Dracula: A Feminist Parable or a Misogynistic Manifesto

Critics remain divided on whether Dracula should be read as a misogynist or feminist parable, because the novel simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes Victorian gender ideology. On one hand, Stoker clearly draws from conventional middle-class ideals of femininity, presenting women like Mina and Lucy as embodiments of purity, domesticity, and emotional restraint. The men repeatedly describe Mina as having a "man's brain" but a "woman's heart," suggesting that her intelligence is only acceptable when framed within traditional gender hierarchy. The male characters, especially Van Helsing, position themselves as protectors and moral stewards of women, implying that female virtue must be supervised and defended by men. Lucy's transformation into a sexualized, predatory "bloofer lady" is often read as misogynistic punishment for female desire; once she deviates from Victorian expectations of passivity, she is violently destroyed. In this sense, the novel seems to discipline women back into submissive roles, reflecting cultural fears of the New Woman and anxieties surrounding shifting gender norms.

Yet at the same time, Dracula introduces subversive possibilities that challenge these very norms. The male characters repeatedly fail to contain danger or understand what is happening; Mina, not the men, becomes the crucial organizer, researcher, and strategist. Her skills with transcription, technology, and information management make her the narrative's central intelligence. Rather than simply being protected, she guides the men's actions, undermining the Victorian assumption that men are natural leaders. The text also reveals deep male anxieties about female sexuality, suggesting that the social order is threatened not by women's inherent danger, but by patriarchal attempts to police their bodies. The scenes with the vampire brides and

with Lucy's voluptuous, assertive sexuality uncover how Victorian ideals repress women's autonomy and desire.

Ultimately, whether Dracula is a misogynist or feminist commentary depends on how one interprets these tensions. Stoker clearly participates in Victorian stereotypes, but he also allows cracks in the ideology to show. The novel's simultaneous fascination with and fear of female sexuality reveals an unstable cultural moment, one in which traditional gender roles were being questioned. Rather than falling cleanly on either side, Dracula can be seen as a text that reflects and interrogates the contradictions of its time, displaying both the misogynistic structures of Victorian society and the early emergence of feminist critique.

When Dracula was first published in 1872, Victorian anxieties about the "New Woman" reached an exponential level, especially with regard to property ownership, marriage contracts and female sexual autonomy, which eventually transformed into the national debate of "The Woman Question" (Swartz-Levine, 2016). At a time when patriarchal authority is simultaneously unravelling and being fiercely defended, Stoker's novel provides a perfect example to reflect these tensions through his contrasting portrayals of Mina and Lucy, whose experiences become vessels for broader cultural fears and desires.

Lucy's transformation from the ideal Victorian maiden into a sexually assertive vampire embodies the perceived dangers of female autonomy, reinforcing the belief that unregulated womanhood must be controlled, contained, or punished. Meanwhile, Mina's intelligence, discipline, and technological fluency position her as a model of the modern woman who threatens traditional hierarchies even as the narrative works to fold her back into them. The tension between empowerment and repression within these characters reflects the era's larger

uncertainty about women's shifting roles, exposing how cultural anxiety about female agency shaped the period's literary imagination.

By performing a close reading of the passage in chapter 18, we can uncover more about Mina's characterization, which both reflects and quietly challenges the Victorian gender ideology that men attempt to uphold:

> Ah, that wonderful Madam Mina! She has a man's brain—a brain that a man should have were he much gifted—and a woman's heart. The good God fashioned her for a purpose, believe me, when He made that so good combination…We men are determined–nay, are we not pledged?–to destroy this monster; but it is no part for a woman…And, besides, she is young woman and not so long married; there may be other things to think of some time, if not now. (Stoker, 2003, p. 250)

