

Abstract

Dracula was Bram Stoker's intellectual playground in which he could safely explore the liminality between morality, gender, and sexuality following the harrowing trial of his close friend and rival, Oscar Wilde. The characters within the novel, specifically Lucy, Mina, and Harker spend the Gothic novel's prolonged middle experimenting with the boundaries and fusion of gender, morality, and sexuality. His characters' experimentation reflects Stoker's inner conflict between loyalty to Wilde and the fear of tarnishing his own reputation. These observations are deepened by the historical-biographical context of Stoker's own inner conflict surrounding sexuality and loyalty. Freudian, queer, and gender criticism perspectives provide frameworks with which to understand characters in the novel. For Lucy, this involves the acknowledgement of her sexual appetite and her desire for agency. For Mina, it involves the fusion of characteristics traditionally designated as male or female. Harker, too, experiments with prescribed roles in relation to gender and sex, while also toeing a fine line between faithfulness and infidelity. Ultimately, writing *Dracula* enabled Stoker to unpack his complicated emotions in relation to the roles he was meant to be inhabiting through the characters who do what Stoker spent his life attempting to replicate: living in-between.

Liminality in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Unlike mainstream horror, *Dracula* is not a story in which the good are preyed upon by the evil. Rather, it explores the liminal spaces the characters inhabit and the growing tension in such spaces. The tension in *Dracula* is not created by the vampire himself, but the inner conflicts within individual characters. They alternate between defying societal norms and back tracking into the safety of role assumption. What is important in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is not the

beginning or the ending, but rather the characteristically Gothic prolonged middle in which characters experiment with borders and duality. Written in the wake of the infamous trial of his close friend and rival, Oscar Wilde, *Dracula* was an intellectual playground in which Stoker could safely explore the liminality between morality, gender, and sexuality.

There is little doubt that Wilde was on Stoker's mind as he wrote *Dracula*. Familiarity with 1890's perceptions of homosexuality is useful in understanding liminal spaces in relation to homoeroticism in *Dracula*. In Schaffer's paper, "A Wilde Desire Took Me: The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*," she explains, "Turn-of-the-century 'inversion' theory considered homosexuals neither male nor female... the 'intermediate sex,' inhabiting a no-man's land like the Undead who were neither dead nor alive" (Schaffer 399). Homosexual men were perceived as having the body of a man and the mind of a woman. Following this logic, Wilde and Stoker both inhabit such liminal spaces between male and female, similar to the vampire. Stoker kept his homosexuality a secret to the best of his ability, though the very nature of acting on one's sexuality almost inevitably destroys the secret in some capacity. As soon as any homoerotic desires are acted on outside the realm of masturbation, the secret is at least partially revealed. Stoker was also caught between his own closeted identity and his duty to stand up for Wilde, whom he had been close with since college. As Schaffer notes, "Stoker was seen as Wilde's friend and expected to feel unhappy at his disgrace" (Schaffer 396). Stoker, however, made no explicit public statement of sympathy. In contrast, he removed Wilde's name from his writing.

Caught between his firm belief in male loyalty and the need to keep his own homosexuality a secret, Stoker chose to communicate his sympathies indirectly through his writing, specifically by using the coded words "reticence" and "discretion" (Schaffer, 397).

Schaffer observes that in *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, Stoker writes an apology to Henry Irving for a minor offense. While the most of the apology seems typical, one sentence in particular seems out of place. Stoker writes, “I feel it too bad that one who in his days has tried to live up to the ideal of discretion, and has regarded reticence as a duty rather than a motive, should have to speak openly... on so private a matter, and I can only trust that I may be forgiven should anyone with the power of forgiveness see the need of it” (Stoker, 242). Schaffer argues the words reticence and discretion, often used by Stoker to code for Wilde, as well as the vague yet imploring language, out of place for a minor apology, indicate this particular sentence is meant not for Irving, but for Wilde.

In addition to their homosexuality, Wilde and Stoker also inhabited the liminal space between Ireland and England. Both were raised in Ireland and attended Trinity College together; both later moved to England and inhabited the theater scene (Schaffer 399). As an Irish protestant living in England, Stoker carefully navigated these two conflicting parts of his identity, and, like Dracula and unlike Wilde, carefully adopted an English accent (Schaffer 399). While there is not one character that Stoker embodies entirely, pieces of his identity and internal conflicts are woven throughout the novel, particularly in its liminal spaces.

Both Lucy and Mina spend the novel navigating between societally constructed labels, weaving among borders of sexuality and gender. Societally constructed gender roles enabled some degree of hidden liberation for women. Craft writes that turn-of-the-century British society was, “largely unconcerned with feminine sexuality... Neither did English law want to recognize the sexually self-motivated woman... the statute under which Oscar Wilde was convicted of ‘gross indecency’ simply ignored the possibility of erotic behavior between women” (Craft 115).

