Sexuality and the Vampire

Essential to understanding the appeal of the vampire is its sexual nature. While it frequently has been pointed out that traditional vampires cannot engage in "normal" sexual activity, the vampire is not necessarily asexual. As twentieth-century scholars turned their attention to the vampire, both in folklore and literature, underlying sexual themes quickly became evident. The sexual nature of vampirism formed an underlying theme in Dracula, but it was disguised in such a way that it was hidden from the literary censors of the day, the consciousness of the public, and probably from the awareness (as many critics argued), of author Bram Stoker himself. Carol Fry, for example, suggested that vampirism was in fact a form of "surrogate sexual intercourse."

Sexuality in Dracula: The sexual nature of vampirism manifested initially in Dracula during Jonathan Harker's encounter with the three vampire brides residing in Castle Dracula. Harker confronted them as extremely appealing sex objects but who embody an element of danger. Harker noted, "I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with their red lips" (chapter 3). Stoker went on to describe the three as sensual predators and their vampire's bite as a kiss. One of the women anticipated the object of their desire, "He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all." And as they approached, Harker waited in delightful anticipation.

Attention in the novel then switched to the two "good" women, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray. Lucy, as the subject of the attention of three men, reveled in their obvious desire of her before she chose Arthur Holmwood, the future Lord Godalming, as her betrothed. Mina, to the contrary, was in love with Jonathan and pined in loneliness while he was lost in the wilds of Transylvania. While preparing for her wedding, however, Lucy was distracted by the presence of Dracula. While on a seaside vacation in Whitby, Lucy began sleepwalking. One evening, Lucy was discovered by Mina in her nightclothes across the river. As Mina approached, she could see a figure bending over Lucy. Dracula left as Mina approached, but she found Lucy with her lips parted and breathing heavily. Thus began Lucy's slow transformation from the virtuous and proper, if somewhat frivolous, young lady, into what Judith Weissman termed a "sexual monster." By day she was faint and listless, but by night she took on a most unladylike voluptuousness. Shortly before her death, she asked Arthur to kiss her, and when he leaned toward her, she attempted to bite him.

Stoker's understanding, however unconscious, of the sexual nature of the vampiric attack became most clear in the blood transfusions that were given to Lucy in the attempt to save her life. Arthur, who never was able to consummate his love for Lucy, suggested that in the sharing of blood he had, in the eyes of God, married her. The older and wiser Abraham Van Helsing rejected the idea, given the sexual connotation for himself and the others who also gave her blood. But by this time, the sexual interest of
Dracula in women was firmly established and led directly to the most sexual scene in the book.

Having given Lucy her peace (and, by implication, returned her virtue) in the act of staking and decapitating her, the men called together by Van Helsing to rid the world of Dracula, were slow to awaken to his real target-Mina. When they finally became aware of this, they rushed to Mina's bedroom. There, they found Dracula sitting on her bed forcing her to drink from a cut on his chest. Dracula turned angrily to those who had interrupted him. "His eyes flamed red with devilish passion ..." Once Dracula was driven away and Mina came to her senses, she realized that she had been violated. She declared herself unclean and vowed that she would "kiss" her husband no more.

**The Sexual Vampire of Folklore:** While there is little evidence that Stoker was intimately aware of eastern European vampire lore, he could have found considerable evidence of the vampire's sexual nature—particularly in the folklore of the Gypsies and their neighbors, the southern Slavs. For example, corpses dug up as suspected vampires occasionally were reported to have an erection. Gypsies thought of the vampire as a sexual entity. The male vampire was believed to have such an intense sexual drive that his sexual need alone was sufficient to bring him back from the grave. His first act usually was a return to his widow, whom he engaged in sexual intercourse. Nightly visits could ensue and continue over a period of time, with the wife becoming exhausted and emaciated. In more than a few cases, the widow was known to become pregnant and bear a child by her vampire husband. The resulting child, called a *dhampir*, was a highly valued personage deemed to have unusual powers to diagnose vampirism and to destroy vampires attacking the community.

In some cases the vampire would return to a woman with whom he had been in love, but with whom he had never consummated that love. The woman would then be invited to return with him to the grave where they could share their love through eternity. The idea of the dead returning to claim a living lover was a popular topic in European folklore. By far the most famous literary piece illustrating the theme was Gottfried August Bürger's ballad "Lenore," known in English by Sir Walter Scott's translation.

