Dracula: Demons, Victims and Heroes

A Discussion of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Feminine Reader Response

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Abstract

*Dracula* was written by Bram Stoker in 1897 but in this thesis I will discuss the different interpretations that can be achieved using reader response theory. More specifically how gender affects these reader responses. It is a detail analysis of how a feminine reader with a 21st century perspective can achieve different reactions to the text than that of the previous masculine and patriarchal readings that have been common in the past. This approach to *Dracula* has shown in more detail how the current representation of vampires in our culture has come to pass. *Dracula* was one of the first vampire novels, but it was by no means the last, and the current fascination with vampires is a direct result of ‘reading’ them in a feminine way. It shows how in *Dracula* demons, victims and heroes, with a new perspective, become tragic, misunderstood and patriarchal oppressors. Also that it is through an integration with the text itself and reading in a feminine way that we are able to see them that way.

**Key Words:** *Dracula*, Bram Stoker, Gender, Reader Response Theory, Feminine, Masculine, Patriarchal.
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Introduction

When reading a text the content will awaken responses within the reader, it is a contest, a dialogue between the two, an “arena in which reader and author must participate in a game of imagination” (Iser 296). They are two opponents in the sense that they are opposites, but they are also symbiotic in their relationship, they provide mutual benefit for each other. They are two opponents, very much like Dracula and Van Helsing who represent opposite sides of the moral spectrum in *Dracula*. Without Dracula, Van Helsing would have no evil to fight, he would be rendered obsolete. This same relationship exists between a text and its reader, one without the other is without purpose. Within this relationship, between reader and text, there are two components: one constant and one continually fluctuating. The text remains constant, Bram Stoker’s classic *Dracula* has remained consistent, in essence (if we disregard different editions, editor changes and changeable footnotes or prefaces), since it was first published in 1897. However, the adaptations, the criticism, and the readings have continually changed and progressed, readers evolve with their culture and as such cause a “cultural remodelling of *Dracula*” (Williamson 60). *Dracula* has taken many different forms in readers’ imagination and in this essay I will examine the differences gender can make in those interpretations and the tension created between a feminine and a masculine interpretation. My claim is that since its first publication in the 19th century the reading of the novel has shifted into a more feminine perspective creating a different very different *Dracula* for its readers.

It has already been stated that the reading or realization of a text is “by no means independent of the individual dispositions of the reader” (Iser 295), it is a personal relationship and for that reason unique. The circumstances of the reading can also alter an interpretation and “a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first” (Iser 299). My claim is that in the reading of *Dracula*, a feminine reading in today’s culture is different than that of the more masculine readings of the 19th century. My argument, in agreement with Patrocinio Schweickart, is that if a reader’s
interpretation can be influenced by their surroundings, their frame of mind, their activities that day, so it can certainly be affected by their gender. It is this gender affectation that is present in the different interpretations of Dracula and his surrounding vampires or victims. In accordance with Anne G. Berggren’s theories, I will argue that a feminine approach to literature is to see it as a world for her to step into, whereas a masculine approach is to regard it as a physical thing, an object to be held in his hands and examined. It is this method of stepping into the world of Dracula and applying empathy that will create different reactions.

Berggren states that women, when reading a novel (such as Dracula) rather than analysing the text as a thing, endeavour to “liv[e] in it as a participant” (171). She says that women read for many reasons: to gain historical perspective, to advise them on their own life choices, or to find understanding with the characters and thus make informed decisions about their own lives: to do all these things they envelope themselves in the world of the text rather than holding it apart as a thing. To summarise women labour to achieve integration with a text, in this case Dracula, and investigate that men as a contradiction, keep the text at a distance, wishing to apply their readings rather than merging with the text.

