

Dracula
The Vampire and the Critics

Studies in Speculative Fiction, No. 19

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Dracula

The Vampire and the Critics

Edited by
Margaret L. Carter

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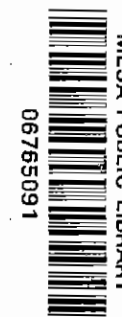
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Contents

- Foreword ix
William Veeder
- Preface xix
- Introduction 1
Margaret L. Carter
- 1 *Dracula*, the Monastic Chronicles and Slavic Folklore 11
Bacil F. Kirtley
- 2 The Politics of *Dracula* 19
Richard Wasson
- 3 The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker's
Dracula 25
Christopher Bentley
- 4 Fictional Conventions and Sexuality in *Dracula* 35
Carrol L. Fry
- 5 The Genesis of *Dracula*: A Re-Visit 39
Devendra P. Varma
- 6 The Genesis and Dating of *Dracula* from Bram Stoker's Working
Notes 51
Joseph S. Bierman
- 7 Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* 57
Phyllis A. Roth



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The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Christopher Bentley

By far the best-known literary treatment of the vampire myth is Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. First published in 1897, this belated Gothic romance has eclipsed the fame of earlier vampire stories such as John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and Thomas Prest's *Varney the Vampire* (1847). It has been reprinted many times, and has also been translated into other European languages. A play based on the book was produced in the nineteen-twenties, became a West End success in 1927, and remained for some years a popular attraction at theatres in Britain and North America, being occasionally revived today. An even larger public knows *Dracula* through several film versions of the novel, beginning with a classic of the German silent cinema, *Nosferatu* (1922). Because of Stoker's novel the name of a fifteenth-century Rumanian prince, relatively unknown outside his own country, has become a familiar word,¹ but *Dracula's* great success cannot be attributed to conventional literary strengths, in which the work is deficient.² The possibilities in a psychoanalytical approach to *Dracula* have been noted,³ but no attempt has been made to investigate in detail the sexual implications of the story.

Ernest Jones, in the section entitled "The Vampire" in his monograph *On the Nightmare*, states that the vampire superstition "yields plain indications of most kinds of sexual perversions,"⁴ and it would seem that such perversions, concealed by symbolism, are the dynamic of *Dracula*, and may largely account for the initial success and continued popularity of the work. Nothing in Stoker's other writings or in what is known of his life suggests that he would consciously write quasi-pornography, and it must be assumed that he was largely unaware

This article first appeared in *Literature and Psychology* 22 (1972), No. 1.

of the sexual content of his book.⁵ In common with almost all respectable Victorian novelists, Stoker avoids any overt treatment of the sexuality of his characters. The obscenity laws, the tyranny of the circulating libraries, and the force of public opinion were, throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century, powerful constraints on any author who wrote for the general public; but it is probably that for many writers, including Stoker himself, an even stronger reason for avoiding sexual matters was a personal reticence amounting to repression. Stoker's "living" characters (that is, those other than vampires) are, both the women and the men, models of chastity. One male-female relationship, that of Jonathan Harker and Mina Murray, is of primary importance to the story, and they marry at an early stage of the plot, but the sexual elements that presumably exist in their relationship are never revealed, much less discussed. However, what is rejected or repressed on a conscious level appears in a covert and perverted form through the novel, the apparatus of the vampire superstition, described in almost obsessional detail in *Dracula*, providing the means for a symbolic presentation of human sexual relationships.

