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The Split Concept of Womanhood in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

The emergence of the New Woman in the final decades of the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States challenged in a radical way the traditional gender roles specified by the strictly patriarchal societies. In literature there had been more or less blatantly anti-establishment phenomena that contributed to the opening up of the space allotted to women in the male dominated world. Among these dissident trends it was probably the Gothic novel that offered the most flexible medium for subverting the traditional concept of sexuality. "Gothic novels are about patriarchies, about how they function, what threatens them, what keeps them going,"¹ argues Donna Heiland. "Patriarchy is not only the subject of gothic novels, but is itself a gothic structure,"² she claims. In the present paper I would like to apply Heiland's concept of the gothic in the discussion of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and show that the disintegration of traditional gender roles evoked anxiety in people, which surfaces in various forms in the novel. I argue that this fear of gender inversion is also clearly manifested in *Dracula*, and that the signs of the New Women in terms of sexual activity are latent in the female vampire characters, which Stoker works out with the modern device of ambiguity.

The sexual puritanism of the High Victorian era was only the surface, sexuality proliferated in certain circles despite the apparent prudery. As Duncan Crow notes, if a woman "had been turned into the virgin in the drawing-room, she had to compensate for this by being the prostitute elsewhere."³ Frigidity, however, was not expected from men. It is the

¹ Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender. An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004) 10.

² Heiland, 11.

³ Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman*. (Allen and Unwin, 1971) 30.

case of the double standard: sexually active women were condemned by society, but it was more or less tolerated if men went to prostitutes to satisfy their needs.

Women were either considered to be pure and virtuous, or were regarded as impure and wholly. Those belonging to the former have often been stereotyped as sexless women without desires, whereas the latter have been pictured as oversexed women. Obviously, both images were exaggerated. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the ideal woman in art and literature went hand in hand with the depiction of the fallen woman.⁴ The monstrous, supernatural female – the personification of the *femme fatale* – became part of the Victorian art as well. This character or archetype has ambiguous characteristics, she is seductive yet destructive, the beautiful outward appearance conceals the inner bestiality.

The female characters in *Dracula* are all connected to vampirism. The three ladies – two brunettes and a fair girl – are Dracula's company and they are already vampires, although there is no information why, how and where they have become such diabolic creatures. The novel includes two main human female characters, Mina Murray (later Harker) and Lucy Westenra. Dracula tries to victimize them both, and the endangering of Mina and Lucy brings about the dichotomy between the pure and the frivolous woman. Mina represents the virtuous woman, who struggles to remain pure, whereas Lucy – after having been bitten by Dracula – becomes voluptuous. Lucy's and the vampiresses' wantonness is against the Victorian moral code. Furthermore, being vampires, they do the sucking, they penetrate, which metaphorically can mean the possibility of gender reversal in Victorian times.

Mina's husband-to-be, Jonathan Harker visits Dracula, a foreign vampire count in Transylvania to do business with him. The count buys an estate in London, thus he comes

⁴ See for instance Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986)

over to England, from Eastern Europe to the Western parts spreading the disease of vampirism. Vampirism with its transgressive elements is contagious, plague-like and the whole society has to face the consequences.⁵ Mina is one of Dracula's desired preys, but being strong and pure she resists the monster and that makes her different from the other female characters in the novel.

Mina also fosters a kind of motherly love towards the members of the Crew of Light, as Christopher Craft has entitled the group consisting of Van Helsing, Dr Seward, Quincey Morris, Arthur and Jonathan, that is the vampire hunters.⁶ Mina's motherly nature is most conspicuous when she consoles Arthur after Lucy's death. She regards her behaviour toward Arthur as the one toward her unborn child. Mother instincts are very strong in Mina. Nevertheless, this ideal mother figure is destroyed when she is forced to drink from Dracula's breast. She becomes nurtured instead of nurturing. Mina's motherly figure is restored after the annihilation of Dracula, and also when she gives birth to her real son, little Quincey.

