Moonlight and Dust: The Ethereal Sister-Brides of *Dracula*

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

In loving memory of Jim Spaulding and Bob Duff.

You were my first and best examples in writing. Thank you for believing in me.

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Introduction

From the beginning of modern horror as a genre, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been an essential example of the inherent homoeroticism of monster fiction. It is widely accepted in *Dracula* scholarship that the sexual alignment and gender expression of the vampire is indeterminate, and therefore inherently queer. The portrayal of female sexuality and the blurring of strictly defined gender lines is fundamental to the creation of the vampire monster. However, few influential criticisms have specifically examined how the queer-coded women vampires in *Dracula* function as an *independent* part of the book's transgressive sexual themes. The characterizations of the main female figures are rarely examined in the context of their own, subtly sapphic coding. If their queerness *is* noticed at all, it is often analyzed in the context of how it helps, hinders, or reflects the male characters. Furthermore, most of this limited examination is centered around the essential characters of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker. But the first female vampires the reader meets– the three unnamed women living in the Count's castle, who for this essay will be referred to as 'the sister-brides'– set the aesthetic and behavioral standard for both of the other, more popularly known examples of female vampirism in the rest of the book. Despite only appearing in a grand total of five scenes, their influence on the story's aesthetic is over-arching. For example, the way the undead Lucy looks, speaks, and moves "with languorous, voluptuous grace," (Stoker 227) is a direct echo of the sister-brides. Long before and after Lucy's part in the story, the phantoms of these unnamed women haunt the narrative as an ephemeral threat, rarely there in physical form but often lurking in the realm of possibility, the innate human fear of the unknown. As such, their characters occupy the focus of several dense, concentrated, and strange moments in the story of *Dracula*.

Therefore, in this essay I will use the figures of the Count's sister-brides to examine the role of the female vampire's sensuality not as a satellite to the masculine, but as a form of independent power both over men and over other women, and as a means of emancipation from restrictive Victorian gender roles. **These sister-brides are the foundation of Stoker's archetype of the female, sapphic-coded vampire, which is fundamentally symbolic of how men fear the disruptive power of queer women and therefore demonize it.** Thematically, the female vampire's sexual independence and empowered refusal to submit to patriarchal norms represents a violent upheaval of patriarchal structures in *Dracula*, to which *all* of the male characters, both the 'evil' *and* the 'good', react with violence. A woman who can both please and support another woman is a threat to the position of the male, a threat of replacement and societal upheaval, and this essay will be analyzing *Dracula* as a story that's all about the violent and systematic removal of this threat. The sister-brides are the first and foremost example of this cycle's enactment in the narrative.

Because of *Dracula's* status as a foundational pillar of the horror genre, this fear/violence reaction against queer-coded women characters – who are often portrayed as monstrous and therefore vilified – has become part of a lasting tradition which continues in media today. I believe it is important to re-examine how we view the female, queer-coded monstrosity in *Dracula* so we can understand how it has become a part of our modern consumption of horror. Understanding the historical context and motivations for Stoker's portrayal of female sensuality and queerness can help us, both as creators and consumers of fiction, to understand and deconstruct such tropes in ways that can better the future roles of women in our media.

A Brief Summary of the Female Role in *Dracula*

Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* first published in 1897 at the closing of the Victorian Era, details the adventures of a group of Englishmen and women who are terrorized by, and must eventually defeat, an ancient supernatural evil. The novel is presented in epistolary format, with sections taken from a variety of diaries, letters, articles, and logs. The point of view alternates between several main characters, with brief vignettes into other kinds of supporting documents. The plot can easily be divided into three sections.

The first section is a short but thrilling introductory act, taken directly from the journal of the character who is generally considered to be the "main" protagonist: a young businessman called Jonathan Harker. His journal details his travels to Eastern Europe where a wealthy Transylvanian Count by the name of Dracula is making preparations to buy property in England so he may start anew there. Jonathan works for the real estate firm who is setting up the purchase of his English estate and has traveled to the Carpathians to help the Count settle his affairs. A series of increasingly sinister events haunts Jonathan's journey to and stay at Castle Dracula, as it becomes clearer and clearer that the Count is not what he seems. The terrifying truth is revealed slowly, piece by piece, and separate parts come together to form the whole picture as time progresses and the tone of Jonathan's journal entries becomes more and more anxious. The Count fixates on Jonathan and begins laying a trap for the young man, to take him as a vampiric victim.

At one point during his stay at Castle Dracula, Jonathan disregards the Count's cryptic warning not to wander through the castle at night or fall asleep anywhere outside the safety of his assigned rooms. When he half-awakens from a brief nap in a dusty lower room, he finds himself trapped in a trance state, surrounded and menaced by a trio of mysterious women. This is the

first appearance of a significant female character in the novel, and the first appearance of the female vampire. The Count arrives just in the nick of time to save Jonathan from these women before they bite his throat. Enraged by their transgression, the Count declares that he will 'have' Jonathan to himself, telling the women that they can have their 'turn' with him after he is done– implying that he is going to somehow ravish the young man, and then leave him to the ghostly women's mercy once he's taken his fill. After this, Jonathan's journal entries become increasingly more frantic as he searches for a way to escape Castle Dracula with his life. Then, on the night of his escape attempt, his journal cuts off and the novel jumps someplace else entirely, signaling the beginning of a new section.

The second act opens with a series of correspondences between a young woman named Mina Murray and Lucy Westenra. Mina is promised to marry her young sweetheart Jonathan Harker, who has mysteriously gone missing. Meanwhile, the virginal Lucy is being courted by three separate men: a dashing American named Quincey Morris, the somber but intelligent Dr. Seward, and the handsome rich heir to the Godalming estate, Arther Holmwood, who soon becomes the Lord Godalming after his father's death partway through the story. Lucy is torn trying to make a decision, as all three so clearly love her and she harbors some level of affection for all three. While she is agonizing over this choice, her physical health is also waning in mysterious circumstances as she starts sleep walking at night, and simultaneously becomes more and more "anemic." Mina comes to visit her, but then leaves when she hears word that her fiancé has turned up at a convent with his memories lost after some terrible trauma brought on a "brain-fever." Mina and Jonathan marry the moment they are reunited, later returning to England as Mr. and Mrs. Harker with the journal that contains the details of Jonathan's mysterious trauma sealed, never to be opened unless the need arises.

Shortly after Lucy makes her choice to marry Arthur Holmwood, she falls deathly ill. The reader's sense of suspense and dramatic irony, knowing what we know about Dracula and his arrival in England, grows steadily with every letter and journal entry. Dr. Seward summons a friend and former mentor of his—Dr. Van Helsing, a Dutchman—to help Lucy, but despite several blood transfusions from all three of Lucy's suitors and Van Helsing himself, she succumbs to her mysterious ailment and tragically passes away, an unmarried maiden. Dr. Van Helsing, who seems to know more than he lets on, soon realizes that Lucy has become one of the undead. When Jonathan Harker accidentally sees the Count Dracula in public and has a flashback, this—paired with the sinister circumstances of her dear friend Lucy's death—prompts Mina Harker to unseal and read Jonathan's account of his time at Castle Dracula.