A close examination of certain episodes in the work shows that Stoker's vampires are permitted to assert their sexuality in a much more explicit manner than his "living" characters. One of the three vampire women who attempt to attack Jonathan Harker at Dracula's castle assesses the potency of her intended victim with a surprising directness: "He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all." Although their nominal intention is to suck Harker's blood, the advances of the women and Harker's responses are, throughout this significant episode, consistently described in sexual terms:

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. 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. . . . The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. . . . I lay quiet, looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. . . . There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive. . . . I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart.⁶

The ambivalence of Harker's response, combining both "longing" and "deadly fear," is especially revelatory, as is his concern over the feelings of his fiancée, Mina: the vampire women offer immediate sexual gratification, though on illicit and dangerous terms, a tempting alternative to the socially imposed delays and frustrations of his relationship with the chaste but somewhat sexless Mina. The entire episode, including Harker's subsequent doubt as to whether he was awake or dreaming, has the unreal quality of a masturbatory fantasy or erotic dream.

Ernest Jones's remarks on the widespread folkloristic belief in vampire attacks support this interpretation:

The explanation of these phantasies is surely not hard. A nightly visit from a beautiful or frightful being, who first exhausts the sleeper with passionate embraces and then withdraws from him a vital fluid; all this can point only to a natural and common process, namely to nocturnal emissions accompanied with dreams of a more or less erotic nature. In the unconscious mind blood is commonly an equivalent for semen.⁷

With the exception of Dracula's brief and abortive assault on Harker when momentarily aroused by the sight of blood from a shaving cut trickling down the latter's chin, the prominent vampire attacks in the novel are always on members of the other sex; the female vampires attempt to make Harker their prey, and Dracula attacks Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, suggesting that vampirism is a perversion of normal heterosexual activity. The relationships between the vampires themselves are rather more complicated; of the three vampire women, two resemble Dracula and so presumably are related to him, while the third is spoken of as their sister. Therefore it would appear that they are either Dracula's daughters or sisters, but when one of them taunts Dracula with the accusation: "You yourself never loved; you never love!," he rejoins meaningfully: "Yes, I too can love; you yourselves can tell it from the past. It is not so?," implying that an incestuous relationship has existed between them.⁸ In this interchange Stoker seems to be consciously endowing his vampires with a sexual freedom that would be unthinkable in his "living" characters. A remarkable heightening of sexuality occurs in the formerly virginal Lucy when she becomes a vampire, and, as in the episode of the three vampire women, "languorous" and "voluptuous" are two of the terms that Stoker chooses from his rather limited vocabulary of the erotic to describe the new freedom of her behaviour.⁹

The blood of the living, which the vampire craves, also has strong sexual undertones. Ernest Jones, in the passage quoted above, equates the loss of blood to a vampire with the emission of semen, and this is undoubtedly what underlies the attempted attack on Harker by the vampire women; but even when no vampire is present, the giving and receiving of blood may still be charged with sexual meaning. Lucy Westenra, weakened by Dracula's nocturnal attacks, receives blood transfusions from, successively, Arthur Holmwood, John Seward, Dr. Van Helsing, and Quincey Morris; of these men, one, Holmwood, is her fiancé; two, Seward and Morris, are rejected suitors who remain on friendly terms with her, while the fourth, Van Helsing, is of course well-disposed towards the young woman. This sequence of blood transfusions symbolizes sexual intercourse, with Lucy of necessity acquiring a freedom and promiscuity that could not possibly be described in actual terms, especially

when the central figure is a girl whose behaviour is as chaste and respectable as that of her friend Mina. Stoker himself is a least partly aware of the sexual implications in those transfusions. After Seward has given blood to Lucy, Van Helsing, who has conducted the transfusion, warns the young man: "Mind, nothing must be said of this. If our young lover should turn up unexpected, as before, no word to him. It would at once frighten him and enjealous him, too. There must be none. So!"¹⁰ Van Helsing's many scholastic accomplishments do not include the ability to speak idiomatic English, but it is evident that he fears Lucy's fiancé will be sexually jealous of the man who has been privileged to give her his blood. After Lucy's burial Seward writes in his diary:

When it was all over, we were standing beside Arthur, who, poor fellow, was speaking of his part in the operation where his blood had been transfused to his Lucy's veins; I could see Van Helsing's face grow white and purple by turns. Arthur was saying that he felt since then as if they two had been really married, and that she was his wife in the sight of God. None of us said a word of the other operations, and none of us ever shall. Arthur and Quincey went away together to the station, and Van Helsing and I came on here. The moment we were alone in the carriage he gave way to a regular fit of hysterics.¹¹

Later Van Helsing explains to Seward the reason for his unseemly amusement:

"Said he not that the transfusion of his blood to her veins had made her truly his bride?"