A woman’s approach to literature in the past has been described as having to “think like a man” (Schweickart 489). Women enter into a male academic environment and in order to survive had to achieve a manner in which she could co-exist with her male professors. Elaine Showalter has argued that the male canonicity was such that women had to enter into interpretations with “intellectual neutrality” (Schweickart 489), a ‘neutrality’ which was, in fact a suppression of any feminine reactions in favour of a more masculine or patriarchal one. In actuality it was not a neutral place from which analysis could spring, but rather a suppression, a subdual of any natural feminine impulses in favour of a male way of thinking. Men were able to approach literature from the lofty standpoint of one who has the method with which to interpret already at their command. Stanley Fish tells us that if one approaches texts with a formalist method one will undoubtedly come away with a formalist
theory, that the “sins of formalist-positivist analysis are primarily sins of omission” (387). In other words, if a reader is looking for a certain so-called ‘traditional’ interpretation then a reader will find it, and it is what they overlook in this search that is to their detriment. So if we apply this to the gender divide these patriarchal readings, with the superiority of having the dominant interpretations at hand, will usually come to those interpretative readings themselves. Dracula will remain a text of sexual oppression and the final patriarchal success of the Crew of Light (the men that oppose Dracula). A woman, however, in the past had to come by these interpretations by aforementioned ‘neutrality’ which was not natural to her.

Adrienne Rich, quoted by Schweickart, described her experience of interpretation as an exercise in submersion: “For years, I have not been so much envisioning Emily Dickinson as trying to visit, to enter her mind through her own poems and letters, and though my own intimations” (qtd. in Schweickart 496). Schweickart further adds that “a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written” (Schweickart 493). They both seem to contradict the reader response theory mandate that only their personal reactions are relevant by adding a contextual spin on their analysis. However, this is not simply the case, what they are trying to achieve is a higher form of symbiosis with the text, rather than trying to find the author, they are trying to become one with the author in order to fully access the text. To understand what the author understood in order to further their own reading, they are trying to achieve the final stage of Iser’s phenomenological approach; they are trying to attain integration with the text where “author and reader converge” (Iser 307). This form of submersion is a method of reading that contradicts the previous patriarchal readings allowing Iser, as a man, to read in a feminine method. Their own lives are suspended and their own individuality recedes as they are supplanted by the text. What Iser calls alien thoughts (meaning thoughts coming from the text but being thought by the reader); take form within the readers’ minds and the text becomes
alive again within them. In this way the text is dead once it is written and only resumes life within the reader.
Dracula: The Demon?

There have been many Freudian interpretations of *Dracula*, usually generated by men and this is one example of a masculine and Freudian centred reader response. The most infamous, or at least highly quoted, is Maurice Richardson who applied psychoanalysis to *Dracula* in his examination published in the early 50s. Richardson sees in *Dracula* as a “blatant demonstration of the Oedipus complex” (qtd. in Williamson 7) in which the Crew of Light are the sons and Dracula is the evil father. Being so he inspires rage in the sons by keeping the mother all to himself. In this case the mother has multiple faces, as do the sons. Dracula succeeds in taking Lucy from Holmwood, and destroying her image in the minds of Seward and Morris, all of whom were in love with her. His success at removing her from their affections is prominent at their destruction of her body and her transformations into an “It” (Stoker 225) and therefore a monster. Dracula then tries to take Mina from Harker. Milly Williamson describes Dracula, in this sense, as “the father who tries to keep all the women to himself” (Williamson 7), which is why he is perceived as evil in this interpretation.

This analysis indicates that the book excites the masculine urges within men to circumvent Dracula’s sexual monopoly and the violence that that ensues; these are the oedipal drives within men to displace the male dominant figure and therefore have supremacy over the women. It is the supremacy issue which points to a male reading. A modern feminine reading would not adhere to an analysis in which the female sex sought to be dominated. I do not mean to imply that a 19th century woman sought to be dominated, merely that most would accept the domination in a way that a 21st century female reader would not. A woman reading a novel will often “assess the events and female characters in novels against their own experience” (Berggren 171) and because of this they would not sit comfortably with the notion of a desire to be controlled, (or put more mildly, looked after in the way that women were in the 19th century) they can be told that it is an interpretation, and be shown the evidence for it, but would not come to the conclusion organically. This could have been the
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case in the past, but in the 21st century women do not seek to be dominated, nor do they accept that it is possible, so in their participation with the text they are unlikely to come to this conclusion for themselves.

