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# Spring 2019 First Prize Essay

## “THE EVILS OF THIS TOWN:” *DRACULA*, VAMPIRISM, AND ADDICTION

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Bram Stoker’s revolutionary 1897 novel “*Dracula*” stands as a cornerstone of gothic literature, spawning a movement that has, in the many forms it has taken, infiltrated society so deeply that vampires are a standard part of our cultural lexicon. There are myriad conclusions that scholars have put forth on the subtext of the novel. In my personal reading of the text, I’d argue that “*Dracula*,” and its description of vampirism, is a perfect analogue for addiction, and the titular monster is by extension emblematic of illicit substances. When we look at *Dracula* and the monsters of horror as symbols of human vulnerability and moral dangers, we must look to the monsters plaguing our society. Addiction, and its hold over people, is a nightmarish force of its own. “Heroin,” by the Velvet Underground off their 1967 debut album, describes addiction in ways that parallel those featured in “*Dracula*,” and provides an addict’s insight to the argument in how it describes the hopelessness and monstrosity of addiction, detailing with evocative earnestness the mental state of a drug addict. Direct comparison to Stoker’s vampires can be seen in the following lyrics: “Because a mainline to my brain/Leads to a center in my head/And then I’m better off than dead” (Reed 33-35). Addiction is directly compared to un-death. An addict is alive in the sense that they are active and engaging in the world like a vampire does, feeling mentally stronger to reflect the vampire’s superhuman physical strength. However, they are also dead in the behavior patterns they shun that make them less human, just as a vampire no longer needs to eat or drink. They are no longer alive, in a manner of speaking, but they are better than dead as they pursue what their curse demands of them. I interpret “*Dracula*” through this lens, in particular focusing on Count Dracula’s drug-like qualities and the instances of explicit drug use by the Crew of Light, but predominantly I focus on the ways vampirism affects Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker: both experience withdrawal, mental anguish, and personal transformation. Finally, I examine the role the Crew of Light plays in Lucy’s failed recovery, and Mina’s successful recovery.

Drugs were a socially acceptable staple of Victorian society, ranging from opium to cannabis to morphine to heroin, which is a far cry from popular perceptions of the prudish Victorian gentleman or lady stereotype (Crane). In Stoker’s novel, drugs are used casually by the Crew of Light. Dr Seward, ruminating on his rejection from Lucy, states, “Choral, the modern Morpheus... I must be careful not to let it grow into a habit” (Stoker 124-125). While Seward chooses not to use the choral hydrate in this scene, he is implying that he has used it before. He treats his use of the drug flippantly; the only thing stopping him is his repulsion at mixing the drug with his lovelorn thoughts. Later in the novel, Mina also has trouble sleeping, and her response is to go to Seward: “I asked Dr. Seward to give me a little opiate of some kind... he very kindly made me up a sleeping draught, which he gave to me, telling me that it would do me no harm, as it was very mild” (Stoker 307). This shows that Seward is not isolated in reaching out to drugs for relief. These instances reflect Victorian England’s lax attitude towards drugs. Finally, as drugs were prevalent in Victorian society, so was addiction. Addiction has been addressed as a health issue since the middle of the 19th century (Crane). Thus, there is precedent in the social climate of the time to support the claim that vampirism could be analogous to addiction. Going from there, we can use our modern

understanding of drugs and their dangers to create a much richer interpretation of the novel.

Dracula's physical features reflect methods of drug use and his ability to put victims into a trance clearly parallels the effect of drugs on an addict. His fangs are sharp and pointed, not unlike hypodermic needles. He needs to be invited into one's house to have any power to attack them; just as an addict must consciously choose to begin using a drug. He has an intense presence, as described in the logs of the *Demeter*: "On 14 July was somewhat anxious about crew... Mate could not make out what was wrong; they only told him there was something, and crossed themselves" (Stoker 102). Despite not being physically noticed yet, Dracula has a pervasive aura that takes over the rational senses of the *Demeter's* crew. Illegal drugs are so taboo in 21st century society, and their influence on the human brain so intense, that we can compare the two through the way they evoke similar feelings of awe. We see Dracula the seducer throughout the novel, and what he promises his victims certainly seems appealing, but those promises are just as incorporeal as his reflection. Dracula is the overbearing force; not an equal. His three brides cry out: "You yourself never loved; you never love!" (Stoker 50). Dracula's devotion to his victims is a manifestation of manipulation and power. As his three vampire women say, he never loves; he only takes, just as drugs whittle away at the addict's mind and body. To conclude the comparison, Dracula's coming to England is not unlike the way drugs have infiltrated lower income communities across America; starting from one point and festering through the community, passing the curse onto victim upon victim.