As for Mina's and Jonathan's marriage, sexuality seems to be out of place in their relationship. There is no allusion to sex between them, their partnership is highly spiritualized. Mina and Jonathan's relationship is mutual, exclusive and heartfelt. Their love is profound, genuine and emotional. When Jonathan is in Transylvania, he cannot help thinking of his bride. Similarly, Mina thinks a lot of her fiancé. They are devoted to each other and would do anything for the other even if that meant self-sacrifice. Their relationship embodies the concept of ideal love including romantic manifestations as the following brief extracts show:

⁵ Vampirism can be a metaphor or symbol of several things, but since I focus on sexuality, — or more precisely, taking the strict Victorian moral code into consideration, sexuality with its connotation of immorality — I do not delve into the question of other possible interpretations.

⁶ Christopher Craft "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Dracula: Authoritative Text Contexts Reviews and Reactions Dramatic and Film Variations Criticism*, ed. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) 445.

“I do wish he would write, if it were only a single line.”⁷ (92)

“It [a letter] is of Jonathan, and must be next my heart, for he is in my heart.”
(122)

“I was the happiest woman in all the wide world, and that I had nothing to give him except myself, my life, and my trust, and that with these went my love and duty for all the days of my life.” (130)

“That if ever there was a woman who was all perfection, that one is my poor wronged darling.” (369)

“You are nearest and dearest and all the world to me; our souls are knit into one, for all life and all time.” (394)

The idyllic wife-mother axis is threatened when Dracula, the vampire count endangers Mina. On account of Dracula's repeated nocturnal visits, Mina goes through a metamorphosis, she becomes spiritless and gradually grows weaker and weaker. The vampire comes like a thief in the night. Taking vampirism's sexual nature into consideration, this clandestine sexual activity terminates Mina's monogamic status. Since Mina is a married woman, she seems to become an adulteress.

Dracula's and his victim's soul are united in a sense, so Mina's relation to Dracula includes not only a physical but also a spiritual bond. As there is a very strong psychical link between them, Mina learns of the vampire's whereabouts and leads the vampire hunters to his place. However, the unity between the count and the girl is not of a positive nature. It is most conspicuous in the scene when Dracula stands by the bed and Mina kneels before him. The count holds the girl's head and compels her to drink blood from his chest. Blood is obviously a substitute for semen here. Mina either has to drink or suffocates. Lapin calls this a “coerced fellation.”⁸

In contrast with Mina, Lucy is lecherous. While human, that is before encountering the vampire, she expresses her regret for not being able to marry her three suitors at the same

⁷ In the body of the text, the references to Bram Stoker *Dracula* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) are in parentheses.

⁸ Daniel Lapin, *The Vampire, Dracula and Incest. The Vampyre Myth, Stoker's Dracula and Psychotherapy of Vampiric Sexual Abuse* (San Francisco: Gargoyle Publishers, 1995) 41.

time. “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?” (76) she asks, revealing her unconscious desire to have relationship with men not only limited to three, but as many as possible. Obviously, Lucy has an inclination to frivolity and this makes her an easily attainable prey to Dracula. According to Bram Dijkstra, Stoker’s main purpose with Lucy’s character was to unfold the danger threatening “manhood by the bestial polyandry of the unacculturated primal woman.”⁹

Lucy’s polygamy is expressed through blood transfusions.¹⁰ Arthur, Lucy’s husband-to-be provides blood first. Saying “my life is hers and I would give the last drop of blood in my body for her” (148) he expresses his love towards his beloved. He does not know that this is going to be the case; a love metaphor turns into reality. This intimacy between the spouses is considered proper, however three transfusions follow this procedure given by three different men, which exposes Lucy’s polyandry.

“No man knows till he experiences it, what it is to feel his own life-blood drawn away into the veins of the woman he loves” (156) declares Dr. Seward. His feelings have not changed since Lucy chose Arthur. Then Dr. Van Helsing saves Lucy’s life and finally Quincey Morris rolls up his shirt-sleeve. All three have been sworn to secrecy so that Arthur would not be jealous. Later Arthur says that he feels as if he really had been married to Lucy because of the blood transfusion. Even Dr. Van Helsing feels himself to be a bigamist because of this procedure. Lucy turns into a female beast who drains the essence of manhood of her suitors.