Williamson articulates that “it is clear from this analysis that we are to understand the reader of this story to be male. It is also clear that ‘he’ is supposed to assume the point of view of the Crew of Light” (Williamson 7). It is true that if we apply Richardson’s oedipal analysis we find ourselves side-lined to a patriarchal point of view, we see Dracula as a threat and the women as his victims. This form of analysis requires the woman to adopt Schweickart’s ‘neutrality’ or suppression discussed earlier (meaning the female scholar’s ability to deactivate her own feminine interpretation and assume the masculine method of thinking), we must see ourselves as threatened by Dracula and let our analysis stem from there. We must align ourselves, as women, to the oedipal desires of a patriarchal man. It is all tied together with the theory that Dracula is a book about the repressed sexual desires of men and women of the time. However the desires that have been described in the book are predominantly male: “the vampire myth offers active, aggressive and sadistic identificatory pleasures to the male reader or viewer” (Williamson 9). Dracula is at both times the enemy of male supremacy in his empowerment of his female vampires, the evil father, and the embodiment of the secret desires of the unconscious male minds. The key word here is ‘identificatory’, the reader with repressed sexuality will identify with Dracula, the point is that critics have assumed that only men would, or even could, identify with him. Modern female scholars Schweickart argued, when in their neutral mind-sets, would also adhere to the male interpretation and would be “think[ing] like a man. And so [they] would go on, increasingly with [their] male professors to guide [them]” (489), but this would not be a first reaction. It is possible that a feminine reader would not be as threatened by Dracula. After all, he does not seek to subjugate the female characters the way the Crew of Light does, in fact quite the opposite. Dracula offers women an increased sexuality and power that
frightens the other male characters, and the masculine readers, but might appear tempting to a feminine reader. How many women have fantasised about being kissed by that “cruel-looking” (Stoker 24) mouth and being transformed into a being of power and blood?

Unconscious desires manifesting themselves in artistic works was a Freudian theory that was applied to Dracula. Williamson paraphrases the claims made by Christopher Bentley that Stoker was unaware of the sexual content in the book and it was method of “giving expression to his own unconscious desires and repressions” (Williamson 8). She states that because the book was born in a culture of repression that the sexuality manifests itself only when humans come in contact with the vampires, otherwise they are chaste. It is as if the vampires draw out the unconscious sexual desires of the men in *Dracula*, extracting their sexual perversions along with the blood: “I felt in my heart a burning wicked desire that they would kiss me with those red lips” (Stoker 45). Thus the vampires become the embodiment of sexual freedom. Does this sexual freedom apply to both men and women?

The sexuality and subsequent villainous readings of the vampires were seen as the reactions of a repressed society. *Dracula* was seen as an expression of sexual perversion and perversion, as Igor Primoratz defines for us, is “a type of sexual behaviour or orientation that is unnatural or perverted is not only to say that it has certain important traits; normally, it is also to condemn it, perhaps harshly, and also to imply that there is an objective reason, reason dictated by nature, that grounds the condemnation” (Primoratz 245). Perversions, sexual repression and the subsequent condemnation of them, all are intertwined in the mind of the reader. So, when we find ourselves faced with a negative analysis of the vampires and the vampires being our unconscious a sexual desire, the negativity is stemmed from a reaction to what is seen as perverted. The question lies in whether this ‘perversion’ is relevant today? In a culture where vampires are desirable, especially to women (a prolonged interest in pouting, pale faced male protagonists in both film, television and literature giving evidence to this) sexual contact with a vampire is no longer seen as something to be disgusted with but rather a
desirable outcome. With this in mind Dracula is no longer the monster that he was, the modern readers, more importantly the feminine modern readers, would not see him as such. I would argue, and recent film incarnations would support, that women prefer to see him as tortured or misunderstood. He is no longer a two-dimensional monster but filled out into a being to be envied or desired.