The evidence of his diary, paired with Van Helsing's own pre-existing expertise in Eastern European vampires and a sighting of the undead Lucy in her crypt, convinces the skeptical men of their group that vampires are real, that the Count Dracula is here in England, and that he killed and turned Lucy Westenra. Dr. Van Helsing gathers a crew made up of Lucy's three suitors and himself to find and kill Lucy. Godalming drives the final stake through his fiancée's heart, freeing the beloved girl's soul from her curse. The emotional moment of her slaying is, as Christopher Craft so aptly pointed out in his essay, "Kiss Me with those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," "…the novel's real—and the woman's only—climax, its most violent and misogynistic moment, displaced roughly to the middle of the book, so that the sexual threat may be repeated but its ultimate success denied: Dracula will not win Mina, second in his series of English seductions" (Craft 122).

In the third act of the story, Mina Harker becomes the subsequent object of the Count's desire. Here the protagonists are given a second chance to re-hash their previous battle with the

vampire in a scenario where they have a chance of winning. After Mina Harker is attacked by the Count in retaliation for Lucy's slaying, and Mina is half-turned by being forced to ingest some of the Count's own blood, Dr. Van Helsing and his crew set out on a quest of vengeance for Lucy and salvation for Mina. They must kill the ancient evil before it has a chance to seduce and entrap their beloved Mrs. Harker for good. The men lay their own traps and counter-traps, eventually chasing the Count out of England and following him back to his Castle in the East where they finally triumphantly kill him.

This section, lacking some of the novelty and the sense of building suspense that the previous two sections had, is a somewhat anticlimactic ending to the story. But it continues to complicate the role of femininity and vampirism right up until the very end, when the Count and his sister-brides are all destroyed and Mina Harker—the only surviving female character—is given her heteronormative marriage-plot ending with Jonathan.

A Literary Review of Queer Studies in *Dracula*

Dracula has a long history of both queer and feminist scholarship. Most essays published in the past twenty years that mention queer and/or feminist theory in *Dracula* will inevitably cite Talia Schaffer's "'A Wilde Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of Dracula" right alongside Phyllis Roth's *Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's Dracula*, Carol A. Senf's "'Dracula': Stoker's Response to the New Woman," and Christopher Craft's "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's Dracula." All are participating in a tradition of analysis that goes back as far as the publication of the book itself. But these essays, while compelling, don't always take the time to examine the queer and feminist undertones of one of the story's strangest and most under-exploited characters: the Count's sister-brides.

Christopher Craft's highly influential 1984 article, "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's Dracula," is probably the best example of the ways analysis of queer theory in *Dracula* can be both persuasive and yet subtly lacking. This essay helped popularize the thus-far-underdeveloped application of queer theory to *Dracula*, broadening the conversation outside of its previous focus on pre-1984 feminism. This essay, while not fundamentally or directly about the feminine role in *Dracula*, is important to consider in any discussion of the book's inherent queerness. Craft uses a background of Freudian psychoanalysis and sexology, the framework of the existing tropes in Gothic monster horror, and a deeply insightful close reading to examine the way the vampire's ambiguous, boundary-defying sexual expression illustrates the author's anxiety and creates horror for the reader. He very effectively shows how Stoker's hypersexual portrayal of the vampire and use of classic monster-horror tropes is metaphorical for a broader and more typical late Victorian anxiety around gender roles and change.

Still, despite this essay's status as a pillar of Queer Theory in *Dracula* criticism, its examination of the feminine leaves something to be desired. Take, for example, the established idea of the Vampire Mouth. Craft opens his essay by coining the term of the Vampire Mouth with a textual analysis, where he identifies this orifice as "the primary site of erotic experience in *Dracula"* (Craft 109). The crucial reference for this is the passage near the beginning of the novel, where the Count's monstrous sister-brides threaten Johnathan with a penetrative pleasure usually reserved only for women. In the Late Victorian reader, this passage creates anxiety around gender inversion and role reversal: Johnathan's position as the recipient of penetration is taboo, and therefore unsettling. But, although the sister-brides' mouths are credited with the power to blur gender lines and exert penetrative control over men, Craft then goes on to credit the power of the women's Vampiric Mouths to the patriarchal male figure of Count Dracula, who is implied to have created them. In this analysis, the sister-brides exist not as an independent sexual power, but as a surrogate: a displacement or extension of the Count's homosexual desire for other men. This idea of displacing male-on-male desire through the female body in order to avoid blatant homoeroticism carries all through the essay's analysis, forming the crux of its argument about gender inversion as fear. Even when Craft goes on to analyze Lucy Westenra's role as a transgressive female power, he brings it back to the displaced male sexuality of the Count. She becomes the surrogate, receiving the sexually-coded 'corrective penetration' (aka, staking) that the Count deserves, so that the potentially homosexual themes of this violent pseudo-phallic punishment can hide behind a thin veneer of heterosexuality. Craft's analysis frames the feminine as a vessel, a narrative tool for the story's men.

A continuation of the conversation Craft started, Talia Schaffer's "'A Wilde Desire Took Me': The Homoerotic History of Dracula" uses a pseudo-biographical reading of Stoker's life

and writing to explore the connection between Bram Stoker's personal ties to Wilde, his perilous status as a closeted gay author in the post-Wilde-conviction era, and the indirect ways he portrays homosexual male desire in *Dracula*. Schaffer's analysis interprets *Dracula* as a fear response from the author, giving Stoker a tentative space to explore his own anxieties about non-conforming gender and sexuality without incriminating himself in his writing the way Wilde did. Schaffer's argument draws heavily on Craft's desire-displacement theory, but she also goes a step further than Craft by drawing direct connection between Stoker's deflection of homosexual desire into women, and the climate of his life and times. This essay fills the gap in *Dracula* scholarship regarding Bram Stoker's own sexuality, making sure that despite the lack of explicit proof of Stoker's gayness, there is still no doubt about its existence and influence on his writing. But again, its focus is on male desire-displacement onto female characters, rather than the female characters themselves.

This pattern of analyzing either the feminine *or* the queer, or analyzing feminine queerness only as a satellite male queerness, appears throughout well-known *Dracula* scholarship. Literary critics in the tradition of gothic horror have discussed the sexual politics of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* since Maurice Richardson's "The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories" helped bring it into the light of critical discussion in 1959. It took a little longer for analysis of the role of the *feminine* in the story to emerge, starting with Phyllis Roth's 1977 book, *Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's Dracula.* Roth's work is also distinctly psychoanalytic, but its focus on the feminine at least helped open a conversation about the role of women and feminism in this pillar of canonical horror. Feminist conversation then opened the door for a discussion of the book centered in queer theory, which, considering Stoker's probable sexuality in a deeply homophobic culture, is one of *Dracula's* most compelling analytic considerations.

However, acceptance of this analysis into the common conversation took time after Roth. Carol A. Senf was writing about women in *Dracula* as early as 1982, two years before Craft; but she examined feminism in *Dracula* through the lens of the heterosexual. Her article, "Dracula': Stoker's Response to the New Woman," enters the conversation by citing a variety of her peers' commentaries—including *Suddenly Sexual Women*—in order to outline the existing controversy around Stoker's portrayal of women. Senf then considers the definition the 'New Woman.' This Late Victorian trend was a basic, early form of emancipative feminism. New Women were young, educated, middle-class professionals who pursued careers for their own personal fulfilment, often postponing or outright rejecting marriage and motherhood. Their style of feminism was by no means new, though it was still disruptive for the time. What made the New Woman different from previous incarnations of the movement, however, was the *sexual* aspect of her feminism. The New Woman was more visibly sexual than her predecessors had ever been. Although this isn't saying much by modern standards, considering the extent of repression and taboo that still existed, the small steps they did take towards visible sensuality in middle-to-upper class women were boundary-breaking for the time.

