

The role of female vampires in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and *The Vampire* by Sir Philip Burne-Jones

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This article is an examination of Bram Stoker's masterpiece, Dracula, and Sir Philip Burne-Jones's controversial work, The Vampire (Fig.1). It is perhaps no coincidence that both were unveiled in the same year (1897). Apart from the eponymous villain, only female vampires dwell in Stoker's Gothic realm. With a tinge of imagination, Burne-Jones's work could easily function as an artist's impression of these creatures and their power over men. This article will argue that these two works present the female vampire as a representation of fears and introspection over the implications of female ascension in the nineteenth century.

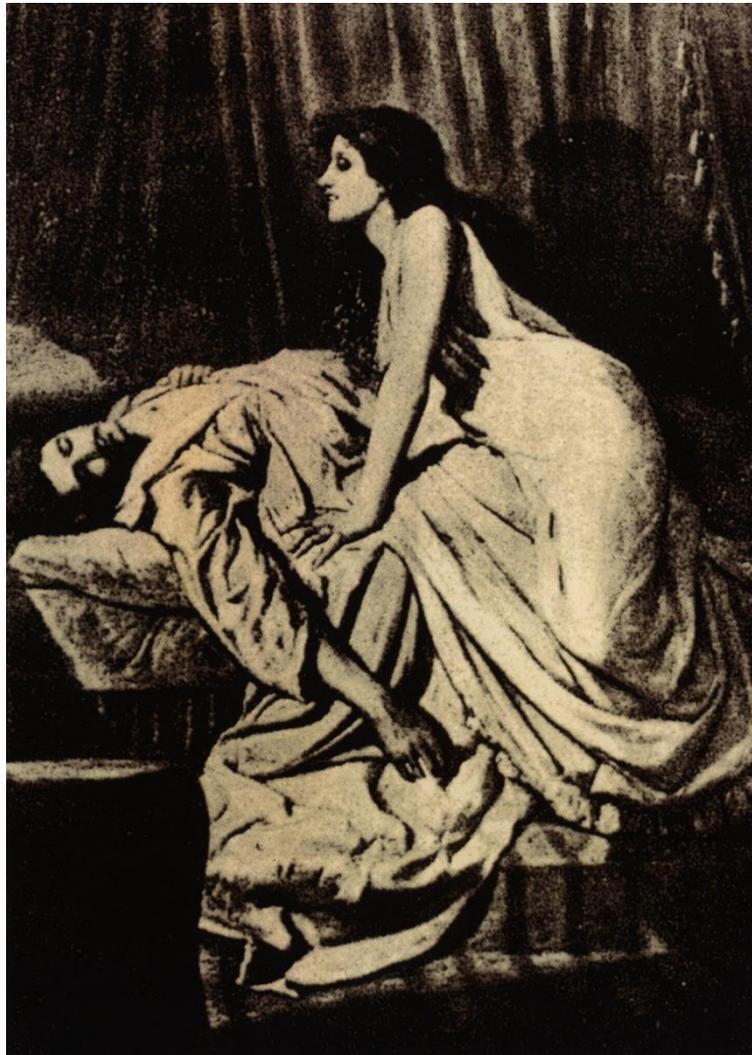


Figure 1: After Sir Philip Burne-Jones, *The Vampire* (1897) (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

Even more than a century later, the vampire is one of the most prolific, substantial and discussed entities from European folklore. The dominance of Count Dracula as the quintessential vampire makes it all too easy to conceptualise vampirism as profoundly masculine. Yet, this superficial reading gives way to another side of the vampire mythos. Twenty-six years before the publication of *Dracula*, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla*, arguably Dracula's female counterpart among the vampiric echelons. Even in Stoker's eponymous novel, female vampires play a significant role. It was in *Carmilla* that the uncovering of a monster served as an examination of human nature – a trope of not only vampiric lore but the Gothic tradition.¹ Le Fanu purposefully created a sympathetic vampire by making the reader only aware of the titular character's vampiric identity in the latter part of the novel. This enabled the reader to focus on her very human cravings for love and companionship.² Female vampires, for all their nefarious traits, command the reader's fascination by living a life that many have, possibly, pondered but would resolutely refuse to act upon. The literary scholar, James Twitchell, perceptively describes the vampire mythos as one 'loaded with sexual excitement: yet there is no mention of sexuality. It is sex without genitalia, sex without confusion, sex without responsibility, sex without guilt, sex without love – better yet, sex without mention.'³ In the case of the female vampires, they are certainly liberated from the psychological burdens of sex that have perennially affected human nature. It would be difficult to envision a more acute representation of this than Philip Burne-Jones's *The Vampire*.