**Lucy: The Victim?**

To put this in the frame of gender difference, examining the female characters as well as the male, we can look at the different fates of Lucy and Mina. They have different attitudes to men, Mina wishing only to be with Jonathan and to be a good wife, and Lucy talking more about love and even going so far as to say “why can’t they let a girl marry three men” (Stoker 67). She immediately repents and retracts the statement but that it occurs to her is what makes her different to Mina. Her eventual fate, succumbing to the power of Dracula and therefore surrendering to the assumed repressed inner-sexuality (sexuality seen as sinful or perverted at the time), and then the destruction at the hands of the Crew of Light can be read as her punishment for giving in to unchaste desires. Lisa Nystrom indicates that the transformation into a female vampire is in essence the “unleashing of female sexuality” (65) and that her destruction is an elimination of the threat to patriarchal society. It is poignant to note that Lucy is not given a voice during the encounter; she is described in the diaries and accounts by the Crew of Light, she is never allowed to document her own thoughts once her transformation has taken place. She becomes a “foul Thing” (Stoker 228) in their eyes and so the reader is strong-armed into the male perspective. If we follow the male train of thought we are led from unchaste behaviour, to empowered sexuality in vampiric form, to monster, to destruction. This demands the reader to follow the Crew of Light’s perspective but a 21st century reader would not necessarily see female empowerment in a sexualised form as a monstrous thing.
It is possible for the feminine reader to identify with Lucy the vampire and see her destruction as a violation of her person. The penetration of her inert body has echoes of rape and this form of destroying a female through her sexuality is a gross defilement, which might be difficult for a feminine reader to support. In this sense the reader response might not be complete jubilation at the destruction of the ‘monster’ but rather tinged with pity and the murder of an innocent victim. Lucy having been feeding on children and having one “clutched strenuously to her breast” (Stoker 226) is an image that invokes disgust in a reader, especially in a female reader whose maternal instincts would rail against the murder of a child. This image is immediately followed by the desecration of her body creating a divide within the reader. The process of reading the first scene, feeling disgust, and then reading on and feeling pity at the desecration of her helpless body, will cause the reader to think back and reevaluate their feelings on the first scene. This method of texturising the reading may not necessarily alter the feeling of disgust but rather layer it with further reactions that alter the interpretations of the eventual outcome of Lucy. A masculine reader looking at the text will see the scenes in a more calculative manner - vampire plus feeding on child equals monster. This method of reading in a linear method is a product of holding the text at a distance, but the feminine method of integration makes it more complicated. In life we are less capable of seeing past events apart from the present ones, it is not a case of this happened therefore this will happen but rather a feeling it is all happening at once. If we imagine the scene where Lucy is discovered, identified as a vampire, caught with the child and then destroyed, the process of stepping into this world, as previously discussed Berggren states feminine readers will, means it all happens in a short space of time. In this case it is impossible to separate one incident from the other. It is harder to see them as separate events which lead to the eventual outcome but rather as one terrifying occurrence that invokes many reactions, some contradictory, which create confusion as to our feelings for Lucy: victim or monster? Or possibly even more confusing, both?
Another point of contention or as Fish puts it, “uneasiness” (390) felt within the reader owing to his or her lack or certainty of the ‘correct’ interpretation, is the tableau created by Lucy the vampire in this scene with the child. The analysis offered by Christopher Craft is that it is an example of ‘inversion’ as the child clutched to Lucy’s breast is “not being fed, but is fed upon” (Craft 120). To Craft this is the “novel’s anxious protestation that appetite in a woman . . . is a diabolic . . . inversion of the natural order” (121), he sees it as simply as his aforementioned statement, in essence a pure reversal, to feed upon instead of feed, to do the opposite of what one should do. This analysis, however logical, sits uneasily. A woman’s relationship with a child is a complicated one and Craft’s somewhat masculine common-sense approach seems too black and white. Considering the natural desire to have children, the maternal or paternal instinct that is arguably present in humans and the vampiric form being a demonisation of natural instincts, Lucy’s behaviour might not be an inversion or opposite but rather a darker form of her nature. As a human she may have coveted a child in the sense of wanting to be a mother and now as a demonised version of herself she still covets children: “we women have something of the mother spirit in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother spirit is invoked” (Stoker 245). Her behaviour therefore is not unnatural, as she is still inclined towards children, but as a vampire her natural instincts are subverted. These are subtle differences in analysis, but differences that may stem from differences in gender and their effects on the way one reads texts.