It is worth examining these transfusions from another point of view as well. On account of vampirization, Lucy has undergone a change. She loses blood, which enfeebles her. She is

⁹ Dijkstra, 345.

¹⁰ Christopher Craft points out that blood as a symbolic form of semen was first identified by Ernest Jones in *On The Nightmare* (London, 1931). Since then it has been an established observation of *Dracula* criticism. Craft, 454 footnote

not a vampire yet, but throughout the metamorphosis she needs blood in order to stay alive. Not being a bloodsucker yet, she cannot take the blood herself, what is more, she does not seem to be aware of the fact that blood is the only thing that can save her life at that point. However, the males around her recognize this need and are willing to give their blood to her to keep her alive. Being kind to Lucy and wanting to help her I doubt that these men represent the male-dominated patriarchal society. In my opinion these males can be the representations of the men who supported those women who wanted to change the strict High Victorian order.

Finally, Dracula sucks life out of Lucy. After her death there is no trace of decay on her body. What is more, her “loveliness had come back to her in death” (198) and she is “more radiantly beautiful than ever.” (240) Lucy does not die, but her mortal existence as such expires since she becomes a preternatural being levitating between life and death. Her new form of existence brings about not only a change in her physical appearance, but makes her even more voluptuous – at least her lasciviousness is more conspicuous from then on. She does not try to camouflage her desires any more.

The vampiric form of the female also endangers the socially expected (positive) mother role. Apart from men, children become victims of this new woman type, too. Reports in *Westminster Gazette* are stating that a ‘bloofer lady’ (213) lures away children and wounds them in their throat. It is obvious that children are attracted to Lucy and not at all frightened by her: “Even this poor little mite [a child wounded by Lucy] when he woke up to-day, asked the nurse if he might go away. When she asked him why he wanted to go, he said he *wanted* to play with the “bloofer lady.” (235; emphasis added) Lucy’s endeavour to get rid of the duty of the mother role is most apparent in the scene when in the churchyard she sucks the blood of a child. Human functions and roles are exchanged, this time the woman sucks, the child has become the metaphorical breast. The holiness of motherhood is overturned. Lucy is hunting

for children, who, as Dijkstra claims, are the “central symbol(s) of the future potential mankind.”¹¹

The male characters do not identify this nightmarish figure with Lucy whose altered personality is reflected in her features. The pure and sweet Lucy has been transformed into a merciless and lustful monster. She tries to entice Arthur, but Van Helsing intervenes again and saves Arthur's life for the second time. Arthur takes on the task to bring an end to this evil and set Lucy's soul free from eternal damnation, thus he drives a stake through the heart of his bride. Lucy regains her former self and then rests in peace. She also regains her original place in the Victorian gender code due to the “murderous phallicism”¹² of the staking. As Rebecca Pope believes, the male murder of Lucy is a “sacrifice to a patriarchal gender ideology.”¹³ Arthur kisses the corpse. He takes leave of his beloved bride with this slightly necrophilic act.

Lucy's ambiguity is supplemented with pretence. According to Nina Auerbach, Lucy's metamorphosis is not a pure girl's transformation into a voluptuous one; on the contrary, Lucy “becomes more virtuous after death than she was in life.”¹⁴ In life she receives three proposals and expresses her regret because she cannot marry all her three suitors, but after death, she directs her monogamic wish only to her fiancé in the churchyard: “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!” (253) I disagree with Auerbach. In my opinion Lucy tries to play a trick on Arthur since being her fiancé he is the most impressionable person among these men. In Dr Seward's diary Lucy is undisputedly described as a malicious creature from hell and not a virtuous wife prototype. The only positive remark on her is embedded in duality.

¹¹ Dijkstra, 345.

¹² Craft, 455.

¹³ Rebecca A. Pope, “Writing and Biting in *Dracula*.” *Dracula: Bram Stoker*, ed. Glennis Byron, (London: Macmillan & Co.; New York: Saint Martin's Press Inc., 1999) 75.

¹⁴ Nina Auerbach, “*Dracula: A Vampire of Our Own*.” *Dracula: Bram Stoker*, ed. Glennis Byron, (London: Macmillan & Co.; New York: Saint Martin's Press Inc., 1999) 160.

