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English 271

19 April 2016

Fangs and Feminism:

Woman, Agency, and the Patriarchy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

It is no secret that patriarchy, the “cultural history and practice of centering on men while underestimating women” (Parker 149), is at work in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but the women of the novel still ultimately control their own fates. Mina exemplifies the ideal woman, playing her role in the patriarchy, but doing so on her own terms; she knows how to work the system and creates agency for herself. In contrast, Lucy attempts to follow in Mina's footsteps but fails as she never develops any sort of agency. The beliefs and actions of the women in relation to the patriarchy determine their ends, whether they in a sense win or lose.

A Victorian cultural model, which “investigates how society shapes women's goals, responses, and points of view” (Bressler 153), as expected by the men is exemplified in a number of lines from Van Helsing. While laying out the final plan to destroy Dracula, Van Helsing explains that Mina is “too precious” to be involved in the actual hunt and that she “must be our star and our hope” (Stoker 225), seeing as he also believes that destroying a vampire is “no part for a woman” (219). Apart, but still based, from the men's opinions, the two females leads build their own expectations for themselves as women.

The first female lead is Mina, the fiancé and eventual wife of Jonathan Harker.

Instead of participating in the action, Mina stays back to transcribe the men's notes, journals, and letters. Mina's first letter to Lucy reveals that she only learned her typewriting skill to be a good wife, saying, "When we are married, I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan, and if I can stenograph well enough I can take down what he wants to say in this way and write it out for him on the typewriter, at which I am also practicing very hard" (53). Mina believes that "women have something of the mother" (214) that allows them to instinctually know how to comfort and care for children. Mina sees her role as tightly tied to the family structure and work.

The second female lead in *Dracula* is Lucy, a former student who idolizes Mina. In a letter to Mina, Lucy remarks, "Some girls are so vain. You and I, Mina dear, who are engaged and are going to settle down soon soberly into old married women, can despise vanity" (Stoker 55). Engaged for less than a day, Lucy eagerly groups herself with Mina as a grown woman, despite only being nineteen. Lucy's idea of a woman, though, veers from Mina's. Lucy tells Mina that women "ought to tell [their] husband everything" (55) and "are such cowards that we think a man will save us from fear, and we marry them" (57). She believes that "men like women, certainly their wives, to be quite as fair as they are (55-56). She even goes so far as to wonder to Mina, "why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them?" (58). Lucy seems to see her role as being a pleasant being for her husband's enjoyment.

While both Mina and Lucy have ideas of women based in their roles to men and as wives and mothers, there are some key differences in their approaches. The picture Lucy gives us is that women are unworthy and pathetic, but men are gracious and love them

anyway. Mina, on the other hand, sees women as assets to men. She prides herself on the skills she has acquired to be of use to Jonathan, whereas Lucy has learned no such skills and often has little more character depth than “looking sweetly pretty in her white lawn frock” and being “so sweet with old people” (Stoker 63). Lucy and Mina’s perceptions of women and their own roles as women influence how each of them acts throughout the novel.

Lucy has a tendency to be more flighty and girlish in her actions. While Mina is working on practicing her skills, keeping a journal and trying “to do what... lady journalists do: interviewing and writing descriptions and trying to remember conversations” (Stoker 53), Lucy is going for “walks and drives, and rides, and rowing, tennis, and fishing” (101) with Arthur. Mina is preparing to be a useful wife who will be invested in her husband’s work while Lucy is simply having a nice time with her future husband.

Over the course of the novel, both women become victims of Dracula, but with vastly different outcomes. Lucy falls completely prey and eventually becomes a creature with “eyes unclean and full of hell-fire” (Stoker 197) and “pointed teeth” in a “bloodstained, voluptuous mouth” (199) that must be staked and beheaded. Mina becomes unclean to the point that a Sacred Wafer burns her, but never fully transforms because her transcribing abilities save her. Seward remarks “Renfield... has been a sort of index to the coming and going of the Count. I hardly see this yet, but when I get at the dates I suppose I shall. What a good thing that Mrs. Harker put my cylinders into type! We never could have found the dates otherwise....” (210). Mina’s skills unveil the pinnacle

piece of information that not only saves her own life, but aides in the tracking and destruction of Dracula.