Another aspect that Williamson invites us to consider is the distress of a reader seeing a dead body defiled, seeing the vampire as a corpse rather than an un-dead monster. To provide context, the novel was written at a time of scientific exploration, the exploration being of the human body, more specifically in surgeons examining corpses to study human anatomy. This inspired a streak of grave robbing and the subsequent fear of having your loved one’s graves disturbed after they are buried: “for it was the process of supplying newly-dead human corpses to anatomists that grave-robbing flourished” (Williamson 22). Williamson
states that there was a sexualised aspect to the examination of a naked corpse and that the “erotic fascination for unveiling and undressing female cadavers provides an alternative understanding of the medical and representational context for staking Lucy” (16). She presents a case for a class related response being similar to the gender related response because subjugated bodies of people react against oppression in a similar manner. That oppression itself is without criteria; it can be applied and reacted to by anyone or anything. The working class respond differently to the novel because of the working class’ fear of having their family’s bodies stolen for medical examination. The working class body was seen as an object much in the same way that Lucy becomes a ‘Thing’ to the Crew of Light and the working class considered “insuring themselves for proper burial more important than health insurance” (Williamson 23). In this sense the desecration of Lucy’s body and its subsequent transformation into an object rather than a person would strike a chord with the working class at that time, creating a reader response that differs from the other classes of the time whose dead bodies were relatively safe from this exposure.

The key word here is exposure, the act of being dead being the ultimate state of passivity. A corpse literally cannot defend itself from attack. Coupled with the gender aspect, there is also the different reaction from the way a man might feel about being seen in this defenceless position and the way a woman would; this would affect the reader response when presented with the scene of Lucy’s ‘corpse’ being viewed by four men. There is also a kinship between the reader and the four men, all of whom view Lucy without her permission, Lucy being unable to give it. There is argument to suggest that the stigma of appearing feminine is present within the female even at the point of their death. The violent desecration of Lucy’s defenseless body by Holmwood who was “like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper” (Stoker 230) could be seen as a brutal act rather than one of mercy.
A feminine reading could be very different from a more patriarchal reaction. In the text itself there is disagreement within the characters between the unyielding Van Helsing and the more sympathetic Seward who tries to stop Van Helsing from even laying eyes on the corpse: “The sight was almost too much for me. It seemed to be as much an affront to the dead as it would have been to strip of her clothing in her sleep while living” (Stoker 210). Seward here acknowledges a reaction that could occur within someone knowing of this act, and therefore acknowledges a reaction that may occur within the reader of the text. Williamson sees this as proof that “Seward clearly considers this activity to be socially inappropriate and sexual” (Williamson 17) and Williamson being a female critic further highlights the point that a feminine reader may not be able to see this act as a purely heroic one.

A contrary reading of Lucy’s destruction, if we return to Craft and his analysis, is that her body is restored rather than desecrated by the stake. Craft described for us the female body as being a sign itself of “Nature overriding reproductive intention” (123); he does this by quoting to us the purpose of the hymen from Havelock Ellis. First of all he illustrates for us that sex itself is the act in which “the accumulated force is let go and by its liberation the sperm-bearing instrument is driven home” (qtd. in Craft 123), he draws correlation between the mystical ‘accumulated force’ of the wooden stake and the ‘liberated’ state of Lucy afterwards. He then delves further into Ellis’ theory by adding the idea that the hymen is a natural barrier with which to test her male partners, a feeble or insufficient man not being able to break it thus the hymen “is an anatomical expression of that admiration of force which marks the female in her choice of mate” (qtd. in Craft 123). His conclusion is that the ‘force’ invited by the female body coupled with Lucy’s restoration to a state of “sweetness and purity” (Stoker 231) is evidence enough that the procedure of “corrective penetration” (Craft 118) was an act of mercy in the novel and should be seen as such. However, it is hard to believe that a feminine reader would agree that any use of ‘force’ on a female body is
appropriate or necessary. In a text where horror and violence is expected it is difficult to appreciate such a phallic and undesired penetration as without connotations of rape. Craft’s insistence that the female body, even at a physical level, invites penetrative force would be a difficult leap for the female mind to make, the feminine method of ‘participation’ while reading means that they too would be involved in the staking and the similarity to rape would be difficult to miss. To further this, if a feminine reader identifies with that character of Lucy they may experience the scene as being a defilement of themselves as well as her.

