

Religion, Superstition, and Science in *Dracula*

Jane Doe

English 1001

Dr. John Smith

October 25, 2012

*Dracula* is a book about battles. The plot, in its most basic form, is a two-sided war: the vampire Dracula comes to London and is then tracked down and killed by a group of Englishmen. However, through the course of the story, the fight becomes much more than one of man versus monster. The story is steeped in both religious and scientific imagery, and presents its heroes, somewhat paradoxically, as proponents of both, locked in a battle with the superstitious forces of centuries past. The novel attempts to make a distinction between the modern Christianity of the English heroes and the old-world superstitions that surround Dracula, however, in the end, it is decidedly un-modern weapons that defeat Dracula. This victory overwhelms the characters endorsement of Christian concepts, and ultimately confounds any attempt the novel makes the draw a distinct line between the two. The lines between good, evil, religion, and superstition lose all definition, and the teaming of modern science with religion does little to prevent the eventually merging of Christianity with the supernatural.

Van Helsing and his small army certainly see themselves as being on the side of the Christian God, and Van Helsing repeatedly depicts their hunt for Dracula as transcending the material to become a biblical battle with clearly drawn lines between good versus evil. Dracula is aligned with the devil throughout the book, and Van Helsing describes the un-dead as “a blot on the face of God's sunshine; an arrow in the side of Him who died for man” (204). The men take upon themselves the role of religious crusaders, out to remove the arrow that is Dracula from the side of the Lord and so to allow God's light to shine upon the world unspoiled. The main weapons used against Dracula derive from the church, and it is through Dracula's aversion to these Christian symbols that the most skeptical of the men come to see his true wickedness. When Van Helsing first introduces the communion wafer to combat Dracula, Dr. Seward says that “we felt individually that in the presence of such earnest purpose as the Professor's, a purpose which could thus use the to him most sacred of things, it was impossible to distrust” (180). Thus Van Helsing's religious nature, already apparent to the other characters, confirms both the seriousness of their purpose and the evil nature of Dracula.

Caught up in this battle between biblical good and evil, it falls to the men to save Lucy's soul when she is turned by Dracula, and in doing so they continue to sharply delineate between themselves and the un-dead. Resting in her coffin, Lucy is equated with the fallen Angels when she is described as a “foul Thing” who works “wickedness by night and [grows] more debased in the assimilating of it by day” (183, 184). It is especially notable that none of the goodness that Lucy displayed in her life remains after her transformation; no middle ground exists, and she is thoroughly a wicked creature of the devil. The group's violent violation of her, then, is justified as an act of religious salvation. Calling on Christian doctrine, Van Helsing claims that after Lucy's true death in the eyes of God, “she shall take her place with the other Angels” (185), and so be made pure again. Van Helsing explicitly makes them out as instruments of God when he commands Arthur, who is about to stake Lucy, to “strike in God's name” (185).

While Van Helsing and his comrades seem secure in their righteousness, the text itself relies heavily on imagery that complicates the strict religious dichotomy its characters embrace. Dracula and his follower Renfield use Christian language and scripture in a way that links Dracula to Christ. In one of the few instances when the reader hears Dracula's own words, he

makes use of explicitly Christian terminology to compare Mina's drinking of his blood to the Eucharist, claiming her as "flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood" (247). Similarly, Mina is later described as being tainted with "that vampire's baptism" (314), which invests in Dracula the power of some kind of devilish priest. Renfield especially likens Dracula to a religious figure, saying of their alliance that "I am. . . somewhat in the position which Enoch occupied spiritually . . . because he walked with God" (231). To Renfield, Dracula is a Christ figure, offering eternal life and salvation in exchange for worship, and he follows him as a religious disciple.

It is possible to interpret Dracula's mimicry of Christ as mere trickery: evil appropriating the language of good for its own uses. However, the text several times suggests that their similarities stem not from stolen language, but from the fact that they grow from a common source. Van Helsing notes of Dracula's need for sacred ground that "it is not the least of its terrors that this evil thing is rooted deep in good" (206). Thus Dracula does not exist as a discrete opposite of good, but is instead created by it, like a poisonous plant rooted in bountiful soil. Similarly, Dr. Seward wonders, upon seeing the beginning of Mina's transformation, whether "there may be a poison that distills itself out of good things" (206), further suggesting that the goodness of God and the evil of Dracula are not necessarily enemies, and are in fact twisted kin.