"Yes, and it was a sweet and comforting idea for him."

"Quite so. But there was a difficulty, friend John. If so that, then what about the others? Ho, Ho! Then this so sweet maid is a polyandrist, and me, with my poor wife dead to me, but alive by Church's law, though no wits, all gone—even I, who am faithful husband to this now-no-wife, am bigamist."¹²

Again the sexual content of the blood transfusions is made abundantly clear.

The same symbolism would seem to be present in a curious episode later in the story, when Dracula has invaded the bedroom of Harker and his wife Mina.

On the bed beside the window lay Jonathan Harker, his face flushed, and breathing heavily as though in a stupor. Kneeling on the rear edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of his wife. By her side stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. His face was turned from us, but the instant we saw we all recognised the Count—in every way, even to the scar on his forehead. With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink.¹³

This description should be compared with Mina's own account of her experiences in which she relates that after first sucking her blood Dracula

"pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding tight, and with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some of the—Oh my God! my God! what have I done?" . . . Then she began to rub her lips as though to cleanse them from pollution.¹⁴

The episode contains a strange reversal of the usual relationship between vampire and victim, as Dracula is forcing Mina to drink his blood. Stoker is describing a symbolic act of enforced fellatio, where blood is again a substitute for semen, and where a chaste female suffers a violation that is essentially sexual. Of particular interest in the earlier passage is the striking image of "a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink," suggesting an element of regressive infantilism in the vampire superstition.¹⁵

The symbolic meanings of blood in *Dracula* are rendered more complex by an incident that occurs later in the same chapter. Mina, bleeding after Dracula's attack on her, is being comforted by her husband:

She shuddered and was silent, holding down her head on her husband's breast. When she raised it, his white night-robe was stained with blood where her lips had touched, and where the thin open wound in her neck had sent forth drops. The instant she saw it she drew back, with a low wail, and whispered, amidst choking sobs:—

"Unclean, unclean! I must touch him or kiss him no more. Oh, that it should be that it is I who am now his worst enemy, and whom he may have most cause to fear."¹⁶

Although the reaction of horror, and its accompanying exclamation of "Unclean," comes from Mina, and although Jonathan firmly refuses to share it ("Nonsense, Mina. It is a shame to me to hear such a word. I would not hear it of you; and I shall not hear it from you"). Mina's description of herself while the "thin stream of blood" trickles from her recalls ancient primitive fears of menstruation. The mention of a "thin open wound" is especially noteworthy: in *Dracula* the mark of the vampire's bite is usually described as two round punctures caused by the elongated canine teeth, whereas this phrase suggests a cut or slit similar to the vaginal orifice. Some of Freud's observations on menstrual taboos are relevant to this episode:

The primitive cannot help connecting the mysterious phenomenon of the monthly flow of blood with sadistic ideas. Thus he interprets menstruation, especially at its onset, as the bite of a spirit-animal, or possibly as the token of sexual intercourse with this spirit. Occasionally the reports reveal this spirit as one of an ancestor and then from other knowledge we have gained we understand that it is in virtue of her being the property of this spirit-ancestor that the menstruating girl is taboo.¹⁷

"Spirit-animal" is a curiously apt term for a vampire, and, though Dracula can scarcely be an ancestor of Mina's, he does claim as his "property" both her and Lucy ("Your girls that you all love are mine already"),¹⁸ and of course he has actually bitten Mina, causing the "unclean" flow of blood, and symbolically he has forced her to undergo sexual intercourse with him. In this incident venous blood symbolizes not semen but menstrual discharge, suggesting that blood as a symbol has multiple meanings in *Dracula*, but that sexual significances predominate.