This painting is a conflation of Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton*.⁴ If a female vampire is to be interpreted as a metaphor for a corrupted woman then *The Nightmare* (Fig.2) may serve as an insight into that process. The incubus squats on the chest of the woman to assert itself. Dracula, a kindred incubus, performs a similar act in the cases of Lucy Westenra and, to a lesser degree, Mina Harker. In all cases, it is imposed on them by entities whose supernatural strength negates verbal communication as a component of this immoral and forceful seduction. When comparing it to *The Death of Chatterton* (Fig.3), the reclination of the arm is a curious commonality. The difference in the area of exposed neck points to the extent of vulnerability that each object of the painting possessed. Given that Chatterton committed suicide, the more relaxed reclination shows a serene acceptance of his demise, whereas the imp's female victim is only in deep sleep prior to a transition to her next incarnation. The victim in Burne-Jones's work may be a fallen artist like his forbear in Wallis's painting, but the supernatural has now turned its target to the masculine. In this sense, the female vampire, as a type of succubus, represents a Gothic development of the traditional ideas of the male incubus seducing femininity. It is also

¹ William Veeder, 'Carmilla: The Arts of Repression', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Summer 1980), pp. 197-223, (p. 197).

² Mathew Beresford, *From Demons To Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), p. 125.

³ Quoted in Christopher Frayling, *Vampires: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 387.

⁴ Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, 'Phallus and Void in Kipling's "The Vampire" and Its Progeny', *Frame*, 24 (2011), pp. 39-55, (p. 40).

revealing how the dark horse spectates the incubus's doings. Perhaps the horse represents the collective dark energy of society that enables such horrors. True, there is no etymological link between the nightmare and mare, but the sexual connotations of riding in folklore, not to mention a horse's sensitivity to the night, may invoke a black mirror of this ordeal.⁵



Figure 2: Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1781), oil on canvas, 101.6 × 127 cm
(Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, 55.5.A.)

⁵ Lawrence Feingold, 'Fuseli, Another Nightmare: "The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches"', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 17 (1982), pp. 49-61, (p. 55).



Figure 3: Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), oil on canvas, 62.2 × 93.3 cm (Tate, London; image © Tate, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wallis-chatterton-n01685>)

Returning to *The Vampire*, any questions about the significance of the female vampire will be served by a discussion of its contemporary context. The painting was grudgingly exhibited by Burne-Jones's eminent cousin, Rudyard Kipling, at the price of writing an acerbic poem of the same appellation; both works focus their fire on Burne-Jones's infatuation with the actress Mrs. Pat Campbell.⁶ Kipling's poem *The Vampire* can be interpreted as an indictment of his cousin's folly. The title of this painting and the publication of Stoker's novel should not be regarded as some cosmic coincidence. It may come as a surprise that Kipling and Stoker were good friends; Burne-Jones's connection to the latter was as a set designer and aficionado of the Lyceum, which Stoker managed on behalf of his dear friend, Henry Irving.⁷ Tellingly, Burne-Jones wrote to Stoker in 1897: 'As soon as I have a copy [of *Dracula*], I shall beg your acceptance of a photograph of my Vampire – a woman this time, so as to make the balance fair'.⁸

It is easy to forget that there is no critical consensus on Stoker's attitudes to women. Some scholars have condemned him as a diehard misogynist, while his supporters have regarded him as a subtle ally of the New Woman.⁹ Then again, are the female vampires too inconsequential as characters in *Dracula* to be

⁶ Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), p. 280.

⁷ Jimmie E. Cain, 'Bram Stoker, Geopolitics and War', in Matthew Gibson and Sabine Lenore Müller (eds.), *Bram Stoker and the Late Victorian World* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2018), pp. 149-176, (pp. 149-150).

⁸ Quoted in Barbara Belford, *Bram Stoker: A biography of the author of Dracula* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997), p. 275.

⁹ Carol A. Senf, *Bram Stoker* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 66.

deemed as an indication of Stoker's views on women? Arguably, the female vampire's inhuman power, preternatural strength and undead nature subvert the conventional assumptions one has of the two genders. These female vampires are not vulnerable against most men for their physical power far exceeds theirs. Still, is there an element of truth to Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson's assessment that 'the seminal in art and the seminal in sex are identical'.¹⁰ The first verse of Kipling's poem serves its purpose as a literary complement to Burne-Jones's work and may even advance an answer:

A fool there was and he made his prayer
(Even as you and I!)
To a rag and bone and a hank of hair
(We called her the woman who did not care)
But the fool he called her his fair lady –
(Even as you and I!)¹¹

The female vampire of the painting is bereft of empathy but, in his slumberous surrender, Kipling understands why 'he called her his fair lady' despite the incredulity of observers. She also prevails as men do not have a monopoly on lust. Sex is seminal insofar as it is the process by which each generation is created. What makes the female vampire so dangerous to society, particularly nineteenth-century Britain, is the utter repudiation of the procreative elements of sex. Stoker may not have taken this interpretation when crafting his vampires, and it difficult to know what Stoker thought of Burne-Jones's work. However, his noted views on stagecraft provide a guide to his aesthetic tastes:

The most important part of dress is colour. There is a natural symbolism in colour so perfect as any of the artificial symbols of the old masters [...] and this symbolism can be carried to great perfection in theatrical dress. A photograph uncoloured is the truest means of reproducing expression, since it is a mere combination of light and shade, and possesses no power of prejudicing the mind of the beholder, for either good or evil, by the colours affecting his sight, but on the stage everything must be coloured, and highly coloured too, or else it will be absolutely without expression, since mere natural colour is lost in the great blaze of light.¹²

In the original painting, the female vampire wore a white dress. If she had worn something more colourful then it might have shifted interpretations, but uncoloured visuals tend to compel the human mind to scrutinise further. That said, a world without colours would be an invisible one, and even black and white exist as colours in their own right. A reader creates their own internal play when converting words to images, and more strongly where the lights of paints and stages do not refract through a prism. This brings

¹⁰ Anne Morey & Claudia Nelson, 'Phallus and Void in Kipling's "The Vampire" and Its Progeny', *Frame*, 24 (2011), pp. 39-55, (p. 41).

¹¹ Rudyard Kipling, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Peter Keating (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 80.

¹² Quoted in Matthew Gibson, 'The Impress of the visual and scenic arts on the fiction of Bram Stoker', in Matthew Gibson and Sabine Lenore Müller (eds.), *Bram Stoker and the Late Victorian World* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2018), pp. 51-76, (p. 53).

us to the question of how a reader may interpret the notorious encounter between Jonathan Harker and the three female vampires in Dracula's castle.

In Stoker's Gothic novel, this is the only explicit presentation of lesbian sexual practices. One theory is that it required the sexual interaction of both genders in Dracula to arouse Victorian fears of interbreeding and racial attenuation by colonial encounters.¹³ Harker, the young and callow English visitor of the East, wears his physical impotence openly against the sexual assault by Dracula's vampiric harem, misunderstood by him to be a seduction, when it is a 'languorous ecstasy'.¹⁴ It bypasses the terms of seduction. His thoughts on them, particularly the fair vampire, whose appearance contrasts to the dark Dracula-esque features of the other two, are particularly telling:

I seemed somehow to know her face, and to know it in connection with some dreamy fear, but I could not recollect at the moment how or where. 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 that desire they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down; lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain; but it is the truth.¹⁵

These three are at ease with promiscuity and are clearly an embodiment of his suppressed but not fallacious sexuality that must be restrained for the sake of society. The novel is at one with the painting and its previously discussed derivatives in acknowledging how sensitive the skin on the neck is. The vampiric kiss can be seen as insatiable hunger for affection and sexual attention that many Victorian writers flirted with and yearned for. The undead credentials of vampires implicitly remind that their aim is to fulfil after death what was impossible in a Victorian idea of a mortal and moral life.¹⁶ As Xavier Aldana Reyes observes, 'the vampire is inherently connected to sin, but stands as the only real mediator of repressed sexual desire'.¹⁷ Likewise, Sarah Sceats expresses how 'female sexuality here combines a highly charged and fearful eroticism with the thrill of the illicit'.¹⁸ When these assessments are combined, it becomes easier to think of the female vampire as a call to be unburdened by the psychological consequences that nature has judiciously tied around the carnal and even the nobler love that accompanies it. That the fair vampiric lady torments Dracula for having never loved is a forceful reminder that the female vampire functions as a licentious love to compensate for the abatement of love that is inevitable in many relationships.

¹³ Heike Bauer, 'Dracula and Sexology', in Roger Luckhurst (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 76-84, (p. 81).

¹⁴ William Hughes, *Beyond Dracula: Bram Stoker's Fiction and its Cultural Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 113.

¹⁵ Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 38.

¹⁶ Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Victorian Literary Kiss', *Browning Institute Studies*, vol. 13 (1985), pp. 165-180, (pp. 179-180).

¹⁷ Xavier Aldana Reyes, 'Dracula Queered', in Roger Luckhurst (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 125-135, (p. 128).

¹⁸ Sarah Sceats, 'Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring, 2001), pp. 107-121, (p. 114).

If we are to entertain Maurice Richardson's idea that, given Stoker's formidable academic and sporting prowess at Trinity College, Dublin, '*Dracula* is plainly an athlete's phantasy', then what does that make the female vampire?¹⁹ Arguably, an imagined respite for a life that ignores the ephemeral virtues of youth that would compel a former athlete, or any man with past glories, to retreat to this private history. The male subject of Burne-Jones's painting has clearly been rendered unconscious and could well be a dreaming of a life he wishes for but cannot possibly want. The female vampire enables man's fear of an attenuated libido to be petrified, for the undead do not age. Lucy Westenra is a more curious case of this because the reader learns far more about her than the enigmatic group of three that seduced the fiancée of her dearest friend.