Women were objects to be acted upon by men in sex, in relationships, and in society. The idea that women would have their own agendas was almost unheard of, and seldom taken seriously. While this limited women in many areas, it also afforded them a degree of freedom in secrecy which homosexual men were not granted. Women were able to exist in liminal spaces without arousing as much suspicion as men. They could blur the lines between sexualities and genders with less intense scrutiny.

Lucy spends the majority of her time in the novel in a liminal state. As Mina observes, “Lucy... has lately taken to her old habit of walking in her sleep” (Stoker 95). Lucy’s predisposition to sleep walking signals that her unconscious is a powerful force. Sleepwalking is a space between sleep and wakefulness; the body moves as if it is awake, yet the mind is asleep. Lucy’s sleepwalking desire to leave the home, resulting in her quasi-sexual encounter with Dracula signifies her repressed desire for sexual liberation. According to Eltis, however, “Lucy is far more reminiscent of the traditional feminine, defenseless and frivolous Victorian lady” (Eltis 572). Eltis cites Lucy’s preoccupation with social and romantic life in her letters to Mina as well as the predisposition of the other characters to care for her as evidence that Lucy is not a New Woman (Eltis 572). Lucy, however, is not so easily pinned down in the category of the Victorian lady. Rather, her sexual appetite, apparent in her letter to Mina, might signify her as feminist supporting the sexual liberation of women. She writes to Mina, “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men...” (Stoker 82). Lucy wrote this letter to Mina while fully conscious and before being bitten; this is a time when Lucy’s unconscious is most repressed. Even with her unconscious relatively stifled, Lucy communicates dissatisfaction with the purity standards imposed upon

women. She verbalizes her desire for liberation to another woman, a starting point of many feminist actions.

Still, Lucy checks herself multiple times within the same letter. Immediately after expressing her desire for polygamy, she adds, "... But this is heresy, and I must not say it" (Stoker 82). Lucy is keenly aware of the society she inhabits and, like Stoker himself, carefully constructs language to communicate her feelings as truthfully as possible without jeopardizing her reputation. Even when writing privately to another woman, she is cautious. Rightfully so: Mina eventually allows this private letter to be read by others by including it in the manuscript. In the same letter, Lucy also wonders, "...why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them?" (Stoker 82). Certainly, such a statement supports Eltis' conclusion that Lucy is more Victorian lady than New Woman. Perhaps the answer, then, is that Lucy inhabits both the space of the Victorian lady and the sexually liberated New Woman, switching between the two. After Lucy is bitten, Dr. Seward observes, "...whenever she got into that lethargic state with the stertorous breathing, she put the flowers from her; but that when she waked she clutched them close... she had many spells of sleeping and waking and repeated both actions many times" (Stoker 174). In her post-bite pre-vampiric liminal state, Lucy alternates between giving in to her sexual desires and accepting the liberation that vampirism offers by pushing away the garlic placed on her neck by men, meant to restrain her, and clutching them close, accepting the protection and repression of men that inherently come together in a society founded on restrictive gender roles.

Mina also deftly weaves between liminal spaces, particularly when it comes to feminism and gender roles. In most analyses, it is Mina who is identified as the clear-cut New Woman.

Apparent as that may be to readers, the men in the band of light seem to remain oblivious to this. Dr. Van Helsing observes of Mina, “She has a man’s brain—a brain that a man should have were he much gifted—and a woman’s heart” (Stoker 242). While to the contemporary reader this sticks out as obviously sexist, a deeper examination reveals that Mina has accomplished what turn-of-the-century New Women and homosexual men at the time could not. She is perceived as fusing together masculine and feminine traits and rather than being targeted for it, she is praised. Mina is able to get away with this in part because she delicately covers her feminism by backtracking and weaving in justifications. Reflecting on her shorthand trick with Dr. Van Helsing, Mina writes, “I could not resist the temptation of mystifying him a bit—I suppose it is some of the taste of the original apple that remains still in our mouths” (Stoker 195). She indulges in dominating Dr. Van Helsing momentarily, but is quick to admonish herself for it.

The pattern of a feminist sentiment followed by an apparently tacked-on admonition is also present with Lucy’s letter discussed earlier. Mina goes on to record, “By the time my little joke was over, I was almost ashamed” (Stoker 105). Mina knows she is treading a fine line. She is “almost”, but, more importantly, not quite ashamed. She navigates asserting her intellectual prowess without compromising men’s comfort around her. The men’s perception of her inferiority lulls them into a sense of security; they do not have to worry about what the woman is doing. This perceived inferiority, however, actually enables Mina to assert her intellect over the men without threatening them, making them more likely to accept her ideas. One might call Mina a closeted feminist.

The novel begins with a statement of censorship, which we later find out is made by Mina, who arranged the papers, “All needless matters have been eliminated... all the records

chosen are exactly contemporary...” (Stoker 28). Not only has Mina “eliminated” “needless matters” unknown to readers, she has “chosen” the records. The verb “choose” indicates that some, not all of the related records are included. Fox notes that it is Mina who elected the documents and her who transcribed them. It is possible too, that she edited them (Fox 596). Stoker himself was no stranger to censorship. As Schaffer notes, “In the ‘Censorship of Stage Plays’ (1909), Stoker uses code terms for homosexuality... in combination with the drama to target Wilde covertly” (Schaffer 388). Stoker, like Mina, practiced the art of speaking in between the lines, carefully choosing what to say and what to leave unsaid in his writing.