**Mina: The Rescued?**

If we come back to the fate of Mina, it is possible to read different things into her behavior and eventual fate. First of all her attitude to being a wife is very dutiful and obedient, she states that she practices her shorthand and typing so that she “shall be able to be useful to Jonathan” (Stoker 62). She wishes to serve her husband. Nystrom states that the difference between the two women is that “Lucy succumbs to Dracula’s thrall and ultimately welcomes the transformation, Mina rejects it” (69); Mina fights Dracula’s influence in order to stay true to her real desire, to be a good wife. There is a subtle difference in the ways of reading this. Her behavior could be seen as her 19th century submission to her role as a female, choosing to read into this attitude only obedience to her husband. However it is also possible to see a desire for enlightenment, Mina does not wish to learn to cook or clean to serve her husband, she desires to “keep up with Jonathan’s studies” (Stoker 62). One response that a woman might have is to see this as Mina desiring to be her husband’s equal, rather than his servant. Mina describes how she and Jonathan converse via shorthand when he is away (Stoker 62) and Jonathan tries to use this by sending an encoded message to Mina while he is a prisoner of the Count: “Mina’s is in shorthand . . . to her I have explained my situation” (Stoker 50). This statement shows a skill that he and she possess equally and his faith in her as well, by
asking for her help. It would be easy to read the novel and see Mina as the simple obedient 19th century wife but a less patriarchal reading might show more.

Mina is Harker’s equal and her rejection of Dracula shows her strength of character rather than as a victim to be rescued. However there have been responses that are contrary to this. It has been claimed that Mina is saved due to her “compliance and obedience to the will of her male companions” (Nystrom 71), it is her submission that ultimately saves her. This is based on Harker’s journal entry where he states that he is “so glad that [Mina] consented to hold back and let us men do the work” (Stoker 264) but this statement is made by a male character and the interpretation is very male centered. Nystrom is saying that Mina is saved because she submits to her role as a subservient woman but this is not necessarily the response that all readers would have. As I have already stated Mina can be seen as Harker’s partner and equal and allowing the men to ‘do the work’ is not a submission but rather recognition of her own limitations, but also her strengths as well. She is afflicted by her encounter with Dracula so taking a more passive role in the chase is sensible and Harker also says that “it is due to her energy and brains and foresight that the whole story is put together” (Stoker 264). So there is tension in the two statements that can create different readings for different readers, it can even cause different reading within the same reader.

Applying Iser’s ‘surprise’ theory to the paragraph, that in order to keep a reader interested a text must cause the reader to this retrospectively, we can achieve a different reading: “Narrative techniques that establish links between things we find difficult to connect, so that we are forced to reconsider data we first held to be perfectly straightforward” (Iser 305). The text will make one statement, and then contradict itself, causing the readers to retrace their original thought process and re-evaluate. It is this process of ‘surprises’ that creates different responses within the reader. First we read that Mina is remaining passive by letting the men handle things, but then we learn that she has been pivotal in her role up to that point, so the reader returns to the original statement and re-reads it in a new light. It is
possible for a reader, perhaps a patriarchal reader, to see this as having finished her part and leaving the rest up to the ‘stronger’ male characters. However, it is also possible to see this as a tactical move; Mina knows her strengths and will be ready to play them when she is needed. A feminine reader may see this more as an acknowledgement of difference rather than weakness.

If we take for example William Hughes’ view that “[t]o maintain a sense of sexual difference, therefore, [women] must be made to suggest at least a degree of vulnerability and, indeed, availability for the accepted sexual transaction of marriage, before the close of the novel brings her into conventional relations with the proprietary hero” (103), it seems that Mina ‘deference’ is actually rather an instance of ‘difference’. That would put Mina and Jonathan’s relationship (somewhat unconventional for the period) in the realm of opposites rather than one of master and subordinate. Hughes argues Stoker’s intent was to create a recognisable difference between the male and female characters. Mina’s deference in letting Jonathan ‘do the work’ is her accepting a different role rather than a passive one. This interpretation could be more akin to Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that a “woman is taught from adolescence to lie to men, to scheme, to be wily” (99), but that would be a feminist and arguably feminine approach to their difference. The difference that Hughes refers to in this case would be an assertion of a subtle female manipulation rather than one of male dominance. Of course another reading would be to see the ‘difference’ as weakness and the male need to take over the duties that Mina could not carry out. Hughes’ ‘difference’ is an effective tool for looking at the conflicting responses that could be taken to Mina’s acquiescing to the men being in control.