Judith Johnson perceptively observes that female readers may see in the tragedy of Lucy Westenra a cautionary tale of the destructive revolt that a woman may wage in retaliation for a man's domineering ways.²⁰ Curiously, the vampiric metamorphosis of Lucy Westenra has been represented as a Freudian allegory. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* (1893) collated a series of case studies concerning women whose sexual suppression and potential 'nymphomania' (a term coined in the late nineteenth century) were manifested in physical symptoms such as delirium and somnambulism.²¹ Arguably, the female vampire serves as a combined manifestation of these vices that stem from a prejudiced conception of womanhood. Victorian readers would be alarmed by Lucy Westenra's shift from naïve woman-child to a beastly inversion of a good mother.²² *Dracula* requires vampires to be bigendered like humanity, because the phenomenon of sexuality is predicated on the existence of these two genders. Yet the dominance of men in Victorian social hierarchy compels them to resent what may expose their hypocrisies. It is curious that the last decade of the nineteenth century coincided with a nascent discussion of the emerging 'New Woman' who sought independence from this patriarchy and opposed the manacles women bore in most marriages.²³ This knowledge would not have been lost on Christopher Craft when he posed an interesting theory of the slaughter of the nascent vampire, Lucy Westenra:

One might question a mercy this destructive, this fatal [...] This enthusiastic correction of Lucy's monstrosity provides the Crew of Light with a double reassurance: it effectively exorcises the threat of a mobile and hungering feminine sexuality and it counters the homoeroticism latent in the

¹⁹ Maurice Richardson, 'The Psychoanalysis of Count Dracula', in Christopher Frayling, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), pp. 418-422, (p. 421).

²⁰ Judith E. Johnson, 'Women and Vampires: Nightmare or Utopia?' *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter, 1993), pp. 72-80, (pp. 76-77).

²¹ Carol Senf, 'Dracula and Women', in Roger Luckhurst (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 114-122, (p. 119).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²³ David Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800-1906* (London: Penguin, 2018), pp. 510-511.

vampire threat by reinscribing (upon Lucy's chest) the line dividing the male who penetrates and the woman who receives. By disciplining Lucy and restoring each gender to its "proper" function, Van Helsing's pacification program compensates for the threat of gender indefiniteness implicit in the vampiric kiss.²⁴

The existence of the female vampire does indeed beget 'gender indefiniteness', as Craft aptly describes it, and is as strong a reminder as any that Victorian civility is a safety valve for its far more unpleasant side. Keridiana Chez has commented that the encounter between Dracula and Mina has often been neglected by literary scholars, as an exposé of the ruthlessness of Victorian society in its determination to quell any potential female rebellion by the most savage means out of a resentment that this empowerment is a sign of ignoble vengeance.²⁵ On the other hand, when Dracula tells Mina that she 'shall be avenged in turn; for none of them shall minister to your needs',²⁶ it may be interpreted as a twisted liberation of a woman in order to become something new. After all, he wishes to transform her into a female vampire that will serve him, but will also be infinitely stronger than her male and human guardians.

In conclusion, the general gap in physical strength between men and woman is intrinsically what allowed men to prevail over women in a social hierarchy. Notwithstanding that the concept of vampires, of either gender, inverted the Victorian social order. Lucy memorably asked Mina, 'Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?'²⁷ Superficially, this is an enticing musing, but such social arrangements are ultimately not viable for the majority of humanity. After all, customs exist to cater and restrain the foibles of the human condition that are more universal than is often given credit for. This is, perhaps, what makes the female vampire enviable: she is not bounded by the psychological burdens of heartbreak. Conventional morality is in abeyance and the female represents more than a New Woman – a novel woman. This suggested idea of women is what connects Stoker and Burne-Jones's works. That said, John Sutherland humorously points out that 'Dracula is one of those novels in which one is always pressing hard on the imagination's brake pedal'.²⁸ Such a warning is even more applicable to a painting like *The Vampire* where it is all too easy to exceed any sensible but fluid parameters of interpretation. However, in the contemporary period, it is difficult to deny the prescience of intimating that a powerful, and probably irreversible, reordering of gender relations was beckoning.

²⁴ Christopher Craft, "'Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Representations*, 8 (Autumn, 1984) pp. 107-133, (pp. 122-123).

²⁵ Keridiana Chez, "'You Can't Trust Wolves No More Nor Women': Canines, Women, and Deceptive Docility in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'", *Victorian Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 77-92, (p. 87).

²⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 268.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁸ Quoted in John Sutherland, *Who is Dracula's father? and other puzzles in Bram Stoker's Gothic masterpiece* (London: Icon Books, 2017) p. 49.

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