The folklore of Russia also described the vampire as a sexual being. Among the ways in which it made itself known was to appear in a village as a handsome young stranger. Circulating among the young people in the evening, the vampire lured unsuspecting women to their doom. Russian admonitions for young people to listen to their elders and stay close to home are reminiscent of the ancient Greek story of Apollonius, who saved one of his students from the allure of the *lamiai*, whom he was about to marry.

The *langsuyar* of Malaysia was also a sexual being. A female vampire, she was often pictured as a desirable young woman who could marry and bear children. *Langsuyars* were believed to be able to live somewhat normally in a village for many years, revealed only by their inadvertent involvement in an activity that disclosed their identity.
The Modern Literary Vampire: While overt sexual activity was not present in *Dracula* sexual themes were manifest in the vampire literature of the previous century. The original vampire poem written by Goethe, "The Bride of Corinth," drew upon the story from ancient Greece concerning a young woman who had died a virgin. She returned from the dead to her parents' home to have sexual experiences with a young man staying temporarily in the guest room. The strong sexual relationship at the heart of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" was expanded in *Carmilla*, the popular vampire story by Sheridan Le Fanu.

In the story, Carmilla Karnstein moved into the castle home of Laura, her proposed victim. She did not immediately attack Laura, but proceeded to build a relationship more befitting a lover. Laura experienced the same positive and negative feelings that Harker had felt toward the three women in *Castle Dracula*. As she put it: Now the truth is, I felt unaccountably toward the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, "drawn towards her," but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging.

Carmilla went about her assault upon Laura while seducing her cooperation. She would draw Laura to her with pretty words and embraces and gently press her lips to Laura's cheek. She would take Laura's hand while at the same time locking her gaze on her eyes and breathing with such passion that it embarrassed the naive Laura. So attracted was Laura to Carmilla, that only slowly did she come to the realization that her lovely friend was a vampire.

The Sensuous Vampire on Stage and Screen: Carol Fry, author of the article "Fictional conventions and sexuality in *Dracula*," has properly pointed out that Dracula was in part a stereotypical character of popular nineteenth-century literature, the rake. The rake appeared in stories to torment and distress the pure women of proper society. The rake was to some extent the male counterpart of the vamp; however, the consequences of falling victim to a seductive male were far more serious for a woman than they were for a man victimized by a seductive woman. The man who loved and left was thought to have left behind a tainted woman. Just as a state of "moral depravity" contaminated the fallen woman, so vampirism infected the one bitten. The vampire's victim became like him and preyed on others. The fallen woman might became a vamp, professional or not, who in turn led men to engage in her immoral ways.

Once brought to the stage, Dracula's rakish nature was heightened. No longer hovering in the background as in the novel, he was invited into the living rooms of his intended victims. In this seemingly safe setting, he went about his nefarious business, though what he actually did had to be construed from the dialogue of those who would kill him. Only after the play was brought to the screen, and the public reacted to Bela Lugosi, did some understanding of the romantic appeal of this supposed monster become evident to a widespread audience. However, not until the 1950s would the vampire, in the person of Christopher Lee's
Interestingly, the obvious sexuality of the vampire was first portrayed on screen by a female vampire. In retrospect, the scene in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936) in which the female vampire seduced the young model was far more charged with sexuality than any played by Lugosi. A quarter of a century later, Roger Vadim brought an overtly sensual vampire to the screen in his version of "Carmilla," *Blood and Roses* (1960). In 1967 French director Jean Rollin produced the first of a series of semipornographic features, *Le Viol du Vampire* (released in English as *The Vampire's Rape*). The story centered around two women who believed that they were cursed by a vampire to follow his bloodsucking life. The sexuality of "Carmilla" was even more graphically pictured in *The Vampire Lovers*, *Hammer Films'* 1970 production, in which the unclad Carmilla and Laura romped freely around their bedroom.