Interestingly enough, Senf brings up Stoker's fraught relationship with his own wife as biographical evidence for this literary analysis of his work but ignores Stoker's biographical status as a closeted gay man. Senf's lack of consideration for queer theory leads to the rather basic, though not necessarily untrue, conclusion that Mina Harker's character—who accepts the financial independence of the New Woman, but ultimately rejects the sexual ideals—is the literary embodiment of Stoker's ambivalence towards the movement.

After Craft helped to expand the conversation, Marjorie Howes centered the focus of her 1988 essay, "The Mediation of the Feminine: Bisexuality, Homoerotic Desire, and Self-

Expression in Bram Stoker's ‘Dracula,’” on themes of queerness and closeted desire. However, much like many of these sources, Howes once again argues that feminine monstrosity in the novel is a vehicle for expressing displaced male desires and disregards the idea of the female vampire as a disruptive power in and of herself. Howes instead analyzes the female vampire as a mirror for male fear, pointing out through research that “For the Victorians, this feminization of the male homosexual was not merely metaphorical or psychological. They often saw it as a physiological feminization, or ‘congenital inversion, the result of what Havelock Ellis called “the latent organic bisexuality in each sex.” In accordance with this paradigm, *Dracula* feminizes desire and obsessively fears the woman in man, which is undeniably and naturally present and always threatening to overwhelm the masculine” (Howes 106). While this is certainly a type of displacement fear, it again traces the source of the fear back to the inner life of the male author, readership, and characters rather than the independent existence and sexuality of the female body.

Also published in 1988, John Allen Stevenson’s "A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of Dracula" takes a different turn to focus not just on the sexual politics of *Dracula*, but also on the politics of racial difference, foreignness, and colonization present in the narrative. This post-Colonial framework is another popular analytic mode in *Dracula* scholarship. Allen incorporates this into his anthropological discussion of how the ethnically proud and aggressively war-like Count, who represents the ultimate invader, exercises his power by ‘stealing’ women away from the protagonists, converting them to members of his own ‘race’ so he can colonize Britain. But even if the idea of the vampire’s taboo and borderline incestuous sexuality as a mechanism of invasion is a fascinating one, it presents some obvious problems to the queer feminist reader.

This reading positions the women as objects of conquest, without much—if any—agency to speak of.

Building on this post-colonial framework, Steven D. Arata frames the titillating fear in *Dracula* not as a fantasy of sexual deviancy, but as fantasy of invasion for Britain in his 1990 essay, "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." As Arata points out, even Carol Senf's earlier feminist reading of *Dracula* must also recognize the "political overtones of Count Dracula's excursion to Britain" (Arata 626). But in uplifting this post-Colonial method of analyzing *Dracula*, Arata once again minimizes the active role of the feminine. The female vampires are defined by "their robust health and their equally robust fertility," which is a sign of their value as tools for the Count's colonization mission. While this is a fair and accurate reflection of the societal anxieties of imperial Britain at the time, this article is only interested in the vampires' sexual deviance as it fits into the over-arching concept of the reverse-colonial plot structures. Women become little more than chattel possessions in this equation.

Women become relevant again in Stephanie Demetrakopoulos' 1997 article "Feminism, Sex Role Exchanges, and Other Subliminal Fantasies in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula,'" where Demetrakopoulos explores the sexual themes of the vampire—specifically the vampire woman—as a way for the sexually repressed, culturally stifled Victorian readership to titillate and satisfy sexual needs that conventional ideas about gender roles denied. In this article, the female vampire is analyzed as a dominating and brutalizing force that inverts tropes about purity (everything about the female vampire is sexualized, and yet her outward veneer of beauty and purity remains), class (she is still not portrayed as a 'fallen' or lower-class woman despite her voraciousness), and motherhood (the female vampire preys on and *eats* children: a consumptive

rather than procreative practice, in direct opposition of Victorian culture's expectation that women should focus all their energy on reproduction and nurturing). This, Demetrakopoulos argues, would have fascinated a male reader who wanted a more submissive sex role, or a woman who wanted more dominance and control, and were subsequently denied by strict Victorian norms. Demetrakopoulos cites medical and scientific writing from the time as evidence of the intensely misogynistic sex role structures that existed in Victorian culture at the time, illustrating how the fantasy of the vampire would have subliminally satisfied the unmet desires of a sexually stifled public.

However, Demetrakopoulos does not touch on—and at one point even directly refutes—the idea of Stoker himself as queer. Neither does she directly acknowledge the vampire as an essentially queer and gender-defying figure. Despite having been written as recently as 1997, the article does not seem to cite any other well-known sources from the time that directly tackled *Dracula*'s queerness. Demetrakopoulos cites Stoker's own writing on his feminist views, but deliberately does not do the same to any similar writings that have been used as biographical evidence of Stoker's closeted homosexuality. She also lumps homosexuality in with other forms of repressed sexual 'depravity'—such as incest, pedophilia, and bestiality—that Victorian culture also saw as taboo, painting queerness in the light of an unfulfilled kink or sexual fantasy rather than an entire, repressed personhood. While the article has interesting things to say about the self-contradictory nature of Bram Stoker's feminism and the titillating role of the Count's sister-brides, it also smacks of what a modern-day queer scholar would term a 'trans-exclusive radical feminist,' or 'terf' for short. Subscribing to a somewhat less progressive brand of feminism, terfs are self-proclaimed feminists who virulently exclude transgender people—especially transgender women—from participation in feminism, and as a result, often subscribe to other subtly

homophobic ideas about what queer people should and should not be, and who does and does not deserve the benefits of feminism. It therefore tracks that Demetrakopoulos has somehow written about “sex-role changes” in *Dracula* without also thinking about homoerotic or transgender subtexts.

In a more recent and inclusive context, Barry McCrea considers the transgressive sensual portrayals and gender-inversions of *Dracula* from a similar, but reversed, point of view as Craft. In his 2010 essay, "Heterosexual Horror: Dracula, the Closet, and the Marriage-Plot," McCrea argues that rather than using perverse heterosexuality as a veil for themes of homosexuality, Stoker is actually using homosexuality as a tool to deconstruct and analyze the horror of heteronormative marriage. McCrea presents compelling evidence that *Dracula* is a closeted gay man’s imagination of what it would be like to publicly participate in love and marriage with men. The closeted gay may be excluded from the societal construct of marriage, but at least he has full ownership of his individual desire, however transgressive it may be; meanwhile, the desires of a married heterosexual couple are dictated and owned by the very same legal and religious marriage institutions that allow that couple’s relationship to be publicly visible. By this theory, vampirism becomes a metaphor for that institutional trap, and the marital violence that was inherent in it at the time. This simultaneous fascination and fear for the heterosexual creates yet another dimension of the novel’s queer-coded anxiety. However, this framework once again reduces the female vampire’s role to a tool for the exploration of male queerness.

One source that *does* consider both the independent femininity and the queerness of the female vampire at length is Charles E Prescott and Grace A. Giorgio’s 2005 essay, "Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker's ‘Dracula.’" Here Prescott and Giorgio examine the complex interactions of Mina Harker’s femininity with the

narrative of other women in Dracula. Her character both fights and plays into the Victorian idea of the 'New Woman,' and the subtle ways in which she does this—her intimate friendship with Lucy, her intelligence and simultaneous devotion to her husband, her education and employment statuses, and lastly her relationship with vampirism—illustrate not only how the liberation of the New Woman threatened the status quo, but how men of the time both admired and feared that disruptive power. Stoker's fear was also compounded by his complicated ideas of sexuality and the feminine, and this shows very clearly in Mina Harker's character-building. This source's contribution is unique because it focuses on Mina both in relation to the men in the story, and in relation to herself and her own femininity. It also deeply examines Mina's borderline-sapphic relationship with Lucy in the context of the historical period.

