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The Portrayal of Female Sexuality in *Dracula*

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* the threat of corruption of purity portrays the anxiety around female sexuality in London during the late 19th century. Through the key female characters in the text, Lucy and Mina, Stoker asserts the ideals of womanhood: sweetness, pureness, and loyalty to one's husband. Lucy and Mina, in parallel ways, portray the possible consequences of not fulfilling these ideals. They are both the perfect picture of women in their own ways, that is until Lucy falls victim to the ways of Dracula, ultimately stripping herself of propriety and becoming a sexual being. Her evolution from virgin to vampire, as well as the way in which Mina is idolized for her brain and commitment to womanhood is representative of the anxiety within society of female sexuality and freedom.

Lucy's transition throughout the novel is indicative of the potential ramifications that occur when women lose their virtue in society's eyes. Lucy was originally a woman with splendid beauty and an innocent aura, however, her bouts of sleepwalking resulted in a sickness that was completely unexplainable. As the men in her life, including Dr. Seward, Quincey Morris, Dr. Van Helsing and her fiance, Arthur Holmwood, tried to find a remedy for her, they all felt a sense of compassion for her suffering. She was seen as an innocent being whom they all cared for, until her ultimate death and corruption at the hands of Count Dracula. As the men faced her in her vampiric form, she was described by Dr. Seward saying that her "sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness (Stoker, 227)."

A defining characteristic of her transition is the sexual terms used to describe vampire Lucy. She was described not merely as evil, but as sexually sadistic. The same words that were used to describe the vampire brides in their “deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive (40)” are now being cast onto Lucy. This evolution is representative of the fear in which men viewed sexual liberation during this time period. There is an assumption being portrayed that the evilness within a woman stems from her sexual being, and that should she lose her purity, she will become a figure of devastation for the men around her.

Similarly to Lucy, Mina, through Jonathan’s early journals, is seen as the perfect embodiment of a wife. She has the utmost devotion for those she cares for, including Jonathan and Lucy, as well as a reverence for God. Stoker shows later in the novel that not only is she an outstanding wife, but she is especially intelligent for a woman according to the societal standards at the time. When Dr. Van Helsing meets with Mina regarding Jonathan’s journals, he continually refers to Mina saying “you so clever woman (197)!” He is shocked by her brilliance and puts Mina onto a pedestal for her sharp mind and Godly manners. Van Helsing reveres her so highly he calls her “one of God’s women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and other women that there is heaven (202)...” However, despite her distinguished mind, she is still held to the standards of other women during the time. When it comes to the affairs of the plot to kill Dracula, she is left in the dark for fear that “...her heart may fail her in so much and so many horrors; and hereafter she may suffer (254).” Her man-like brain is overshadowed by her womanly empathy, thus separating her from the other men. However, Mina is soon faced with the same circumstances as Lucy, as her purity is challenged by Dracula’s attempts at corruption.

Throughout the making of the group's plans to thwart Dracula, Mina begins to grow increasingly ill. She attempts to remain chipper as to not worry the men, however, her

exhaustion is soon explained by the witnessed attack of Dracula on Mina. After Mina is forced to drink from Dracula's chest in a sexually symbolic manner, she is plagued with troubles, thus showing the ramifications of losing one's purity. The biggest consequence of all being the branding on her forehead. When Dr. Van Helsing attempts to protect Mina from Dracula, the holy object burns her face. In reaction, Mina yells "Unclean! Unclean! Even the almighty shuns my polluted flesh (321)!" She is aware that even though the sexual act was forced upon her by Dracula, she is still seen as impure in God's eyes. The scar is a physical symbol of the act which has ruined her virtues, and she is forced to wear it just as Hester Prynne is forced to bear her scarlett "A". The result of this symbol is the punishment for Mina that "she with all her goodness and purity and faith, was outcast from God (333)." This ultimately embodies the consequences for women who are no longer seen as sexually impure. She is tainted, and it appears that she is going down a similar path as Lucy. However, by the end of the novel, Mina is ultimately able to be saved from her fate and her mark vanishes due to the role of femininity she plays.

Mina, unlike Lucy, is viewed more for her intelligence and devotion rather than her sweetness and allure. She is consistently seen comforting the men throughout the novel as a kind of motherly figure during their times of need. Though she is struggling herself, Mina attempts to put on a brave face for her husband so as to not worry him, and even after her attack she remains strong and comforts Jonathan as she "...looked at him pityingly, as if he were the injured one (311)." Lucy, however, is not described as having the same strength as Mina. The novel begins with Lucy having to choose between three possible suitors, which already puts her in the role of a sexual being. She also relies heavily on the men to care for her once she is ill, and she does not attempt to mask her pain as Mina does. She is described using the same verbiage as the vampire brides, whereas Mina is seen paralleled to them. For example, when they tell Mina at the end of

the novel, “Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come (398),” she is petrified and able to withstand their temptations. Although Lucy and Mina have certain similar attributes, the delineation between their strength and role as sexual beings explains the difference in outcomes of their lives. The motherly figure is saved, while the naive girl falls prey to the plights of vampirism.

Stoker uses these two archetypes of women to contrast the fear that manifests from the sexual freedom of women in the Victorian era. Mina, the intelligent, mother figure is spared, while the innocent, yet ignorant Lucy becomes a sexual villain that must be slain in order to return her previously dignified soul back to God. These archetypes ultimately reinforce stereotypic ideals of women during the time period, and reflect the women as two dimensional characters, rather than their own beings.

Works Cited:

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Edited by Glennis Byron. Ontario: Broadway, 1997 [1897].