Hughes also claims that women become, in Stoker’s fiction, a form of “erotic currency constantly in transmission between one male and another, and always before the eye of an implicitly male reader” (106). He is implying that Stoker writes his female characters for male readers intentionally, the reduction of the female characters to items of sexual trade
being an indicator of this intention. This is reminiscent of a safeguard against “interpretive chaos” (Schweickart & Flynn 5), namely wrong interpretation. Schweickart and Flynn discuss the “New Critical injunction” (5) in which the main function was to prevent misguided or erratic associations when it came to literary interpretation. It is presented as one of the arguments against Reader Response theory, the “subjectivity of the reader mainly as a source of error” (4) rather than one of diversity. Hughes’ claim that Stoker writes for a male reader implies that Stoker meant to prevent this; he meant to prevent alternative readings of his characters by writing them a certain way, to prevent ‘wrong’ responses. In continuation of this in order to see the female character as ‘currency’ a feminine reader would have to adopt a patriarchal point of view. A feminine response to Dracula might not necessarily see Lucy and Mina as sexual currencies as to do so they would also, to some extent, have to see themselves that way. Sexuality is a power in women, that it is seen as such now it arguable true, but it is not a power wielded by men as the analogy of currency would have us believe.

Hughes then goes on to say that Stoker used rape as a method of theft or ‘moral outrage’ against, not the female victim, but the male ‘owner’ of that female: “the rhetoric of moral outrage when the incident is based not on consent, but on an act of violence or coercion against the woman herself – thus indirectly against her male ‘owner’, current or future” (106). In the case of Lucy her owner is Holmwood, and in Mina’s it is Harker. This throws new light onto the scene of Lucy’s final destruction, the male reading being that the ‘owner’ and therefore real victim of the crime, taking back or restoring what was stolen from him. Holmwood’s final penetration of Lucy, his only one, is what restores her to peace and therefore restores some of what was stolen from him. However it is difficult for any woman, experiencing the ‘rape’ with Lucy, to feel empathy for the male doing it. His ‘theft’ pales in comparison to the ordeals that Lucy faced. Feminine readings would not see her transformation and subsequent destruction as a strike against Holmwood, this view seems
somewhat egotistical, that in the case of the victim we should feel sympathy for her fiancée rather than her.

**Dracula’s Wives: Biting Back?**

The vampire sexuality is both its biggest lure and threat and sexuality is a theme that will always cause extreme reactions within the reader. The vampire itself has been compared to a ‘vagina with teeth’, because the act of sucking blood is comparable to that of oral sex to extract semen. The danger of the vampire is that the teeth are capable of biting off the penis and thus emasculating the man, it is this fear that would cause reaction in a male reader. It stems from the idea that in sexual intercourse the man enters the woman and dominates the proceeding, the woman having to allow herself to be entered. A 21st century might not agree that men ‘dominate’ sexual encounters. In the case of the vampire the idea of a “vagina with teeth” (Nystrom 66) comes into play because she has the ability to ‘bite back’ at her sexual partner. Lisa Nystrom states that the teeth of the vampire subvert the power play in the sexual experience. Is it really the teeth that unbalance the dynamic or the increased sexuality and the teeth are merely the symbol of it?

The symbolic nature of the vampire’s teeth is evidenced in Harker’s fixation on the female vampire’s teeth, he found himself “clos[ing his] eyes in a languorous ecstasy” (Stoker 46) which indicates his arousal by the powerful female figure. His description, however, also indicates his alarm at the encounter:

> All three had brilliant white teeth . . . I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth . . . I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips . . . I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of the two sharp teeth. (Stoker 45-46)
The repetition of the red lips and the teeth are a visual image of the vagina with teeth as both inviting and threatening. Nystrom states that “with the threat of castration being paired with alongside uninhibited sexuality, the vampires in Dracula become objects of lust, desire, terror, and disgust all at once” (66). Castration by the Vampire can be thought of as a literal fear of the female biting off the penis with her teeth or as a metaphor for the submission that men are forced into in the presence of the strong sexuality of the female vampire.

A male reader, looking it at the novel as a ‘text’ and “setting oneself apart from the reading” (171) as Berggren argues men do when approaching their analysis, might look at the language of the above quotation. To look at the language as something apart from yourself you can see the animalistic nature in the description, the licking of the ‘scarlet lips’ like an animal, and take this to indicate the vampire is something akin to an animal, a base natured creature, that has given in to its beastly desires and abandoned all ties to that of civilised human behaviour. The ‘lapping’ and ‘churning’ of the tongue further the theory that the vampire is something ‘other’, it is not human and therefore not natural. By this extension the sexual behaviour of the female vampires is also seen as unnatural, and is thus proven by the text.