The methods used to destroy vampires also contain sexual implications, and, revealingly, are modified according to the sex of the vampire. Lucy, who becomes a vampire after succumbing to Dracula's attacks, is released from her "undead" state into true death by her erstwhile fiancé, Arthur, who drives a hardened and sharply pointed wooden stake through her heart. The phallic symbolism in this process is evident, and Lucy's reactions are described in terms reminiscent of sexual intercourse and orgasm, and especially the painful deflowering of a virgin, which Lucy still is:

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. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it; the sight of it gave us courage, so that our voices seemed to ring through the little vault.

And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth ceased to champ, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. The terrible task was over.¹⁹

On the other hand, when Dracula himself is to be destroyed, although a stake driven through the heart remains part of the method, the emphasis is shifted to decapitation of the vampire. Now it has long been recognized that the head is a very common penis-substitute in dreams concerning the fear of castration.²⁰ Dracula is rendered powerless, symbolically castrated, by having his head cut off; a sexual revenge is taken on the creature whose depredations have been basically sexual in character. Van Helsing, the novel's expert on vampirism, sometimes uses the term "sterilize" when discussing means of defeating and destroying Dracula, implying that he entertains a castration fantasy based on fear and envy of the vampire's powerful sexuality.

Although vampirism is ostensibly presented as a supernatural phenomenon of evil, to be combated with the weapons of religion, such as the Cross and the Host, and those of superstition, such as garlic, it is in actuality treated as a shameful and terrible disease. Two physicians, Seward and Van Helsing, the former an authority on mental illness and the latter a polymath who has made a special study of vampirism, are omnipresent, and their medico-scientific tech-

niques, including blood transfusions, hypnotism, and sedatives, are an important part of the fight against Dracula. The traditional view of vampirism as a species of demonic possession to be cured by spiritual means survives in the novel, but it has been partly displaced by a more modern attitude which sees vampirism as a disease and a perversion possibly amenable to medical treatment, recalling the Victorians' horror of masturbation and nocturnal emissions.

Details of the vampire's existence are rich in psychological implications: the stench of decay around Dracula and places associated with him would seem to contradict the very basis of vampirism, namely that the vampire corpse is not subject to natural decay like ordinary corpses, but Ernest Jones writes: "Bearing in mind the anal-erotic origin of necrophilia . . . we are not surprised to observe what stress many writers on the subject lay on the horrible stink that invests the Vampire."²¹ Stoker describes the smell in the chapel at Carfax, Dracula's deserted lair, as being "composed of all the ills of mortality" and "as though corruption had become itself corrupt."²² The atmosphere of sin and guilt is as strong as the mephitic odour. Dracula's wooden coffins filled with earth, as necessary as blood for sustaining the vampire's life in death, since he must return to one of them during each day, are an obvious womb-substitute, and together with Van Helsing's repeated assertions that Dracula has a "child-mind" or a "child-brain," confirm the suggestion already advanced, namely that there is an element of infantile erotic regression in vampirism.

Though the vampire's attack symbolizes sexual intercourse, or more precisely, in view of the presumed chastity of the two female victims, loss of virginity, there is one important difference. Unlike actual defloration, the process is reversible, for the victim can be redeemed by the death of her seducer, the vampire; the burn-mark on Mina's forehead, caused by the touch of the Host when she was "unclean," disappears as soon as Dracula is destroyed. The physical and spiritual degradation incurred by the victim of a vampire need not be permanent, and in any case to fall victim to a vampire does not, in this novel, involve social degradation; the vampire women who attack Harker at Dracula's castle are described as "ladies by their dress and manner," and Dracula himself, though presented as a creature of infinite wickedness, is, as Stoker emphasizes, a European nobleman with an ancestral home, a distinguished lineage, and a "courtly" manner. On occasions he displays thoroughly aristocratic contempt for his somewhat *bourgeois* antagonists, while they, with a proper sense of his rank, customarily refer to him in their diaries and journals as "the Count." Dracula has much in common with the corrupt but gentlemanly seducers of popular fiction and drama whose archetype is Lovelace in Richardson's *Clarissa*. Just as they can attempt and sometimes succeed in the seduction of innocent females without forfeiting their claim to be gentlemen because of the freedom given them by society's double standard, and because of a received definition of the gentleman that includes licentiousness as one of his qualities, so Dracula