Within the broader conversation of Mina's femininity, this essay analyzes the estrangement and othering of the various facets of Mina's personality. It picks apart the ways in which Bram Stoker forces Mina (and therefore all women, since she is often considered to be his statute of womanhood) to choose an alignment: degeneracy (which is codified as the independence and power of the New Woman and/or queerness, and thereby linked to vampirism and monstrosity) or decency (the classical archetype of the pure, good, Christian Victorian woman, the submissive housewife who is "cleansed" of all "corruption" at the end of the story). At its core, this essay discusses the way Stoker characterizes Mina (and therefore all womankind) as a creature with a natural, inherent potential for dangerous degeneracy, which she must fight and win against in order to be acceptable in male-dominated society. Since Dracula is the embodiment of queer degeneracy and the independence that comes with it, Dracula's infection of Mina and his subsequent defeat in her name is symbolic of the male desire to keep female power contained by preventing their 'infection' with degeneracy, feminism, and/or

queerness. Lucy Westenra is a Victorian's tragic example of what happens if women give in to those degenerate sexual urges, and Mina Harker is a Victorian's triumphant example of a woman who fights for and eventually submits to dominant conservative ideas of female purity.

However, if Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker are representations of male fear of sexual displacement, Count Dracula's three unnamed sister-brides created the archetype for vampirism that Lucy and Mina's characters follow. How does this trio of strangely uncodified, aggressively queer women set the standard for the female vampire's disruptive power? What about their strangeness is most terrifying to the male Victorian reader? In this essay, I hope to answer these questions.

Section I: The Three Sister-Brides of the Count

When considering the prominent female figures in Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* three characters immediately come to mind: Mina Harker, the faithful wife of the main protagonist, Johnathan; Lucy Westenra, the damsel whose tragic death and undeath at the Count's hands brings the vampire-hunting crew together; and, most mysteriously, the three unnamed vampire women who live in the Count's castle in Transylvania. Those three women are some of the strangest, and yet the most under-utilized, figures in *Dracula.* Although these female vampires are described as three separate bodies, their lack of distinct names, their homogeny in all but appearance, and their shared role in the story makes it easy to categorize them as one character. Thus arises the single analytical figure of the Count's sister-brides, who this essay will consider as a collective unit.

Lacking a given name, the term "sister-brides" is probably the most apt descriptor for this archetypal figure both because of and in *spite* of its plurality. These women share a curiously unclassified relationship with the Count and with each other. They defy the boundaries of every singular role one could possibly apply, and so there is no one word to taxonomize them. Therefore, because it is so difficult to pin down exactly which of the common categories their bonds fit into, the only way to refer to them is by *hyper*-classifying them with multiple terms. I believe this terminological paradox is an essential part of understanding their characterization.

Part of the innate fear of the vampire is the ambiguity of its intimate relationship with its victims. Is the victim a sexual partner, a lover or spouse to be ravished and then kept forever? Are they a child or offspring, created from the vampiric body as Mina is when the Count forces her to nurse blood from his 'bare breast'? Are they meant to be a semi-platonic companion or helper; a subordinate sibling annexed into the family? Are they just power pawns in a slowly

building undead army, objects to be taken and won? What are these three women to the Count and to each other, and why are they the site of so much concentrated strangeness and terror whenever they appear?

When trying to understand these relationships, and what is queer and monstrous about the sister-brides in general, one must first understand *them* as a figure. Their basic outline is made most clear in the prominent, much-examined scene in the beginning of the novel where they are first introduced. The passage is a lengthy one that describes their initial manifestation, their physical traits, and the way they menace the unwitting, half-asleep Jonathan Harker with a "kiss" from their vampire mouths during his stay at Castle Dracula. All of the sister-brides' subsequent appearances directly refer back to this one introductory passage:

> In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, for, though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor… Two were dark, and had high aquiline noses, like the Count's, and great dark, piercing eyes, that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon. The other was fair, as fair as can be, with great, wavy masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires… All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips… The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. One said: – 'Go on! You are the first, and we shall follow; yours is the right to begin.' The other added: – 'He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all.' I lay quiet… The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me.

> Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet… but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood… 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 I 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. (Stoker 40-42)

The analytic community of *Dracula* has cited this passage time and time again, picking apart the fear of role reversals in sex, male submission, the blurring of power and dominance lines, and the 'wet, gaping maw' of the female vampire's mouth as an analogy for the vaginal. But, as previously illustrated, the vast majority of this analysis relates the function of these women in this scene back to the relationship between Johnathan Harker and the Count, or the male characters and vampirism in general. It's all about the interaction of fear around male homosexuality, male queerness, and what makes these vampire-women threatening to Jonathan's own masculinity. What about their *femininity*?

The hyper-feminine descriptions of these women—their "voluptuous" figures, their bright red lips and white teeth, their too-perfect beauty—is directly counterbalanced with their

vampiric ability to threaten Jonathan with penetration. It shows a frightening moment of inversion, described most aptly by Christopher Craft:

> Immobilized by the competing imperatives of "wicked desire" and "deadly fear," Harker awaits an erotic fulfillment that entails…the thorough subversion of conventional Victorian gender codes, which constrained the mobility of sexual desire…by according to the more active male the right and responsibility of vigorous appetite, while requiring the more passive female to "suffer and be still." (Craft 108)

Therefore, the greatest point of friction with the reader's sensibilities in this scene is that the female vampire takes on a traditionally male role in the sex power dynamic, forcing the male participant to submit to the penetrative. Penetration in Stoker's social context is strictly reserved as the male domain, but the female vampire flaunts that rule with impunity. Her transgressive power threatens both the destruction of the masculine identity, and the possibility of replacing the male participant entirely, usurping their role of sexual dominance over women.

This passage is an aggressively and inherently queer presentation of the female vampire, as it implies via her ability to perform a male penetrative role while still retaining her own femininity that she is perfectly capable of threatening *anyone* with this transgressive queerness: including other women, who, if they were already dissatisfied with the shortcomings of male rule or if they themselves had repressed sapphic desires under societal pressure, would therefore no longer need the pleasuring capabilities of a man. Women would then have the choice to discard men entirely in favor of the vampire, who—though othered and made monstrous by patriarchal society—is therefore *free* from the constraints of said patriarchal society. While the sapphic is not implicitly *stated* in this paradoxical power of masculine sexual capability with feminine presentation, the *potential* for disruption of the status quo exists as a dark undercurrent. Were the

female vampire to rise to power in this story, the other female characters—namely Lucy and Mina, who represent all of womankind in this narrative and who both show subtle sapphic tendencies, as will be later discussed—would potentially be able to discard masculine rule in favor of another woman. This is directly opposed to the wishes of the men in the story, who see Lucy and Mina—and therefore all women—as primary objects of desire which they must win and keep. Thus, the subtle fear of male displacement by feminine queerness becomes inextricably tangled with fear of the female vampire, and therefore with the character archetype of the sister-brides.

