphasizing that her needs are secondary to her husband's wants.

From Mina and the male protagonists' perspectives, Stoker's vampires are leeches, feeding off the blood of others while contributing little to society. Higher class women paralleled this situation. Confined to the home and without the possibility of working, "middle-class Victorian women were held up as guardians of the nation's and the empire's moral health" (Crozier-De Rosa 418). In her active role to support her husband, Mina ultimately rejects the monstrous vampire lifestyle in favor of society's approved non-working females. Dark Lucy emphasizes that some considered the New Woman a monstrous abomination, but Stoker ultimately parallels Mina's behavior as the ideal for an idle women. That Lucy drinks from children is also symbolic, outlining the anxiety that a younger generation will degrade in a society of dominant women

who want neither man nor children and who do not contribute to the social order. Lucy's death is a necessity for Stoker to alleviate the reader's fears of an influx of Dark Lucys invading in a similar manner as Dracula's attempts to invade London. Stoker vividly describes the crucial problem of Victorian society through Lucy Westenra and then offers the solution through her death and Mina Harker's repression. Ultimately, *Dracula* illustrates a patriarchal society's anxieties about the emancipation of women from traditional roles and advocates a continuation of the active suppression of women.

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