

The New Woman in *Dracula*

Emily Carmichael

Bram Stoker's 1897 gothic horror novel *Dracula* touches on numerous themes, including the role of women in Victorian culture and sexual conventions. The most notable representations of these themes in the novel are Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray. Both characters exemplify the ideals of Victorian womanhood, although in different ways: while Lucy is representative of the emotional and domesticated view of women which was held by men of the time, Mina maintains no life of luxury or idleness as does Lucy. She is sensible and devoted to both God and her husband, qualities which were held in high regard in the Victorian era. However, both women also represent the emerging phenomenon known as the "New Woman" - although again, in differing ways. The phenomenon became increasingly common in the late nineteenth century and is characterized by the active resistance to traditional controls placed on women. While Lucy represents the augmented importance of women's sexuality and its implications, Mina embodies all other aspects of the New Woman, retaining a job and a sense of practicality evident throughout the novel. Although Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is primarily a novel about vampires, the author does provide interesting commentary on the emerging New Woman and her implications in Victorian society, a phenomenon exemplified in the female characters of the novel.

Lucy and Mina are, despite being close friends, quite different. Their differences are first apparent in the letters the two childhood friends exchange. In her correspondence, Mina confesses that she has been overwhelmed by her work as an assistant schoolmistress and states that she is learning shorthand and practicing on a typewriter so as to be of use to Jonathan when they are married (Stoker 55). In stark contrast to Mina's studiousness is what Lucy describes doing with her time - going to picture-galleries and for walks in the park (56). Lucy also conveys much more emotion in her letters than her childhood friend: she writes that she wishes Mina were there so she could tell her friend what she feels and frequently confesses that she is afraid, sorry, or happy (57), while such emotion is not as apparent in Mina's writing. Another, possibly the most significant, difference between the two women is that Lucy is an openly sexual character and Mina is not. After being proposed to by Dr. Seward, Quincey Morris, and Arthur Holmwood all in one day, it becomes clear that Lucy is quite

the flirt, as she writes to Mina, "why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her?" (60). Although she later discounts this as heresy, the tone of her comment is one of playfulness and reflects her genuine sexual attraction to all three men (Johnson 27). Lucy embodies the Victorian man's traditional view of the upper-class woman as someone who does not work and is highly emotional and sensual. Lucy's sexualization, characteristic of the New Woman, becomes much more apparent after the young woman succumbs to vampirism.

In the days leading up to Dracula's landing in England, as well as Lucy's impending autumn wedding, Mina notes in her journal that Lucy has recommenced her childhood habit of sleepwalking, always attempting to exit the house she shares with her mother. This is perhaps because, as she has already playfully hinted at in wishing that a woman could marry as many men as she pleases, she feels a disinclination for the constraints of marriage, an institution which is traditionally centered around the home. It is while in this possible state of subconscious rebellion against traditional marriage that Lucy is attacked by Dracula. When the young woman becomes a vampire, she transitions from a simple flirt to a voluptuous seductress: by simply calling out to Arthur, her voice, too diabolically sweet for any mortal to possess, appears to put the man under a spell as he opens wide his arms to her (Stoker 188). Lucy as this seductress is in direct opposition to the view of a woman's sexuality held in the Victorian era, a time marked by sexual repression. The fact that Lucy's victims are children is significant and suggests that Lucy's animosity is directed not just at marriage but at motherhood as well, a role that Victorian women were expected to fulfill. This "exaggerated perversion" of motherhood reflects the fear that the New Woman would not only be a bad mother, but potentially harmful and deadly as well (Gagnier 144). By isolating and exaggerating Lucy's flirtatious tendencies, Stoker calls attention to the possible destruction that is caused by the sexualized New Woman.

Lucy is not the only sexualized character in *Dracula*. She shares this distinction with the three beautiful female vampires, often referred to as Count Dracula's 'brides', which Jonathan Harker encounters in the Count's castle. The seductive vampires, who simultaneously elicit both longing and fear in Jonathan, speak of "kissing" him, and their voices send tingling through Jonathan's nerves. In short, the three women offer Jonathan more overt sexual gratification in three paragraphs than Mina does in the entire novel. The vampires represent what Victorian women should not be, as does Lucy: voluptuous and sexually aggressive. Such sexual pro-