And yet, the sister-brides' relationship to the Count and to the other male characters continues to complicate further during this introductory scene. Just in the nick of time before the vampire women attempt to feed on Jonathan, the Count appears in a fury to stop them. It is this interruption, and the tension afterwards, that characterizes these women's relationship to him most tellingly. "With a fierce sweep of his arm, he hurled the woman from him, and then motioned to the others as though he were beating them back; it was the same imperious gesture that I had seen used to the wolves" (Stoker 42). It's clear that these women are subordinate to him in some way; though that still leaves plenty of room for interpretation of their relationship, as Victorian society—and therefore Stoker himself—considered both wife, daughter, and sister as subordinate to the man of the house. After the Count berates them, however, they lash out by accusing him of being incapable of love. His response is, "Yes, I too can love; you yourselves can tell it from the past. Is it not so?" (Stoker 43).

Though he aimed this response at Johnathan with a longing look, the implication is that the Count turned these women into the monsters they are a long time ago and thought of it as 'love' of a sort. Furthermore, because the Count's desire for Johnathan is pseudo-sexual, and

because he is referring to his desire for both these women *and* Johnathan under the same context, it then follows that the 'love' he showed these three women was also sexual in nature. Yet Stoker introduces *another* complication directly after this when the sister-brides ask, "Are we to have nothing to-night?" (Stoker 43), and the Count gifts them a bag which is implied to have a child in it, which they then make off with and presumably eat. This could be him filling the role of the patriarch providing for his harem, giving the women a child in a horrific perversion of impregnation and conception. However, it could also be read as a father providing for his young. This undertone comes up again later in the story when the process of the Count turning Mina is described as 'nursing,' implying some warped paternal drive behind his desire to spread vampirism ever further. The very act of creating a vampire is reproductive in nature, so the vampiric victim is now cast in the light of an offspring too.

The story also introduces the complication of seeing a still-human vampiric victim as both "wine-press" or food, and "companion… and helper" later on (Stoker 309); but the strongest tension in Dracula's relationship with the sister-brides is still between these simultaneous roles of lover and offspring. Therefore, part of the reason this unquantifiable vampiric relationship is so unsettling to the reader is because it reads as incestuous.

The practice of conflating queerness with predatory incest was and still is a keystone of homophobic and transphobic societal fears, so implying the sister-brides as incestuous automatically brings the conceptual baggage of queerness and queerphobia into their characterization, grounded in the very fact of their existence. Thus, their static role in the story—their entire being and selfhood—revolves around the uneasiness of these subtle implications, laid side-by-side with the Count whose existence they are inextricably tied to.

Section II: The Perverted Sisterhoods of Vampirism

As blurred as the three sister-brides' relationship to the Count is, their relationship with each other is equally ambiguous. If their connection to Dracula is so strange and warped and unclassifiable, why wouldn't their connection to each other be similarly tangled in ideas of incest and queerness? With all of these unsettling contexts pre-existing in their relationship to the Count, it follows that the same contexts would then apply to the three of them, *independent* of him. Any combination thereof could be argued. They could think of themselves as adoptive siblings; as a polyamorous triangle of lovers or spouses, married to each other by proxy of the Count; or they could simply be companions and allies to each other (although considering the overtones already implicit in their role, the latter seems unlikely). Either way, their power imbalance with the Count puts them in a unique position relative to each other. That same power imbalance is perhaps the strongest thing unifying them.

The Count leaves the sister-brides behind in his Transylvanian castle—presumably alone—for weeks when he moves to London, with no clear intent to return. He leaves his considerable property in their care, as one would a spouse. Castle Dracula is described as rich both in both history, material wealth, and literal treasure, with Jonathan at one point discovering "…a great heap of gold in one corner—gold of all kinds, Roman, and British, and Austrian, and Hungarian, and Greek and Turkish money… None of it that I noticed was less than three hundred years old. There were also chains and ornaments, some jewelled…" (Stoker 51). Given the amount of wealth the Count seems to have hoarded in his ancestral home, there's a great deal of responsibility implied in stewardship of the place. The Count's willingness to leave this responsibility in the sister-brides' hands assume a certain level of trust he has in their independence of him.

And yet, his furious reaction to them earlier also shows how he simultaneously fears that independence. It's obvious by their synchronistic behavior that they are more strongly bonded—or, at least, more *willingly* bonded—to each other than they are to him. The implication of the sister-brides as offspring of the same parent makes them siblings, and the implication of their marriage with the Count automatically and simultaneously implies marriage to each other. That's not one, but *two* powerful bonds forged between these three women, layered overtop of each other and reinforced in their appearances in the story. In every scene detailing their hauntings, they always appear and move together as one. Given the vampire's natural bent for 'perversion' of sexual desire, and the implied potential of the female vampire as capable of filling multiple roles in pleasure, it's not a far leap of the imagination to think that these three vampire 'sisters' could also be a self-sufficient triad, capable of sexually satisfying each other. It would explain why Dracula exercises such strict hierarchal control over them. It's an effort by the Count to keep his prizes, his conquests, in check and under his control even though they don't necessarily need or even want him. The strength of their unsettling bonds as a trio—the thing which makes them most useful as pawns to the Count—is also the thing which makes them a potential threat to him.

There is yet further evidence to support this idea of a sexual relationship in the text. From the way the three separate women are described, at least one of them—with her skin "…fair, as fair as can be, with great, wavy masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires" —is not supposed to be a biological sibling to the other two, who are racialized as "…dark, and had high aquiline noses, like the Count, and great dark, piercing eyes, that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon" (Stoker 41). But although it is implied in this that none of them are really related by anything besides their mutual connection to the Count, Stoker still

deliberately layers a tone of incestuous sisterhood over their relationship to each other. To make things more complex, the term ‘sister’ at the time could also be taken to mean something else entirely, when used as a term of endearment between women who aren’t actually related; especially in the era before the terminologies of ‘lesbian’ and ‘sapphic’ and ‘bisexual’ were accessible to queer women to name their intimate relationships with each other. This became most clear with the rise of the New Woman during Stoker’s time.

To reiterate, the New Woman was an early feminist movement in late Victorian society which promoted women’s financial, intellectual, and sexual freedom from men. The sexual aspect was notably prominent, compared to the standard of the time. “When it came to sex the New Woman was more frank and open than her predecessors. She felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as contraception and venereal disease” (Senf 35). Once the New Woman had exposed the general public to the existence and prominence of women’s own independent sexual desires, it called into question the presumed asexuality of female friendships, and therefore the legitimacy of the word ‘sister’ as a platonic term. The New Woman was often stereotyped as disdainful of romantic/ sexual connections with men, but suspiciously ‘passionate’ about her friendships with other women. Prescott and Giorgio described this passion, called a ‘rave’ friendship, as an intimate friendship between women with sapphic tendencies who were possibly lovers or at least romantically involved. It was usually between middle-to-upper-class young women, while they were in their school days together at all-girls institutions (Prescott and Giorgio 496). It is worth noting that, in the context of Lucy and Mina’s relationship:

> Lucy is not indiscriminately sexual; she shows remarkably little interest in or passion for the man… chosen to be her husband… Lucy’s most effusive moments of pleasure,

> however, are not directed at any of her male suitors… Lucy's most passionate connection is undoubtedly with her dear friend. When she writes, "I wish I were with you, dear, sitting by the fire undressing, as we used to sit"… she captures the intimacy of the rave relationship. (Prescott and Giorgio 496)

With Lucy and Mina therefore demonstrated to share a certain level of intimate "sisterhood," this same convention then becomes relevant in the subtext of another important scene featuring the three sister-brides: one of only two where they have dialogue. Much later in the story, when the protagonists are nearing the end of their journey to kill the Count, the sister-brides appear and try to haunt Van Helsing and Mina in the woods around Dracula's castle. Mina is protected inside a warding circle with the three vampires kept outside it, but they beckon to her, saying "Come, sister. Come to us…" (Stoker 393).