One of Dracula's first and most noteworthy victims is Lucy, and with her we see how an addict begins their drug use. In her earliest correspondence with Mina, we can tell that she already questions the social constructs of her era. She writes, "Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as she wants, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it" (Stoker 73). The very idea of a woman sharing her mind and body with more than one man in Victorian England was blasphemous. While this quote doesn't speak to addiction, it does speak to Lucy's wild nature, suppressed by social constructs. She is depicted as susceptible to moral corruption, making her easy prey for Dracula. His empty promises are enough to spark a wild passion in her brain for liberation. The fact she points out the apostasy of her polygamous belief is also indicative of the addict's intentional ignorance. A prospective addict isn't an idiot; they know the well-documented dangers of drug use. However, in their quest for transcendence, they flirt with those dangers, just as Lucy acknowledges her desires and their conflict with society.

The vampirism that takes hold of Lucy and alters her personality is not different from how the addict changes themselves as drug use escalates. Her appearance changes when she becomes a vampire: "showed in startling prominence a dark-haired woman, dressed in the ceremonies of the grave..., as we recognised the features of Lucy Westenra. Lucy Westenra, but yet how changed. The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness" (Stoker 251). The blonde and chaste beauty of pre-vampirism Lucy has twisted into something hard and cruel. The shadowy, dark-haired seductress she becomes physically represents the change in her personality. She's opened up to all sorts of depravity in the pursuit of her poison, and thus the image of a fair-haired wide-eyed innocent young lady is no longer fitting. By looking at the report of the Bloofer Lady, we see just how her personality has changed. Lucy leads off children playing at night, leaving them, "slightly torn or wounded in the throat" (Stoker 212). She perverts the idea of women as compassionate mothers and caretakers, just as the addict, as their illness escalates, indulges in socially unacceptable behaviors, such as lying, explosive aggression, and criminal activity. Both Lucy and an addict would view these actions as abhorrent before their transformations, but their priorities have shifted so much that they no longer even consider morality. "Thank God that I'm as good as dead" (Reed 46); as the song states, Lucy and the addict both believe they are already forsaken, and thus their actions have no bearings on anything that isn't a means to satiating their hunger. To expand upon this point, Lucy embraces her id and chases after her desires wildly. Her earlier musings on romance manifest with sexual intensity. When the Crew of Light returns to Lucy's resting place to kill her permanently,

she attempts to seduce Arthur. "Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" (Stoker 251). Lucy's quote is full of licentious euphemisms- I find it doubtful that it's her arms that are hungry. There is a definite link between drug use and sex, as being under the influence leads to impulsive behavior. Vampire-Lucy has no qualms about shunning social norms and embracing her desire for sex, nor does she shy away from using sex to get what she wants. Lucy, to use Stoker's favorite word when he wants to demonize a female character, is voluptuous; a trait of her personality that she previously held at bay.

Before Lucy fully transforms into a vampire, we can draw connections between how the Crew of Light treats her- from their perspective, mysterious illness- to modern day addiction treatments. Methadone is a synthetic opioid that mimics the effects of heroin on the brain, without intoxication (Tackett). It is often used in treating opiate withdrawal. Lucy's vampirism essentially makes her addicted to blood. Van Helsing, in his attempt to cure her anemia, turns to a parallel of methadone treatment: blood transfusions; these transfusions sate the sickness but are not quite what her brain and body convinces her she needs. Stoker writes, "As the transfusion went on something like life seemed to come back to poor Lucy's cheeks" (Stoker 148). Methadone, like the transfusions, is not a panacea; it must be paired with other forms of treatment. The Crew of Light fails Lucy in narrowly focusing on only one method, displaying an arrogance that they know best. After all, are they treating Lucy for her benefit, or for theirs? It is from a place of love, but Lucy never has any say in her treatment, nor does she get the opportunity to explain what is happening to her. In a way, the Crew of Light, through their ignorance, enables Lucy's transformation into an un-dead being. Then even inject her with a narcotic (Stoker 148), and while it is so she is asleep for the transfusion, it is representative of selfish dehumanization. Lucy is seen as a delicate flower that must be protected, just as an addict can be seen as weak-willed and feeble-minded. In viewing treatment from this angle, we fail the addict, just as the Crew of Light fails Lucy. Lucy's story ends in tragedy, which is unfortunately the case for many addicts. When we turn our attention to Mina and her experiences with Dracula, we see a new perspective on the matter, as Mina goes through similar experiences.

Dracula's feeding on Mina is a perfect isolated scene that covers a range of feelings and experiences of addiction. We can draw another connection to "Heroin" here. "Cause I feel like a man/When I put a spike into my veins" (Reed 3-4). Lou Reed, singer-songwriter of the Velvet Underground, was a heroin addict at the time he penned this song; through his perspective, we see the enlightenment that an addict believes their demon of choice will bring them. It also plays on the gender dynamic that is so heavily engraved into the novel, and Mina's character in particular. Dracula details an outcome that would grant Mina great power and equal opportunity. He seduces her with visions of what is to come should she indulge in him. Dracula, as previously mentioned, is making empty promises just as any drug does, but that allure is enough to draw Mina in. The ensuing rape scene hammers home the one road that addiction leads to: "With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker's hands... his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down to his bosom" (Stoker 333). Addiction's grip is just as unforgiving as Dracula's. At this point, Mina knows she is in over her head, but can no longer turn back.