If we try to read the novel ‘as a woman’, meaning with a feminine perspective, there are two aspects of this that we can consider. Firstly, that it is argued that women read “primarily for pleasure, and assess the events and female characters against their own experience” (Berggren 171). Secondly, a feminine reader will not appreciate characters, and therefore novels, if they do not understand them, if their own experience and life do not allow them access to them. Berggren describes an interview with a female reader and states that “Kim disliked Nancy Drew . . . [as] Kim did not recognize [her]” (174). In applying this to Dracula, if we examine the same scene we can produce different results. A feminine reader, placing herself within the text rather than apart would gain more interest in the narrator’s (Harker’s) reaction:
There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive. 

. . . the skin of my throat began to tingle as one’s flesh does when the hand that
is to tickle it approaches nearer –nearer . . . I closed my eyes in languorous
ecstasy and waited –waited with beating heart. (Stoker 45-46)

Here, concentrating on the feelings rather than descriptions of the scene one can gage a
different perspective on the vampire. Harker speaks of a ‘tingling’ feeling and being in
‘ecstasy’, he repeats himself which indicates impatience, and describes the vampire and both
‘thrilling and repulsive’. The sexual nature of the encounter cannot be denied and it has
become sexual from Harker’s own description. This tells the reader that it is the male
color, in his own journal, which deemed the encounter as sexual. A 21st century reader,
who has either had sexual encounters of their own, or eagerly await them (younger readers),
would be excited by the idea of a man being so aroused by a female character. Whereas the
male characters sees monstrosity, a 21st century sees power and sexual awakening. If you
focus on the feelings of the characters in this exchange there is a man who freely admits (via
his journal) to have been aroused by a sexually powerful woman but felt guilty and disgusted
afterwards: “Then the horror overcame me” (Stoker 47, my emphasis). Harker’s response here
mirrors the patriarchal readers’ excited and horrified response to the wives of Dracula. Putting
oneself into the text and allowing our own emotions and feelings to colour it, rather than
examining it like a formula, allows for a much more feminine analysis.
Conclusion

In reading *Dracula* it can be said that you will also read something of yourself. Your response to the novel can create telling insights into your own perception of yourself and the world around you. When you read about Dracula, do you see a threat, a monster or temptation? Are his wives ghastly and repulsive or sexually free? Is Lucy a victim of Dracula, the Crew of Light or not a victim at all? Is Mina saved or does she save herself? All of these are questions that will be answered differently by every reader, but one thing that will affect the decision is the gender of the reader.

Feminine readers will always have a different perspective than masculine or patriarchal readers and arguably read in a different manner. Therefore the outcome will always differ from a man’s. A feminine reader will surround herself with the world of *Dracula* and see Harker’s journal as the writings of 19th century man, they will see Mina’s opinions as that of a 19th century woman, and they will envelope themselves in the events and emotions of the characters and become a part of the story itself. Neutrality becomes impossible when one is a participant in the story, which is how to read ‘like a woman’. It will always remain impossible for them to see Lucy as just a victim as we would never regard ourselves as ‘just’ anything; therefore that same courtesy will be extended to the characters. People and life involve layers upon layers of complexity and it is those layers that are applied to the text. The diversity that we inject into the text, the ‘filling in the gaps’ that we employ is ourselves, our own personality. To read like a man, to ‘hold the text apart’ as a thing to be studied is to limit it, but if we merge with the text, breathe life into it, and then it becomes a world for the reader. It is from this world that we can see more clearly what the text is trying to say, and indeed what we want to say about the text.

*Dracula* has not remained on the pages as a monster because the world we created for him would not have him so. Female vampires are not repellent to men, quite the
opposite, and are powerful while retaining their female sexuality. Wives are not merely there to be protected and rescued, they are helpful and aid in their own survival. These are the worlds that reading like a woman has created and, whether Stoker intended for them to be or not, this is where the characters live now, not on the pages but in the reader’s minds.