In calling to Mina—someone who is characterized as having traits of the stereotypical New Woman, and as previously being in a rave relationship with Lucy Westenra—as "sister" in their customarily lascivious way, the sister-brides are trying to literally seduce her over to their side. They presumably do this without the direction of the Count (who is miles away and in transit at this late point in the story), which shows that they're acting of their own independent will. These women want to add Mina to their ranks just as badly as Dracula does, and it's clear that they see her as a valuable acquisition or conquest; much like Dracula once saw them.

Through all these subtleties of implication, suggestion, subtext, and the cultural undercurrents of the time, the relationships between the Count's sister-brides inextricably twine a precedent of feminine queerness as monstrosity into Stoker's canon of the vampire. However, these relationships are only one side of the coin that defines their disruptive sexuality.

Section III: Moonlight and Dust—the Body of the Female Vampire

Despite their concentrated weirdness and the relative importance of their role in the story's sexual horror, the Count's three terrifying sister-brides only appear in a total of five separate scenes and speak their scarce handful of dialogue in only two of them. Part of the reason they perform their narrative role so well is because of just that. They are creatures made mostly of physical description and occasional action, and they don't need to be more because even the basic fact of the sister-brides' *existence* is strange. They don't have to do anything other than *be there* in order to throw a proverbial wrench into the cogs of *Dracula*'s sex and gender dynamics. The definition of a stock character, their role is not to grow or change or even move the story along: their role is simply to be strange, and for their strangeness to be scandalously visible. Through the simple act of appearing, these three unnamed women do just as much narrative work as the Count in building the lore and aesthetic of the classic Draculean monster. Their brand of transgressive sensuality has therefore become an essential precedent for vampire horror.

And yet, despite their monumental influence on vampire canon, these women's existence in the story is more *ethereal* than physical. Feminist theory in *Dracula* is all about the politics of the female body, female sex, female power. But although the sister-brides clearly have sex and power, what kind of bodies do they even have? They are repeatedly characterized as ghostly—made up not of flesh and blood, but of ephemeral things which are impossible to pin down, grasp, or contain. When considering the strangeness sister-bride's materiality, three basic questions of their narrative role must be answered: when do they show up, why do they show up, and how do they show up?

Pre-emptively, the answers to these questions are simple: the sister-brides show up when the narrative is at its most climactic peaks of suspense: 1) the moment when Jonathan realizes, in

a flash of visceral horror, that he is in mortal danger at Castle Dracula; 2 & 3) the moments just before Jonathan is finally terrified into making his desperate escape attempt, convinced that he'll be tortured and killed if he doesn't flee; 4) the moment of near-climactic rising when the heroes are just hours away from tracking down and killing the Count; and 5) the moment when the sister-brides are slain in a narrative echo of Lucy's climactic death, just five pages before the Count meets his end.

There is a recognizable pattern to all these appearances. They come in groups, back-to-back with each other, in the highest moments of suspense when the story is ramping up to a major narrative shift. The first three help to signal the transition in the novel's first section between Jonathan's vague unease in Castle Dracula, and his mortal terror, just before the story leaves that introductory section on a cliffhanger and moves somewhere else entirely. In the novel's second section, it can be argued that, since the Undead Lucy shares so many aesthetic and thematic similarities with the sister-brides, they—or at least, their precedents for female vampirism—are represented there too. Then, in the novel's third section, the sister-brides' latter two scenes feature prominently in the rising action of the novel's final climax, occurring just a few entries before the resolution of the Count's death, the heroes' hard-won victory. Judging by this pattern, it can be argued that Stoker's suspense-building mechanism in each of these sections hinges on the presence of the sister-brides in some way, shape, or form.

Following this conclusion, the reason why the sister-brides show up is evident: they are a major part of Stoker's horror trope, and function as a disruptive menace in the moments when the main characters —Jonathan and Mina Harker, most notably—are in the most potent danger. The sister-brides' job is to complicate and terrorize any scene in which they appear, scaling up the reader's sense of unease in preparation for the coming climactic moment of horror.

Finally, the conventions of how the sister-brides show up must be dissected individually in each scene, in order to understand how their metaphysical strangeness works to create that vague background anxiety which Stoker is relying on. Their ethereality is the crux of the argument that the female vampire embodies male displacement fears and male terror at the idea of female power.

The weird, wraith-like qualities of the sister-brides are clear from the moment they first appear in Castle Dracula. When Jonathan Harker wakes in their presence and realizes he is not alone, he becomes aware of them in a roundabout way:

> The room was the same… I could see along the floor, in the brilliant moonlight, my own footsteps marked where I had disturbed the long accumulation of dust. In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, for, though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor." (Stoker 40-41)

Additionally, when the sister-brides disappear at the end of the scene in question, they "simply seemed to fade into the rays of the moonlight and pass out through the window, for I could see outside the dim, shadowy forms for a moment before they entirely faded away" (Stoker 43). The sister-brides' materialization and de-materialization in this introductory scene is characterized by the moonlight which seems to pass right through them ghost-like, and by the thick mats of dust in the ancient room Jonathan fell asleep in. Though not yet directly linked to the sister-brides, the dust is the *only* atmospheric cue the reader gets about the setting in which they first appear.

The physical description of the sister-brides, which makes up the bulk of this passage, does the most work out of any other scene in the book in reinforcing this idea of the disruptive power of the the female vampire's queerness. The sentences detailing their appearance—already

cited in full in Section I—are all about the female vampire's 'voluptuousness,' her too-perfect beauty and ruby-red lips against pearly white teeth. Her power of emasculation is wrapped up and served to the reader in a physical appearance that is so aggressively hyper-feminine, it almost circles back around to become masculine again.

The sister-brides' physical beauty is taken to extremes, their feminine traits becoming 'cold' and 'hard' in the same ways the Count is severe and foreign, and possessed of the same threatening powers that the Count has. The only difference in their presentation is that the Count can initially pass as human, with his intense masculinity softened by Stoker's portrayal of him as just left of normal. The Count's off-ness is initially something that only tickles Jonathan's senses at the edge of perception. Comparatively, the sister-brides are something Jonathan immediately, viscerally reacts to as inhuman. Their provocative femininity is so intense, so perfect and complete, that it has become something completely alien to him. When Lucy re-appears as the undead later in the story, the description of her 'unearthly' physical traits echo the sister-brides' almost exactly, which further demonstrates how the sister-brides set the aesthetic precedent for all members of their kind. This aesthetic precedent for the female vampire plays into a structure of physical othering, which works to push the archetype of the female vampire further and further outside of the Victorian realm of 'normal' and into the realm of the strange and queer, in increasingly unsettling and transgressive ways.