The characters in *Dracula* spend much of the novel inhabiting liminal spaces. Harker’s nighttime experience with the three female vampires is emblematic of such liminal spaces in three instances. The first occurs even before the female vampires enter. Harker begins to experiment with the fusion of male and female. He writes, “Here I am, sitting at a little oak table where in old times possibly some fair lady sat to pen, with much thought and many blushes, her ill-spelt love letter, and writing in my diary in shorthand all that has happened since I closed it last” (Stoker 62). Stoker so vividly imagines the lady that may have once occupied his current place that Fox asserts in her queer criticism of the scene that Harker is actually identifying with these imagined women. She argues that Harker, “happily believes he is as welcome in these women’s space as if he were one of them... imagining himself as a woman, sharing empathy and intimacy with other women...” (Fox 599). Certainly, for a man to enter a woman’s chambers is considered a grave trespass, clearly overstepping the boundaries of where the genders are allowed to go. When he imagines himself as a woman, however, Harker is able to not only enter these chambers, but feel comfortable enough to fall asleep within them. In the same sentence in

which he imagines himself as a woman, he also acknowledges his physical self, which is male, recording a diary in shorthand. In this instance, Harker's feminine imagined self and his masculine physical self seem to blend together as Harker inhabits both simultaneously.

Secondly, the line between reality and imagination is further blurred when Harker falls asleep. Later, he reflects, "I suppose I must have fallen asleep; I hope so, but I fear, for all that followed was startlingly real—so real that now... I cannot in the least believe that it was all sleep" (Stoker 63). The liminal space between sleeping and waking permitted otherwise unthinkable behavior.

The third liminal space Harker inhabits in this scene is one of gender roles in relation to sexuality and the line between monogamy and infidelity. These are best understood through a Freudian perspective, which Foster uses, "Freud provided us with the language to see ourselves as possessed by an other, uncanny self who stands behind us but casts no reflection in the mirror of consciousness... we would forever hunger for that unpalatable fruit" (Foster 533). Harker, a devoted lawyer and fiancé, hardly seems the type to give in to irrational carnal temptations. Yet his dreamlike trance permits such a digression to occur as his unconscious self rises to meet the conscious. Meanwhile, Harker is helplessly caught on a sexual threshold as he lies still with eyes closed, "in a languorous ecstasy and waited" (Stoker 63), for the female vampire to penetrate him with her teeth. This "languorous ecstasy" is strikingly similar to feelings aroused during sexual intercourse both in the moments before penetration and before orgasm: the in-betweens which create anticipatory feelings as intense as the falling action. In addition, gender roles are also upended here. Women are the aggressors, advancing on the motionless, submissive male.

The disruption of sexual gender roles almost hints at homoeroticism, yet does so from a safe distance.

Though not often noted by critics, there is also the liminal space between faithfulness and infidelity that Harker inhabits. Even in his dreamlike state, where the unconscious is more powerful, the conscious is not entirely overpowered, which causes Harker to feel some sense of guilt. He writes, “It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina’s eyes and cause her pain...” (Stoker 63). Though he has already decided to give in, lying in wait for the female vampire, he still feels a tinge of guilt regarding Mina. It is not clear if this constitutes infidelity. No sex, or penetration of any kind, occurred; Harker was not even kissed.

Furthermore, Harker did not actually act on any of his sexual desires for the women, rather he stood by waiting for them to enact their own desires on him. This may not be clear infidelity, yet it is also removed from true faithfulness. This becomes yet another liminal space Harker inhabits. Similarly, Stoker did not do anything to actively increase Wilde’s pain or humiliation following the trial’s verdict. Nonetheless, Stoker also did nothing to support Wilde. Schaffer observes, “As a man who stressed male loyalties, Stoker may have found himself torn apart by the trial’s competing demands” (Schaffer, 396). As Harker was torn between loyalty to his fiancée and the pressure of the vampire women, Stoker was torn between his desire to be loyal to Wilde and the need to conceal his own homosexuality from society.

Much like Stoker, the characters in *Dracula* experiment with boundaries in gender, sexuality, and morality. The characters subtly navigate the boundaries imposed upon them by their culture, finding ways to subvert them without compromising their place in society. They spend the prolonged middle of the novel dancing between borders of restraint and hedonism,

male and female, Victorian lady and New Woman in their attempt to evade the restrictions such binary labels impose. Stoker wrote *Dracula* during a time of societal moral panic about the destruction of gender and sexual norms while simultaneously reeling from the verdict of Oscar Wilde's trial which resulted in the public condemnation of Stoker's personal friend for a sin he himself had also committed. Writing *Dracula* enabled Stoker to unpack his complicated emotions in relation to the roles he was meant to be inhabiting through the characters who do what Stoker spent his life attempting to replicate: living in-between.

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