In addition to the differences in the way the women act, they also handle emotion in different manners. While writing to Mina about the proposals she received but turned down, Lucy apologized to Mina for the tear stained letter, explaining that “being proposed to is all very nice and all that sort of thing, but it isn’t at all a happy thing when you have to see a poor fellow, whom you know loves you honestly, going away and looking all broken-hearted, and to know that, no matter what he may say at the moment, you are passing quite out of his life” (Stoker 56). Lucy tells Mina of the proposals which she rejected. Both times, she cried while telling the men she would not marry them. Even the thought of being sad causes her to cry once again. Lucy does not have the control of her emotions the way Mina does, as the latter describes Lucy as “of too supersensitive a nature to go through the world without trouble” (84).

Mina believes that her emotions will do little to further aid the men and would simply cause distraction so she does her best to hide her emotions. Later in the novel, while the men prepare for their final assault of Dracula, Mina begins to feel guilty concerning Lucy’s demise and begins to cry. She writes:

There now, crying again! I wonder what has come over me to-day. I must hide it from Jonathan, for if he knew that I had been crying twice in one morning—I, who never cried on my own account, and whom he has never caused to shed a tear—the dear fellow would fret his heart out. I shall put a bold face on, and if I do feel weepy, he shall never see it. I suppose it is one

of the lessons that we poor women have to learn... (239).

Mina does not deny her emotions, but rather recognizes that she must not let them be present around the men. She knows that if Jonathan were privy to her emotional state it would distract him from the pressing matter of defeating Dracula. Mina realizes that hiding emotion from men is something she must do as a woman, something that Lucy failed to learn.

In chapter XVIII, Van Helsing explains that Mina “has man’s brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and woman’s heart” (Stoker 218). It is an interesting statement, implying that men think but women feel, considering the emotional state of the men of the novel. At one point, Van Helsing slips into what Seward describes as a state of hysteria, saying that Van Helsing “laughed till he cried... and then he cried till he laughed; and laughed and cried together, just as a woman does” (162-163). Seward and Van Helsing both make remarks that women are emotional, which does not seem to describe Mina, as she rarely loses grip on emotions. Later, when Arthur breaks down emotionally, Mina is there to comfort him, saying, “I suppose there is something in woman’s nature that makes a man free to break down before her and express his feelings on the tender or emotional side without feeling it derogatory to his manhood” (214). Mina again recognizes that she is of use to the men, even if she does not like to publicly express her own emotions.

Ultimately, what Mina has over Lucy is agency, in feminism women’s “ability to imagine and shape their own lives” (Parker 157). Mina has a job as an “assistant schoolmistress”, practices shorthand “very assiduously” as well as typewriting (Stoker 53).

Mina may still rely on the patriarchy to obtain her agency, but considering the era in which the story takes place, there were probably few options to find agency outside of that system. In comparison, Lucy lacks any form of agency. While Mina is busy building her agency, Lucy goes “a good deal to picture-galleries and for walks and rides in the park” (55). Mina does her best to keep a strong hold on her emotions, especially around the men, who confide their own emotions in Mina, which gives her an emotional agency over the men. Lucy is constantly losing control of her emotions, breaking down in front of the other characters a number of times; even remembering being sad makes her cry again. Without agency, Lucy is rendered as little more than a victim who must be cared for and rescued (even if said rescue is unsuccessful).

Mina’s dedication to her husband and the band of men earns her Van Helsing’s praise, calling her a “brave and gallant woman” (Stoker 351). Beyond the doctor’s praise, Mina earns a successful life. She and Jonathan marry, they become the heirs to Mr. Hawkins’ estate, and they have a son. In contrast, Lucy subscribes to the patriarchy, accepting a man’s proposal and infatuated with the idea of being a wife, but lacks the agency that Mina has. Because of this, Lucy is unable to escape being a victim and ends up transforming into a vampire that the men must hunt and gruesomely kill, never becoming a passive wife as she had planned.

Mina and Lucy have different ideas of what their roles as women involve, Mina’s being more active and Lucy’s being more passive. These differences in views influence each of the women’s actions and ultimately how their stories conclude. In the end, Lucy becomes corrupted, turning into a vampire that must be destroyed, but Mina’s saves her

own life, as well as countless others who may have eventually become Dracula's victims, thanks to her agency.

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