iciency threatens to undermine the foundations of the male-dominated Victorian society by compromising man's ability to reason and maintain control, as is evident when Jonathan nearly succumbs to the brides' deadly "kisses." They also represent what was perhaps the greatest threat of Dracula's coming to London – his ability to transform sensible Victorian women into uncontrollable lustful monsters. The three women reappear towards the end of the novel and pose this very threat to Mina, as they stand ready to transform her into a vampire vixen. Just as it was necessary to destroy Lucy for her diabolic sexuality, so is the case for Dracula's brides. Van Helsing sees to this, maintaining control of the situation despite feeling the seductress' effects, saying about one of the vampires that she was "so fair to look on, so radiantly beautiful" that he began to feel the effects of the spell similarly felt by Arthur in the presence of Lucy, making his head "whirl with new emotion" (Stoker 320). The brides share another similarity with Lucy: their victimization of children. When Dracula prevents the three vampires from "kissing" Jonathan, he provides them with a young child to appease their hunger (44), sharing the implication that voluptuous vampire seductresses, and thus the sexualized woman they represent, make for deadly mothers.

In contrast to Lucy, whose descent into vampirism is marked by her increased sexualization, the action leading up to Dracula's attack on Mina is characterized by the young woman's continuous exclusion from the affairs of men. Mina is excluded from the planning of the pursuit of Count Dracula due to the men's preconceived notions of a woman's proper role (Johnson 32). Van Helsing states that Mina should play no part in destroying Dracula, as "it is no part for a woman. Even if she be not harmed, her heart may fail her in so much and so many horrors; and hereafter she may suffer – both in waking, from her nerves, and in sleep, from her dreams" (Stoker 207). Ironically, it is being excluded from the pursuit of Dracula that truly distresses Mina, as she grows increasingly anxious and increasingly susceptible to Dracula's attacks. As soon as the men discover Mina's developing vampirism, they see that their exclusion of her has been a mistake and agree that she should be in their full confidence (253) and with good reason: it is by means of Mina's telepathic connection to Dracula that the men are able to determine the whereabouts of the Count, tracking his escape from London to Transylvania. Had the men remained steadfast in their belief that the business of tracking monsters was not for women, they could not have made use of Mina's telepathy, and their journey would not have been possible, much less successful.

Although both Lucy and Mina embody the Victorian New Woman, neither is a completely full-fledged New Woman: Mina, whose New Woman status is established by her practical competence and her position as an assistant schoolmistress, desires only recognition within a marriage of her choosing rather than radical sexual and social independence, whereas Lucy, who embodies this sexual reform, is consciously indifferent to feminist reform, choosing not to work. Yet Lucy dies and Mina does not. This may signify that at the outset of the novel, the group of men were extremely disturbed and uncomfortable with Lucy's overt sexuality, seeking to kill what she had become so as to return the young woman to a more pure, socially acceptable state. Indeed, after Arthur kills her, Lucy's face undergoes a physical transformation, returning to the much more innocent face that she had had in life (192). Although Mina does have a close encounter with death, the men fight to preserve her life, signifying that they have more or less come to terms with the intellectual, working New Woman of which Mina is an example, while tossing out the old emotional example of the traditional woman such as Lucy. In fact, at the end of the novel, Van Helsing says of Mina and Jonathan's son: "This boy will someday know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care" (327). Here Stoker expresses that despite fears of the New Woman being a harmful mother, as is embodied in Lucy, accompanying the new era of woman comes a new era of children, who can understand and accept a woman who is not only a loving mother but also a brave and intelligent woman – and that this New Woman should be respected and allowed to thrive.

Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* explores many themes and includes an examination and representative social commentary on the emerging phenomenon of the Victorian New Woman gaining popularity in the nineteenth century. The two major female characters in *Dracula*, Mina Murray and Lucy Westenra, are both frustrated by male prerogative: Lucy is expected to make an aristocratic marriage, and Mina is simultaneously placed on a pedestal and discounted by the group of men pursuing Count Dracula (Johnson 21). From this frustration comes the emergence of the New Woman qualities each woman embodies. Lucy personifies Stoker's commentary on the sexualized nature of the New Woman and its implications on motherhood, while Mina is representative of the New Woman's professional and practical status. It is clear what Stoker thinks regarding the former, as both the vampire Lucy and the brides of Dracula must be destroyed for what they stand for, while the group of men risk

their lives to save Mina's, and are eventually successful in this endeavor. While neither Lucy nor Mina is a perfect example of the Victorian New Woman, each embodies separate characteristics of a New Woman, and through examining these childhood friends and how they are treated in the novel by the other characters, one is able to grasp a sense of the attitudes surrounding gender roles in late nineteenth-century society.

Works Cited

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