From these and similar early soft-core productions, two quite different sets of vampire films developed. On the one hand were pornographic vampire films that featured nudity and sex. Among the earliest was *Dracula (The Dirty Old Man)* (1969), in which Count Alucard kidnapped naked virgins to fulfill his sexual and vampiric needs. Spanish director Jesus Franco produced *La Countess aux Seins Nus* (1973) (released in video in the United States as *Erotikill*), in which Countess Irena Karnstein (a character derived from Carmilla) killed her victims in an act of fellatio. (These scenes were cut from the American version.) The trend toward pornographic vampire movies culminated in 1979 with *Dracula Sucks* (also released as *Lust at First Bite*), a remake of *Dracula*, that closely followed the 1931 movie. It starred Jamie Gillis as Dracula. More recent sexually explicit vampire movies include *Dracula Exotica* (1981), also starring Gillis; *Gayracula* (1983), a homosexual film; *Sexandroide* (1987); *Out for Blood* (1990); *Princess of the Night* (1990); and *Wanda Does Transylvania* (1990). Most of these were shot in both hard-core and soft-core versions.

**The Vampire in Love:** The pornographic vampire movies were relatively few in number and poorly distributed. Of far more importance in redefining the contemporary vampire were the novels and films that transformed the evil monster of previous generations into a romantic lover. The new vampire hero owed much to Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *St. Germain*. In a series of novels beginning with *Hotel Transylvania* (1978), St. Germain emerged not as a monster, but as a man of moral worth, extraordinary intellect, and captivating sensuality. He even occasionally fell in love. He was unable to have ordinary sexual relations because he could not have an erection. However, his bite conveyed an intense experience of sexual bliss that women found to be a more than adequate alternative.

At the time Yarbro was finishing *Hotel Transylvania*, a new stage production of *Dracula The Vampire Play in Three Acts* had become a hit on Broadway. The play was the first dramatic production of *Dracula* to reintroduce the scene in which Dracula forced Mina to drink from his blood. The scene, a rapelike experience in the novel, had been transformed into one of seduction. In 1979 the larger populace was
introduced to this more sensual Dracula when Frank Langella recreated his stage role for the motion picture screen. He presented Dracula as not only a suave foreign nobleman, but as a debonair, attractive male who drew his victims to him by the sheer power of his sexual presence. The scenes in which Lucy, over the objections of her elders, rushed to Carfax to join her lover and drink his blood completed a transformation of Dracula from mere monster into a hero who lived up to the movie's billing: "Throughout history he has filled the hearts of men with terror, and the hearts of women with desire."

Langella's Dracula directly informed the more recent production of Bram Stoker's Dracula under the writing and direction of Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola not only brought the vampire into proper society but turned him into a handsome young man who, with his money and foreign elegance, was able to seduce the betrothed Mina from her wimpish fiancé. He returned the final blood drinking scene to her bedroom, revealed Dracula at his most human, and made their lovemaking the sensual climax of the movie's love story subplot, which Coppola had added to explain Dracula's otherwise irrational acts against the British family he had assaulted.

The transformation of the vampire into a hero lover was a primary element in the overall permeation of the vampire myth into the culture of late-twentieth-century America (which included the emergence of the vampire in humor and the vampire as moral example). As such, the contemporary vampire has had to deal with a variety of sexual patterns. Television detective Nick Knight developed an ongoing relationship with a researcher who was trying to cure him. Mara McCuniff, the centuries-old vampire of Traci Briery's The Vampire Memoirs, was overtaken by her sexual urges for three days each month at the time of the full moon. In Domination, Michael Cecilone placed his vampires in the world of sadomasochism. Lori Herter's romance novels elevated the vampire as the object of female fantasies.

The response to the conscious development of the vampire as a sexual being has almost guaranteed future exploration in fictional works. Prisoners of the Night, a periodical of vampire fiction that appears annually, has focused on sexuality in several issues. Editor Mary Ann B. McKinnon has added an impetus to exploring the theme in her fanzine, Good Guys Wear Fangs which covers good-guy vampires, most of them romantic heroes. Such sexualizing of the vampire, while departing from the common image of the vampire as mere monster, has not been foreign to the creature itself. From the beginning, a seductive sexuality has existed as an element of the literary, vampire comingling with that of the monstrous, and goes far to explain the vampire's appeal relative to its monstrous cousins.

Shuter, Michael. "Sex Among the Coffins, or, Lust at First Bite with William Margold." Draculina 17 (December 1993): 32-34.

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