This theme of ethereality, hyper-femininity, and alien physicality carries on to their next appearance, which happens just five short entries before the introductory segment of Jonathan's journal cuts off:

> Something made me start up, a low, piteous howling of dogs… Louder it seemed to ring in my ears, and the floating motes of dust to take new shapes to the sound as they danced

> in the moonlight. I felt myself struggling to awake to some call of my instincts; nay, my very soul was struggling, and my half-remembered sensibilities were striving to answer the call. I was becoming hypnotized! Quicker and quicker danced the dust, and the moonbeams seemed to quiver as they went by me into the mass of gloom beyond. More and more they gathered till they seemed to take dim phantom shapes. And then I started, broad awake and in full possession of my senses, and ran screaming from the place. The phantom shapes, which were becoming gradually materialized from the moonbeams, were those of the three ghostly women to whom I was doomed. I fled, and felt somewhat safer in my own room, where there was no moonlight and where the lamp was burning brightly. (Stoker 49)

In this moment, the only presence of safety is in the absence of the moon's cold glow, where the "dim phantom shapes" have nothing to manipulate. The sister-brides never even take a real form in this scene—they simply menace Harker with the threat of manifestation, the disembodied shape of their power, their *potential*. While the Count is a concrete, physical menace to Jonathan—a man with a flesh-and-bone body he can and has touched—these women's untouchability, the mere *potential* of their presence, is all part of their terror. Here, the sister-brides are the stuff of nightmares. They are characterized only by moonlight—the symbology of which is historically and near-universally feminine—and dust: something which floats through the air and which cannot permanently be trapped down, something a person can never quite escape from. Dust is everywhere, and one can no more defend oneself from it than one could from a moonbeam.

The non-appearance of the sister-brides in this scene is as much of a weapon as their appearance, for it spreads a vague, omnipresent background fear of their potential manifestation

in any and all of the novel's settings. They can appear anywhere and enthrall a man without ever even touching him, without so much as showing their faces. The female vampire does not have to reciprocate to a man in order to 'seduce' him, and thereby have power over him. As with their first appearance, the sister-brides flip the gender dynamic on its head. In the sister-brides' world, the female vampire takes what she wants from her victim—whether that's sexual satisfaction from him, or his role of sexual empowerment over other women—and the male victim, usurped from his place in Victorian society, gets nothing.

While the sister-brides' second appearance is rich in description and concept-building for them, their role in their third scene is comparatively small. It has not yet been mentioned in this paper because it is so short, occupying less than a paragraph. A few days after the sister-brides' dust mote haunting, Jonathan hears whispering at his door:

> …I heard the voice of the Count: "Back, back, to your own place! Your time is not yet come. Wait. Have patience. To-morrow night, to-morrow night, is yours!" There was a low, sweet ripple of laughter, and in a rage, I threw open the door, and saw without the three terrible women licking their lips. As I appeared they all joined in a horrible laugh and ran away. (Stoker 55)

This short appearance accomplishes only two things. Primarily its function is to set stage for the act's conclusion, preparing both Jonathan and the reader for his climactic escape attempt. "To-morrow" is all the time he has left, so 'today' must be the end of this particular arc. Accordingly, his last journal entry for the section begins shortly afterwards with, "These may be the last words I ever write in this diary…" (Stoker 55). While there is nothing particularly extraordinary about the sister-brides' role in this setup, it once again follows Stoker's convention of placing the sister-brides in the middle of suspense-building moments as an element of unease.

Secondarily, these lines function to further establish the sister-brides' position as begrudgingly subordinate to the Count in their vampire hierarchy. His dialogue echoes the earlier moment when he had to intervene between them and Jonathan, and here he is once again fending them off when they try to go behind his back. Their subtle defiance is worth noting, as is the fact that they once again escape his wrath unpunished, despite their insubordination. Despite the Count's apparent defensive attitude towards them, at no point does he retaliate against them. After this, the sister-brides fade into the background for awhile, only mentioned in passing reference, a mere echo of memory in the back of Jonathan's—and therefore the reader's—mind.

Although it comes many, many chapters after the previously discussed appearance, just before the climax when the heroes are closing in on Dracula, the sister-brides' fourth scene is a direct echo of their original scenes. It calls the reader back to the suspense of that opening section, bringing the narrative full-circle. In this scene, their ethereal threat of appearance, that potential for enthrallment while maintaining untouchability, is repeated; but this time they appear from thin air to haunt Mina, rather than her husband. It's a continuation of their previous attack, as if to remind the Harkers (and therefore the reader) that their menace was never gone, just laying in wait. This delayed springing of their trap is almost as crucial a moment as their first scene. From the point of view of Dr. Van Helsing:

> Even in the dark there was a light of some kind, as there ever is over snow; and it seemed as though the snow-flurries and the wreaths of mist took shape as of women with trailing garments. All was in dead, grim silence, only that the horses whinnied and cowered, as if in terror of the worst. I began to fear – horrible fears… It was as though my memories of all Jonathan's horrid experience were befooling me; for the snowflakes and the mist began to wheel and circle round, till I could get as though a shadowy glimpse of those

> women that would have kissed him. And then the horses cowered lower and lower, and moaned in terror as men do in pain. Even the madness of fright was not to them, so that they could break away… the wheeling figures of mist and snow came closer, but keeping ever without the Holy circle. Then they began to materialize, till – if God have not take away my reason, for I saw it through my eyes – there were before me in actual flesh the same three women that Jonathan saw in the room when they would have kissed his throat. I knew the swaying round forms; the bright hard eyes, the white teeth, the ruddy colour, the voluptuous lips. They smiled ever at poor dear Madam Mina; and as their laugh came through the silence of the night, they twined their arms and pointed to her… (Stoker 392-393)

Again, the sister-brides manifest themselves from motes of another physical, but untouchable, material: snow flurries and mist. Both are forms of water—something which is both physically and conceptually uncontrollable. Although Van Helsing swears that he sees the women "in actual flesh," the "weird" means of their materialization casts doubt on the reality of their physical presence. And even before the sister-brides take ghostly form in the vapor, the first sign of their presence is the horses' fear. The sudden, inexplicable terror of domesticated animals is a common trope in horror fiction to denote the presence of some supernatural danger which lurks beyond detection by human senses. Although the sister-brides cannot hypnotize anyone protected inside the holy warding, they demonstrate their frightening abilities by robbing the horses of all their usual defense mechanisms, leaving them helpless and moaning "as men do in pain": a proxy for the people the sister-brides *would* be enthralling, if it weren't for the protective ring of Christian symbolism keeping them back.

Additionally, in the middle of this events sequence when Van Helsing begins to fear for Mina, the woman in question laughs "low and unreal," her speech "like a voice that one hears in a dream, so low it was," and points out that she—in her half-vampire state—is the *only* one who the vampires won't harm (Stoker 392). The sister-brides are here solely to call to Mina. Though Mina visibly rejects their summons, the fact that her voice is dream-like and unreal—plus the fact that she spends most of these final days of the novel either asleep during the day or in a hypnotized trance during the twilight hours—shows that she is already well on her own way to ethereality. Mina, whose queer coding has already been established, must struggle against the pull of monstrous femininity even as she already has one foot in both the literal and the proverbial grave. It's not dissimilar to the way Mina must struggle against her pull towards the "degenerate" femininity of the New Woman, fighting to fit into the mold of the acceptable Victorian wife and mother. The strange metaphysical freedom of the female vampire will continue to tempt her away from her marriage, and into transgressive queerness, until both the sister-brides and the Count are defeated.