appears curiously guiltless in his vampirism, for he is merely obeying the dictates of his corrupt nature, and, in choosing beautiful young women as his victims, is only exercising an admittedly perverted *droit de seigneur*. In particular his nocturnal visits to Lucy, pre-empting the claims of her fiancé, have a distinct echo of the medieval *jus primae noctis*, the more so as Dracula, who is several centuries old, once was a feudal lord, and certainly retains the outlook and behaviour of one.

Dracula received a number of reviews in the popular journals of the period. *Punch* offers a determinedly jocular notice in which "ingenious" is the strongest word of the praise.²³ The *Spectator* summarizes the plot of "Mr. Stoker's clever but cadaverous romance" and concludes:

Its strength lies in the invention of incident, for the sentimental element is decidedly mawkish. Mr. Stoker has shown considerable ability in the use that he has made of all the available traditions of vampirology, but we think his story would have been all the more effective if he had chosen an earlier period. The up-to-dateness of the book—the phonograph diaries, typewriters, and so on—hardly fits in with the mediaeval methods which ultimately secure the victory for Count Dracula's foes.²⁴

The *Athenaeum* finds *Dracula* "highly sensational," but

wanting in the constructive art as well as in the higher literary sense. It reads at times like a mere series of grotesquely incredible events; but there are better moments that show more power, though even these are never productive of the tremor such subjects evoke under the hand of a master. An immense amount of energy, a certain degree of imaginative faculty, and many ingenious and gruesome details are there. At times Mr. Stoker almost succeeds in creating the sense of possibility in impossibility; at others he merely commands an array of crude statements of incredible actions. . . . The people who band themselves together to run the vampire to earth have no real individuality or being. . . . Still Mr. Stoker has got together a number of "horrid details," and his object, assuming it to be ghastliness, is fairly well fulfilled. Isolated scenes and touches are probably quite uncanny enough to please those for whom they are designed.²⁵

Earlier in the same decade English reviewers had abused Ibsen's *Ghosts*, in terms more literally appropriate to Gothic fiction, as "Absolutely loathsome and fetid . . . Gross, almost putrid indecorum . . . Literary carrion . . . Morbid, unhealthy, unwholesome and disgusting . . . Morbid horrors of the hideous tale . . . Just a wicked nightmare . . . Noisome corruption" and had described the author as "A gloomy sort of ghoul, bent on groping for horrors by night,"²⁶ but the reviewers of *Dracula*, while they may find artistic flaws in the novel, detect nothing that is morally objectionable. Ibsen, of course, had dared to be explicit about sexual relationships in contemporary society and had treated such a forbidden topic as hereditary venereal disease. Stoker's work, in spite of its modern setting, is a fantasy using the materials of folklore, and its chief character is

therefore permitted to force his way into the bedrooms of respectable young women and to exercise freedoms that would be surprising even in the avowedly "fast" novelists of the day. The reviewers' comments suggest that the sado-masochistic accounts of human suffering and violent, premature death that are the nominal subject matter of *Dracula* caused little or no offence to contemporary readers, while they were apparently oblivious to the novel's covert treatment of perverted sexuality.