Van Helsing's claim that Mina has "a man's brain" condenses the novel's conflicting attitudes toward women into a single sentence. By describing her intellect as inherently masculine, Van Helsing reinforces the Victorian belief that rationality and analytical skill naturally belong to men, treating Mina's competence as an anomaly rather than an intrinsic quality. His reassurance that she also possesses a "woman's heart" works to contain this threat by framing her emotional softness and moral purity as compensating for her transgressive intelligence, effectively drawing her back into the ideal of the submissive, nurturing Victorian woman. Yet the very need to gender her abilities so explicitly reveals the instability of these norms: Mina's actions repeatedly blur the boundary between masculine reason and feminine sentiment, exposing how artificial and anxious such distinctions are. Furthermore, Van Helsing is reducing Mina's intellectual ability back to that of a classic Victorian woman, commenting that "she is young woman and not so long married; here may be other things to think of some time," suggesting that ultimately her role as a woman is to be a virtuous wife and mother, nothing more.

The scene in the novel that involves the staking of Lucy also provides an intriguing close reading that unveils a subtle commentary on feminine ideals in the Victorian era. The moment Arthur drives the stake through Lucy's heart is described with a mixture of horror and obsessive attention to her body:

> 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…There, in the coffin lay no longer the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate that the work of her destruction was yielded as a privilege to the one best entitled to it, but Lucy as we had seen her in her like, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity (Stoker, 2003, p.230).

Notably, earlier in her vampiric transformation, Stoker begins shifting pronouns from "she/her" to "it," signalling Lucy's loss of individuality and the men's perception of her as an unnatural, monstrous threat rather than a human being. The narrative lingers on her physicality (her movements, expressions, and the "wanton" energy of her vampiric form), turning the act of killing into both a moral and almost ritualized spectacle of control over female sexuality. The staking is framed as necessary to restore her "purity," emphasizing Victorian anxieties that female desire, if ungoverned, must be violently contained. At the same time, the vividness of the description exposes the brutality required to enforce such norms, revealing discomfort with male authority over female bodies. The juxtaposition of eroticized fascination with moral imperative dramatizes the extremes to which Victorian culture went to regulate women, suggesting both the power of female sexuality and the fragility of the patriarchal structures attempting to control it.

Mina's temporary vampiric infection contrasts sharply with Lucy's full transformation, revealing the novel's nuanced exploration of female power. While Lucy's vampirism renders her a sexualized threat and ultimately justifies violent male control, Mina's near-transformation enhances her abilities without compromising her individuality or moral authority. This liminal state allows her to access knowledge and insights that the men cannot, emphasizing her

indispensable role in the narrative and her intellectual superiority. Symbolically, Mina's experience suggests that female power (intellectual, moral, and even supernatural) can exist without being destructive, challenging the rigid binaries that Victorian culture imposed on women. In comparison, Lucy's body becomes a site of punishment for transgressing norms, whereas Mina's temporary vampirism illustrates that female agency can be harnessed productively, exposing both the fragility of patriarchal authority and the potential of women when their capabilities are recognized rather than feared.

Ultimately, Dracula operates as a complex exploration of Victorian gender ideology, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging the period's expectations of women. Through the character of Lucy, Stoker dramatizes the consequences of female desire and autonomy gone "unchecked," showing how patriarchal authority violently seeks to contain sexualized or transgressive femininity. In contrast, Mina embodies a more nuanced vision of female power: her intelligence, organization, and near-vampiric abilities allow her to act as the narrative's central agent, demonstrating that women can exert influence, skill, and moral authority without threatening social order. By juxtaposing Lucy's punishment with Mina's productive empowerment, the novel exposes the fragility and anxiety underlying Victorian conceptions of gender, revealing both the cultural fear of female sexuality and the potential for women to transcend restrictive norms. Ultimately, Stoker's text is neither wholly misogynist nor wholly feminist; instead, it interrogates the tensions of a society grappling with the "New Woman," illustrating how Victorian fears and fantasies about gender coexist, conflict, and transform within the Gothic imagination.

Works Cited

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Swartz-Levine, J. (2016). Staking Salvation: The Reclamation of the Monstrous Female in Dracula. *The Midwest Quarterly, 57*(4), 345-361,314. https://ezproxy.lib.torontomu.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/staking-salvation-reclamation-monstrous-female/docview/1807689082/se-2