There is a road to recovery in Mina's character arc, but it is marked by turbulence and pain. When Van Helsing uses the Sacred Wafer to purify Mina, a very clear-cut similarity to rehab and withdrawal is displayed. "As he had placed the Wafer on Mina's forehead, it had seared it- had burned into the flesh as though it had been a piece of white-hot metal" (Stoker 349). Withdrawal is a painful process; poison has rewritten brain chemistry to such a high degree that the body cannot healthily function without it. Obviously, this presents great physical and emotional tolls through the treatment process, or, in this example, the Wafer. Later down the page, we see the emotional impact of withdrawal as Mina cries out, "Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh!" (Stoker 349). Addiction and mental illness go hand in hand, and in this heart-wrenching display of anguish, we get a tangible feeling for how hopeless

the addict feels. Kicking addiction is an uphill battle, and the things it has made them do, as well as the person it has made them become, instills a sense of futility. As Mina references God, she speaks to the concept that as the addict is receiving treatment, they are undeserving of salvation. It's terrifying to the addict, but also indicative of a fate they believe to have brought upon themselves. In the end, Mina does not suffer the same fate we see with Lucy. She recovers and carries on. Touchingly, it is through the help of her devoted friends who change their ways that she overcomes the sickness. On the road to Dracula's castle, Van Helsing surrounds her with a circle of holy Wafers, protecting her from both herself and the forces outside of her. Or, her desire for drugs and the drugs themselves, respectively. Then, Dracula's three brides arrive: the three women are examples of so-called-friends who enable an addict, and just like Dracula they do their best to seduce her. As they attempt to do so, Van Helsing comes to Mina's aid. "I seized some of the firewood which was by me, and holding out some of the Wafer, advanced on them towards the fire" (Stoker 431). The Crew of Light never give up on Mina. They failed Lucy and will not make the same mistake again. So, when Dracula is slain, it is a group effort that removes the curse from Mina, but as we can see, it demands a cost. Quincy dies of his wounds with his last words directly addressing Mina: "The snow is no more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!" (Stoker 443). Of course, it is highly unlikely that any member of an addict's support system would die during of the treatment process, but Quincey's passing symbolizes the hardships of potential relapses, withdrawal induced physical and mental illness, and constant hopes that a cure is in sight that the support system suffers from just as the addict does. However, the last words on his lips were rejoices that it was not all in vain. Mina's treatment is complete, signified by the fact that her forehead is clean of the Wafer's scar.

The nature of Mina's child at the ending of the story is circumspect after her interactions with Dracula. The rape analogue is clear, and because he fed on her multiple times, a sexual aspect is possible. In his death scene he is described unusually before the final blows are struck. "As I looked, the eyes saw the sinking sun, and the look of hate in them turned to triumph" (Stoker 442). A triumphant look on the face of a megalomaniac upon his own demise is blatantly suspicious. I propose that while the baby does contain Dracula's blood, he is not the product of sexual assault. As Dracula is in effect Mina's drug, that fact that her child carries the same mark not only is a commentary on how addiction is oftentimes genetic, but also on the fact that Mina will never truly be free. Her child is a constant reminder of the bleakest period of her life. This sounds remarkably dark, but that doesn't mean that Mina will become a hateful mother. Quite the opposite, actually: "His mother holds, I know, the secret belief that some of {Quincey's} spirit has passed onto him" (Stoker 443). Following both ideas that her child has Dracula's blood and that Dracula is analogous to addictive drugs, Mina has chosen not to ignore nor hate the person she once was. Rather, she has embraced it and loves in spite of her ordeal.

"Dracula" is a harrowing novel no matter how it is interpreted. When we look at it through the mindset of addiction, we unveil another layer that holds much more emotional impact. Our modern society fears foreign "invaders," promiscuity, and female empowerment; rational minds reject the foolish idea that they present any real danger to us. That being said, addiction is still an epidemic we have not come to terms with. Despite the plethora of information we have on drug abuse, it is still present today with the serious examples this paper draws inspiration from, and the minute ones that go unquestioned; our culture celebrates binge drinking and excessive caffeine intake. It is important to clarify that the fault of addiction does not rest on the shoulders of an addict. While they did choose to use drugs, there are a countless factors that contribute: Sexual or domestic abuse, mental illness, economic disadvantage, etc. The addict is certainly not proud of what their life has come to, which we see described in "Heroin": "I wish I was born a thousand years ago... away from the big city/where a man cannot be free" (Reed 20 & 26). Where a simple fix available, the addict would surely take it, but trauma and an altered brain chemistry perpetuates the illness and puts up barriers to their hopes of changing. We see two sides of society

in Lucy and Mina's character arcs: One which negligently fails the addict resulting in their death, and one in which the addict is embraced and shown compassion to help them overcome their illness. It should be very clear which path is the correct one our society should take in combating addiction. It is human empathy that overcomes a struggle, especially addiction, and defeats society's vampires just as surely as a stake through the heart.

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