Notes

1. See Grigore Nandris. "The Historical Dracula: The Theme of His Legend in the Western and in the Eastern Literatures of Europe," *Comparative Literature Studies*, III, 4 (1966), 367-96.
2. A representative scholarly view of *Dracula* is to be found in a modern history of the English novel, which describes it briefly as "a vampire story rendered plausible by documentary devices imitated from Collins," and acknowledges that it was an "immense popular triumph," (Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel: A Panorama* (Boston, 1960), p. 428).
3. Maurice Richardson, "The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories," *The Twentieth Century*, CLXVI, 994 (December 1959), 426-30.
4. Ernest Jones, *On The Nightmare* (London, 1931), p. 98.
5. Bram Stoker (1847-1912) was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and worked for ten years in the Irish Civil Service. In 1878 he became Henry Irving's business manager. With the exception of some of his short stories Stoker's other works of fiction are markedly inferior to *Dracula*. His first book was *The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland* (1879), and his most substantial literary production is *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906), a biography of his employer and lifelong friend.
6. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London, 1897), pp. 38-39 (Ch. 3).
7. Jones, op. cit., p. 119.
8. *Dracula*, p. 40 (Ch. 3).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 216 (Ch. 16).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 130 (Ch. 10).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 177 (Ch. 13).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 179 (Ch. 13).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 289 (Ch. 21).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 296 (Ch. 21).
15. Cf. Jones, op. cit., p. 120: "When the more normal aspects of sexuality are in a state of repression there is a tendency to regress towards less developed forms. Sadism is one of the chief of these, and it is the earliest form of this—known as oral sadism—that plays such an important part in the Vampire belief."
16. *Dracula*, pp. 291-92 (Ch. 21).

17. Freud, "Contributions to the Psychology of Love, The Taboo of Virginity (1918)," *Collected Papers*, IV (London, 1934), pp. 221-22.
18. *Dracula*, p. 315 (Ch. 23).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21 (Ch. 16).
20. Freud, "A Connection between a Symbol and a Symptom (1916)," *Collected Papers*, II (London, 1924), pp. 162-63.
21. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
22. *Dracula*, p. 257 (Ch. 19).
23. *Punch*, 26 June 1897, p. 327.
24. *Spectator*, 31 July 1897, p. 152.
25. *Athenaeum*, No. 3635, 26 June 1897, p. 835. *Dracula* was also reviewed in the *Daily Mail*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Lady*, and the *Bookman*.
26. Cited from William Archer in George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London, 1891), pp. 89-91.

4

Fictional Conventions and Sexuality in *Dracula*

Carrol L. Fry

To the general reading public, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is one of the best known English novels of the nineteenth century. It was an immediate best seller when it appeared in 1897, and the frequent motion pictures featuring the machinations of Count Dracula since the 1931 film version of the novel have helped make vampire folklore very much a part of the English and American popular imagination. The work's fame is in part attributable to its success as a thriller. The first section, "Jonathan Harker's Journal," is surely one of the most suspenseful and titillating pieces of terror fiction ever written. But perhaps more important in creating the popular appeal of the novel is its latent sexuality.

This feature of the work is most apparent in Stoker's use of disguised conventional characters, placed in new roles but retaining their inherent melodramatic appeal for a sexually repressed audience. The most apparent of these characters is the "pure woman," the staple heroine of popular fiction from Richardson to Hardy. In dozens of novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this pure woman is pursued by a "rake," a seducer who has designs on her virtue. The melodrama is based on the reader's suspense regarding whether or not he will succeed. Those women who lose their virtue become "fallen women," outcasts doomed to death or secluded repentance. In *Dracula*, there are two "pure women," Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, the former of whom actually does "fall." The role of "rake" is played by Count Dracula, and vampirism becomes surrogate sexual intercourse. The women who receive the vampire's bite become "fallen women."

Stoker establishes Dracula as a rake in large part by making him a "gothic villain," a derivative of the rake in English fiction. Like most gothic villains, Dracula lives in a ruined castle, remarkably like Udolpho, Otranto, Grasmere