Seward calls her “diabolically sweet in the tones” (253); her tempting voice makes her similar to sirens, who want to mislead men.

The three female vampires who appear in Dracula’s castle represent a threat against the Victorian woman model. They are beautiful and coquettish, belonging to the type of woman who is tempting but also dangerous in the eyes of Victorian men. Like the vampire Lucy, they are also dominant, masculine (in the sense that they penetrate) and voluptuous.

It is interesting to note that the bloodtaking acts are never described in the novel apart from the scene when Mina is forced to drink from Dracula’s chest. It seems that sexual intercourses are censored in the name of the spirit of the age. The erotic movements of the vampiresses project the sexual act itself. Bloodsucking is a metaphor of sexual intercourse. This observation can be justified easily, examining the physical contact of the vampire and the victimized person. The vampire plunges his fangs (phallic symbol) into his victim’s neck. A penetrating and a receiving organ play part in this act, during which bodily fluids intermingle. The fangs and the bloody scar on the neck become supplementary sexual organs. So, the human beings transformed into vampires will become new creatures possessing active and passive organs as well. They are characterised by sexual duality. They become hermaphrodites: male on the mouth and female on their neck. Due to this sexual ambiguity, the distance between male and female sexuality is narrowed.

Beauty seems to be a concomitant of female vampirism. Outward appearance makes these females able to seduce men, thus beauty becomes a means to reach an end. Even Dr Van Helsing gets mesmerized by the vampiresses. Men seem to be disgusted by the coquettish vampire ladies on the surface, but long for them unconsciously. The most erotically charged scene in the novel follows this idea. When one of the vampiresses, the fair girl approaches

Jonathan in Dracula's castle, she triggers an ambiguous response from the boy: he is longing for her and finds her repellent at the same time:

The fair girl went on her knees and bent over me, fairly 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, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. 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. Then she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and could feel the hot breath on my neck. Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer – nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited – waited with beating heart. (52)

Female vampires allure differently from Dracula. Vampiresses are attractive and sexy in contrast with the count. They seduce with the help of outward appearance, whereas Dracula uses his inner power to hypnotize his victims. The vampiresses entice on the spot, while Dracula's seduction works telepathically. Men are under the vampiresses' spell only when they are present. At other times, these female vampires are mentioned with negative connotation:

“for nothing can be more *dreadful* than those *awful* women (...)” (59; emphasis added)
 “for I *feared to see* those *weird* sisters” (64; emphasis added)
 “Three *terrible* women licking their lips” (66; emphasis added)
 “I am alone in the castle with those *awful* women” (66; emphasis added)
 “They are *devils of the Pit!*” (69; emphasis added)

The negative remarks do not refer to their appearance, obviously, but to their lascivious nature. The actions of the vampires are governed by their sex drives. The aims of these females are confined to the satisfaction of their primary needs. Through the vampiric image

men are confronted with their own inner animalistic being. Vampiresses represent the suppressed sexual desires which are denied on the surface but males long for them in secret. These desires cannot be experienced in everyday life because of the strict social demands. Encountering these vampire ladies the repressed is brought to the surface. However, male characters prefer virtuous ladies to these horrid women, thus adjusting themselves to the social norms.

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* the female characters are clearly divided into the pure and the impure. Mina is the virtuous, decent woman who has scruples because of the transgressive element of the union with the vampire, whereas Lucy welcomes the vampire count who represents passion and sexuality. The three vampiresses in the castle are also lustful and sexually active. Female vampires are equal to New Women in the sense that they are awake to their sexuality and are not afraid to enjoy it. They gain sexual power and this power imperils the male characters's masculinity and the whole structure of the patriarchal society. The novel was written in a male-dominated society where the appearance of the New Women aroused the anxiety about gender reversal at the time. Stoker splendidly illustrates this fear, dealing with taboos in a symbolic form. In the novel, the promiscuous woman falls, but the woman of moral rectitude is able to overcome the temptation and her happiness and place in society are recovered. The order of the patriarchy is restored.

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