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A Feminist Approach to Dracula

Interpretations of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker are widespread, but the feminist theory is widely accepted as the most prominent in the novel. In Bram Stoker's period, the late eighteenth century, most of Great Britain viewed women in a traditional light. They were to perform their duties in the home and rely on the men to protect and serve them (Byron 474). However, the "New Women" ideology was rapidly expanding in the masses of Great Britain. New Women turned away from this traditional view and began to perform tasks that were deemed typical of men (Byron 473). *Dracula* was written near the end of the traditional period of women, and Bram Stoker did not appear to be a supporter of this movement. His values, most likely instilled by a traditional upbringing before the advent of this new femininity, embed themselves in the novel in a façade of good versus evil. The protagonist female characters of *Dracula* represent their patriachal stereotypes, while the antagonist female characters exemplify New Women ideology.

Opponents of this division in *Dracula* state that most female characters display New Women characteristics. For example, Lucy wishes she did not have to choose between three suitors; she desired all three of those who wished to marry her. Mina conveys leadership roles when she refuses to allow the men to pursue Dracula without her; she uses her mental link with Dracula to interpret his location and lead the men to him. This shows the protagonist female

characters exhibiting New Women characteristics, direct contrasts to traditional characteristics. These interpretations are valid when examining characters without considering their other attributes and the attributes of other characters in the novel. In reality, the protagonist characters only exhibit New Women characteristics after they have been affected by Dracula, the driving antagonist of the novel. Stoker clearly divides the characters as good, traditional women and evil, "New Women."

Thus, for the most part, female characters in *Dracula* closely follow the traditional view of women. Mina and Lucy are portrayed as weak characters susceptible to Dracula's attacks. Lucy seems unable to defend herself from the unknown assailant draining her blood, and Seward and Van Helsing rush to perform blood transfusions multiple times. After allowing her to momentarily recuperate, Lucy again falls prey to heavy blood loss. Mina falls victim to Dracula's attack as well. Rosenberg states, "Like Lucy, Mina is susceptible to Dracula's corruption and it is the good brave men who set out to save her" (Rosenberg 9). This vulnerability is especially evident as Mina seems helpless as Dracula forces her to drink his blood, and Van Helsing and the other men rush to the room to rescue her just as they had before to rescue Lucy. After Mina seems branded with a connection to Dracula, the men desire that she stay behind while they pursued Dracula. Near the end, Van Helsing protected Mina from the dangers of Dracula's castle using a "Holy circle" formed by holy wafers. In all of these examples, Mina and Lucy are helpless to defend themselves from Dracula's various attacks. Instances in which women display a need for protection by the men of the novel demonstrate Stoker's inclination toward the traditional role of women.

Also, female characters in *Dracula* convey traditional feminine characteristics through their actions and personalities as well. Mina is perhaps the epitome of Victorian women in *Dracula*. Mina also actively seeks Jonathan Harker to be her husband, but in such a way as to represent femininity. She states that she simply wants to be a good wife and please Harker. This theme also appears when Dracula forces her to drink his blood. Mina portrays her typical occupation as a "schoolteacher's assistant" and passively obeys the orders of the men of the novel. Later, Mina states that she did not want to inhibit Dracula; this suggests her passive acceptance of men's orders.

However, the "antagonist" female characters in *Dracula* display characteristics of New Women. For example, Mina displays leadership, a New Women quality, as she leads the men to Dracula through her mental connection. However, this occurs after she has been corrupted by Dracula. The three female vampires display feminine sexuality, something which is strictly prohibited of traditional women. Jonathan Harker states his feelings of desire yet terror at the sight of these three women who wish to feed upon him. Van Helsing, in the process of killing these three vampire women, almost succumbs to the temptation to disregard this task due to their extreme beauty and sexuality. In evidence of this, Van Helsing states, "She lay in her Vampire sleep, so full of life and voluptuous beauty that I shudder as though I have come to do murder" (Stoker 373). After Lucy undergoes her transformation to a vampire, she is inherintly seen as evil and is often compared to Medusa (Rosenberg 5). Lucy's transformation to a vampire signals her transformation from good to evil; this is shown when she feeds on the children of the city. When the men approach her to finally end her terror, Lucy commands Arthur to kiss her. The novel demonstrates Arthur's immediate reaction as it states, "Arthur bent eagerly over to kiss

her" (Stoker 168). Arthur nearly succumbs to her provocation as well, but Van Helsing stops him. Both men are nearly drawn in by temptation derived from these New Women characteristics. New Women characteristics try to prevent the men from completing their tasks for the good of the world, and this presents these characteristics as antagonists of the novel that try to counter the protagonists (Armstrong 13).

The feminist interpretation of Dracula that considers femininity with respect to good characters and evil characters seems to be the most valid interpretation. New Women were becoming popular near the time of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but Stoker supported the traditional view of women, as evidenced by his alignment of these views to good characters as protagonists and bad characters as antagonists. Stoker most likely supported these views because they had been enacted in society throughout his life. He was approximately fifty years old at the time of the novel's publication in 1897; fifty years in a patriarchal environment decided his perspective on these issues. If one were to only analyze these female characters without considering their roles in the novel, all the characters might seem to be New Women. Considering all the appropriate viewpoints, Mina and human Lucy are driven by patriarchal stereotypes of Stoker's era, while the three female vampires and vampire Lucy are characterized by New Women ideology.

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