This mingling of the sources of good and evil starts to erode the battle lines drawn by the characters, who seek to define the Christian God as categorically distinct from the source of Dracula's power. This becomes especially true as their God is shown not to be omnipotent, but is instead trapped by the same rules of play as Dracula. After Dracula's attack on Mina, the English take it for granted that Mina is unclean in the eyes of their God, even though she herself has done nothing wrong and maintains her purity of faith and heart. Mina's status is made violently clear when she is burned by the communion wafer Van Helsing means to protect her, after which she cries "Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh!" (254). The Christian God, then, is shown not to embody goodness, but is Himself wrathful and petty, impressed not by intention and thought but by action and symbol. Mina has sinned against her will, during what amounts to a rape, but even "with all her goodness and purity and faith, was an outcast from God" (264). The God who curses Mina begins to seem less like the morally conscious object of religious veneration, and more like the dark, random force of a superstition which is chained to the same ancient forces as Dracula.

The text attempts to keep the Christian God from merging with traditional superstition by having the English bring modern science to bear on His behalf, suggesting that the alliance of modern science with religion raises both above the level of old world superstition. Indeed, in this battle against the Devil, the men see their greatest asset as science. The book is littered with examples of the most modern technology available at the time – phonographs, Kodak cameras, typewriters, and medical equipment are all used by the English heroes. Mina explicitly emphasizes the alliance of this technology with religion when she describes the phonograph as "like a soul crying out to Almighty God" (191). Van Helsing especially touts the advantages science will bring to this religious battle, cheering the men by claiming they have "a power denied to the vampire kind; we have sources of science" (204). The men strategize endlessly, and seem to think that they will be able to defeat the evil they face through the sheer force of

reason alone. Van Helsing welcomes Mina's work to gather all of their evidence into one document so that when they "meet in the study we shall all be informed as to facts, and can arrange our plan of battle with this terrible and mysterious enemy" ( 202). No matter how terrible the mystery, it is no so great that it cannot be overcome by facts.

As the battle progresses, however, the joining of God with science is unable to keep the heroes from entering the realm of taboo and superstition, and in the end it is the most archaic powers of the church – symbol and ritual – that drive the vampire from England. Jonathan is initially depicted as an "English Churchman" who sees the crucifix as "in some measure idolatrous" (4), but he, and the other Englishmen, must learn to shed this modern, abstract religious view in favor of a primitive Christianity grounded in the magical and fantastic. Confronted by Dracula during the attempt to purify his safehouses, Dr. Seward defends himself with ancient religious symbols, and says he feels "holding the Crucifix and Wafer in my left hand . . . a mighty power fly along my arm" (263). In the context of Catholic catechism, which declares that "to attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance [. . .] is to fall into superstition" (Matthew 23: 16-22), the men's use of the crucifix and wafer is not merely un-modern; it is almost blasphemous. The objects are no longer evocative of a person's internal relationship to God, but are electric in and of themselves, regardless of when and how they are used.

So, despite their nominal victory, modern religion and its partner science actually do little to prevent Dracula's invasion. In seeming contradiction to his earlier endorsements of God and science, Van Helsing later as much as admits their limitations in the fight with Dracula. He faults science and religion for their narrowness, telling Dr. Seward that "it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then is says there is nothing to explain" (163), and warns "not to think little of any one's belief, no matter how strange it be" (159). In fact, the reader is told before Dracula even reveals himself that it will take something more than modernity to defeat him. Jonathan, in the opening pages of the story, senses some of the ancient evil behind Dracula and imagines that "the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere 'modernity' cannot kill" (30). The power to defeat Dracula comes not from science or even the modern church, but "out of the lore and experience of the ancients" (183); in fact, he says, in this battle "tradition and superstition – are everything" (204).

The men, then, for all their talk of the powers of God and science, come to look a lot like the cowering citizens of Romania who, at the beginning of the story, try to warn Jonathan Harker away from Dracula's castle. They too must resort, like those anachronistic peasants, to the use of ancient symbols, despite all their access to modern science and technology. Their God, instead of a being in a separate sphere altogether from the evil of Dracula, begins to seem not that different from the enemy they are chasing. Even the joining of religion with modernity cannot effectively temper the basic depiction in *Dracula* of the Christian Church as atavistic and superstitious. Van Helsing himself makes the extraordinary claim that "to superstition must we trust at the first; it was man's faith in the early, and it have its root in faith still" (202). Faith, then, is not distinct from superstition, and but is a sort of evolution of ancient traditions, dressed up to meet the demands of the newest science and technology. It is, however, back to the original and ancient superstitions of their religion that the men must go in order to survive.

Works Cited

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. Print.

*The English Standard Version Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with Apocrypha*.  
Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.