The sister-brides only become truly physical in their final scene, where—unlike all their other appearances—their role is simply to be, and to die. Come daybreak after the close of the previous scene, Dr. Van Helsing (a character who is positioned as the Count's "virtuous" counterpoint, a mirroring figure of male domination) leaves Mina behind in the protective circle, and goes up to the Castle Dracula to find and destroy the three sister-brides in their tombs. The way their death scene progresses is an echoing coda of Lucy's. In the same way Van Helsing ordered Godalming to mutilate his fiancée's body, the old doctor now takes it upon himself to violently stake and behead all three of the sister-brides in turn. When the undead Lucy is destroyed, Dr. Seward describes how "…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; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam" (Stoker 232). Comparatively, when Van Helsing destroys the sister-brides, he narrates, "… I could not have endured the horrid screeching as the stake drove home; the plunging and writhing form, and the lips of bloody foam" (Stoker 397). The two scenes are remarkably parallel. This is the only time the sister-brides imitate another character, rather than the other way around; therefore, it follows that, if Lucy's death is analyzed as a vengeful penetration and execution for her crimes—a penalty meant to 'correct' her transgressive sexual behaviors and restore her soul to purity—the same principle of retribution and restoration applies to the sister-brides. They become suddenly, gruesomely physical in this moment for the express purpose of their punishment, allowing Stoker to eliminate the threat and bring 'balance' back to their gender roles in their final moments.

And yet, despite their lack of movement and action leading up to their imminent death, the sister-brides are far from passive in this scene. Again, their role is to be, and to die; but even their state of *being* is, in and of itself, an aggression. They do not lay helpless under the threat of penetration the way Jonathan once did. In the entry detailing that last encounter, Van Helsing describes the subtle ways the sister-brides resist him at length:

> She lay in her Vampire sleep, so full of life and voluptuous beauty that I shudder as though I have come to do murder. Ah, I doubt not that in old time… many a man who set forth to do such a task as mine, found at the last his heart fail him, and then his nerve. So he delay, and delay, and delay, till the mere beauty and the fascination of the wanton Un-Dead have hypnotize him; and he remain on, and on, till sunset come, and the Vampire sleep be over… And there remain one more victim in the Vampire fold… There is some

> fascination, surely, when I am moved by the mere presence of such an one, even lying as she lay in a tomb fretted with age and heavy with the dust of centuries… I braced myself again to my horrid task, and found… one of the other sisters, the other dark one. I dared not pause to look on her as I had on her sister, lest once more I should begin to be enthral; but I go on searching until, presently, I find in a great high tomb… that other fair sister… She was so fair to look on, so radiantly beautiful, so exquisitely voluptuous, that the very instinct of man in me, which calls one of my sex to love and to protect one of hers, made my head whirl with new emotion… Had I not seen the repose in the first face, and the gladness that stole over it just ere the final dissolution came, as realization that the soul had been won, I could not have gone further with my butchery… hardly had my knife severed the head of each, before the whole body began to melt away and crumble into its native dust… (Stoker 395-397)

Again, in this scene the mere fact of the sister-brides' existence is both a defense and an offense against patriarchal domination. The female vampire's aggressive, almost alien performance of femininity becomes a kind of predatory power over men, which she then uses to subvert and destroy their masculine identities, thereby preserving her own freedom from male influence. This hypnotic ploy is one which Van Helsing, by his own admission, only barely escapes. He struggles to carry through with the task of destroying them and has to fight his own 'natural urges' the entire time. The archetypal female vampire almost manages to foil the novel's long struggle against sexual perversity, simply by the aesthetic facts of her existence.

It is therefore implied in the stated arguments that although the sister-brides' scenes in *Dracula* are extremely limited, the 'when, why, and how?' of their appearances in the story are a key component to the canon of the female vampire, and the fear of her. The concentrated

strangeness of the female vampire's materiality (or lack thereof) is her greatest weapon, and therefore the thing which makes her most terrifying to the heteronormative Victorian reader. Her hypnotic vampire sensuality is nothing more than a promise which never has to be fulfilled if she doesn't want it to, for she can simply dissolve away into dust and moonlight if she is caught or pinned, laughing scornfully all the while. There is no forcing or raping or coercing submission from a woman like this. And upon realizing this, the reaction of the dominating male—with no easy way to assert power over the female vampire—is to fear her, violently.

Conclusion: Violent Reactions to the Female Vampire

Although the female role in *Dracula* is continually complicated by the novel's queer undercurrents—and although the female vampire archetype as characterized by the sister-brides is, at its core, a representation of feminine queerness and sexual independence from male rule—Stoker ultimately brings the novel to its close with the opposite sentiment. In order to give the male reader his "happy" ending in which traditional Victorian sex-gender values are re-affirmed and the threat to his own masculinity is eliminated, Stoker must wrap the vampire narrative up in a neat, "virtuous" bow.

The "repose" in the face of the first sister-bride Van Helsing kills, and the "gladness that stole over it just ere the final dissolution came, as realization that the soul had been won" (Stoker 397), is on its surface meant to show some kind of relief or gratitude from these women at being 'set free' from the 'curse' of un-death, their souls redeemed to a Christian idea of purity now that they have been punished for their sexual transgressions, and the tables of penetration have been turned back on them in a restoration of male-dominated heterosexuality. However, I would argue that on closer inspection, this moment of dissolution seems less like a restoration of virtue, and more like a reprieve for the male Victorian reader from the fear of displacement. The perceived relief on the sister-brides' faces read as a projection of *male* relief at having preserved his dominant place in sexual power dynamics by pre-emptively destroying this monstrous sapphic threat, before the female vampire can follow through on her disruptive agenda.

It can easily be argued that the sister-brides' feminine queerness was coded as monstrous for the express purpose of vilifying and subsequently destroying it, therefore satisfying and enabling the conservative late-Victorian desire for restoration of the gender status quo. The execution of this trope is in direct opposition to the 'radical' disruptions of the New Woman and

the rise of feminism. This cycle of codifying and then destroying, titillating and then justifying, tempting and then relieving, has since become a long-standing tradition in horror. It is often used to examine individual and societal fears about the 'other,' but female characters—queer female characters especially—often catch the brunt of that intentional othering. By no means did *Dracula* invent this trope: Gothic horror writers both male and female were using it before him and have continued to do so since. But it is something the subgenre of vampire fiction continues to struggle with well into the era of modern media, with its roots and precedents set firmly in the both the aesthetic and ideological canons of Stoker's original work.

One final thing worth mentioning about the sister-brides' death scene is that it is one of only two moments where they are ever *touched*. In their first appearance, they touch Jonathan, but it is against his will and at their leisure. The first time they *are* touched is by the Count when he interrupts and, "With a fierce sweep of his arm, he hurled the woman from him" (Stoker 42). This is only possible because the Count has tenuous power over them in the hierarchy of that scene, as previously discussed. That one brief, combative blow is the only contact the reader ever sees him make with the sister-brides. Then at the very end of the story, Van Helsing also makes brief physical contact with the sister-brides—for the sole purpose of ending them. The only times when the sister-brides' ethereality is interrupted by touch are times when male violence is being enacted on their bodies, in violation of the metaphysical power structures the female vampire is built upon. This subtle connection only further justifies the combative relationship the sister-brides have with masculinity, reinforcing the idea that their power lays in transgressive feminine queerness, and untouchability by men.

And finally, once again, the sister-brides' physicality in their ending scene is defined only by that most elusive of substances: dust. They are surrounded by the "dust of centuries," and

when their ancient vampire bodies are destroyed, they dissolve into their “native dust,” becoming one with their surroundings rather than leaving behind any trace of themselves to be manipulated or controlled. Although they briefly become physical when they are killed—thereby extinguishing their unquantifiable potential, and all the male fear that comes with it—they immediately revert to the incorporeal. They leave behind no bodies to be taken or buried or burned or violated in any way. Preserving that last shred of independence even in death, the female vampire’s ‘native’ form—her final, natural state—is free and ethereal, made up of nothing but moonlight and dust.

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