RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sins of the flesh: anorexia, eroticism and the female vampire in Bram Stoker’s Dracula

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This article discusses anorexia as an aesthetic ideal rather than as an actual illness, as well as its erotic connotations in the context of Victorian literature and culture. The nineteenth century regarded anorexia as a gendered disease: like other so-called ‘female maladies’, it is connected with male standards of femininity and the devastating effects it has on women’s self-image. The sometimes contradictory representation of anorexia in literature offers a particularly interesting insight into cultural assumptions of what was (is?) considered as ‘truly feminine’. I will concentrate on the analysis of vampire women in Stoker’s Dracula, since the female vampire manifests all the contradictions in Victorian and fin de siècle assumptions of femininity. In the novel, all the vampires except the Count himself are female, and the transformations these women undergo are mainly manifest in their bodies. The act of eating in Dracula becomes not only aesthetically and culturally unacceptable but monstrous and grotesque, the vampire thereby becoming an exaggerated representation of the Victorian culture of anorexia and personifying male fears about women and hunger. Stoker’s message seems to be that the fleshy sensual woman is not only sexually incontinent but fatally dangerous, thus needing to be corrected – if not savagely eliminated.

Keywords: Victorian; femininity; aesthetics; anorexia; eroticism; vampire

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. (Woolf 1992, p. 45)

This article discusses female vampire characters, their relationship with anorexia as an aesthetic ideal rather than as an actual illness, and how the artistic representation of anorexic women was endowed with disturbing erotic connotations in the context of Victorian literature and culture. The nineteenth century (and certainly the twentieth as well) viewed anorexia as a clearly gendered disease: like other so-called ‘female maladies’, it was connected with male standards of femininity that regarded women as angels of purity and innocence, and thus as physically weaker and necessarily ‘less carnal’ than men. To my mind, the portrayal of vampires and anorexic women in literature offers a particularly interesting insight into cultural assumptions of what was considered ‘truly feminine’. As the following pages aim at illustrating, the icon of hyperfeminine

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selflessness that anorexic women represented offers multiple perspectives for analysis, as it often provoked ambivalent reactions of admiration and suspicion in males. In either case, both the physical emaciation and the severe mental disorders that anorexia entails are a strikingly painful manifestation of women’s sense of otherness and inadequacy in a male-defined culture.

The ideal of True Womanhood and its adjoining Cult of Invalidism often caused devastating effects on women’s self-image, and sometimes even on their physical condition. Middle- and upper-middle-class women who displayed symptoms of emaciation showed their decorative status – and their husbands’ wealth in being able to afford such an unproductive wife – and clearly exhibited their opposition to the typically large and fleshy working-class woman. As a result, the notion that a true lady had to be petite and fragile in order to emphasise her angelic, bodiless and passionless nature encouraged delicacy and an unnatural weakness in women. Control of food intake was obviously crucial in achieving this appearance of sickly loveliness, so fasting and vomiting became an effective instrument for young women of the period who wished (or rather, imperiously needed) to appear attractive to the male gaze. Anna Krugovoy Silver pertinently remarks on this notion in her introduction to *Victorian literature and the anorexic body*:

> the erotic appeal of a woman’s small waist derives from her physical weakness and vulnerability, especially when juxtaposed with man’s strength. Symbolically, the waist signifies woman’s ethereal nature, the aerial qualities that separate her from man; a woman’s light weight suggests her spiritual, rather than carnal, nature. Her ‘angelic’ nature is thus reflected in her weak, slight body . . . they understood her weakness and invalidism, demonstrated by her lack of appetite, as closely connected to a hyperbolic femininity. (Silver 2002, p. 44)

Although these practices cannot be considered as common to all women, fashion and dress codes increasingly demanded the use of corsets, and the unhealthy practice of tight-lacing became more widespread. Many women’s health was often impaired by lack of exercise and fresh air, as well as by inadequate diets that could sometimes result in serious diseases like anaemia or even tuberculosis. Silver aptly identifies the corset as ‘a visible marker of the culture of anorexia’: its ability to constrict women’s waists is only too obvious an image of the suffocating strictures of Victorian patriarchy. The corset ‘both demonstrates the cultural imperative to be slim and constitutes the method by which women approximated that imperative: throughout the century, women re-shaped their bodies, particularly their waists, to conform to normative standards of beauty’ (Silver 2002, p. 36).

The first volume of Michel Foucault’s *The history of sexuality* reveals how the need of Western society (and, more specifically, of the medical profession) to control women’s sexuality brought about a ‘hysterisation’ of their bodies by defining them ‘as saturated with sexuality’ on the grounds of ‘a pathology intrinsic to them’ (Foucault 1978, p. 104), thus popularising the view that women are inherently sick. Anorexia nervosa was first diagnosed by Charles Lasègue and Sir William Withey Gull in 1873, but the American William Stout Chipley had already coined the term ‘sitomania’ in 1859 to define a fear of eating. However, archival research suggests that diagnoses of anorexia nervosa existed before it was termed as such, perhaps as early as the 1820s. In his enlightening book *Idols of perversity*, Bram Dijkstra also notes that the origins of anorexia nervosa and other related disorders are to be found in women’s attempts to conform to the morbidly attractive ideal of the sublime consumptive:

> many [women], realizing that a consumptive look in women was thought to be evidence of a saintly disposition, began to cultivate that look of tubercular virtue by starving themselves . . .
the psychological antecedents of our twentieth-century disease of anorexia nervosa, which gives the sufferer a false sense of virtuous self-control, are to be found in the fad of sublime tubercular emaciation which, as we have seen, began to take on epidemic proportions in the 1860s and has continued to serve as a model of what is considered ‘truly feminine’. (Dijkstra 1986, p. 29)

As has been mentioned, the literature of the period reproduced the patriarchal notion that viewed slenderness and illness as the attributes of the pure, saintly and selfless woman. In literature, for example, Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The fall of the house of Usher’ (1845), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla (1872), George du Maurier’s Trilby (1894), and a number of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories identify the female body as the outward expression of a woman’s emotional states or of her moral qualities. Not only literature but other forms of art as well helped to emphasise this view: images of convalescent, invalid, dying or even already dead women crowded art galleries and magazines of the period. The deaths of Ophelia and the Lady of Shalott were favourite subjects of most artists – well-known Pre-Raphaelites like Dante Gabriel Rossetti or John Everett Millais painted them almost to obsession. As a result, these tragic heroines and their even more tragic endings became cultural icons of perfect femininity. Even opera mimicked these values: in Puccini’s works, for instance, the sweetly consumptive Mimi in La Bohème (1896) or the innocent and submissive Cio-Cio-San in Madame Butterfly (1904) similarly equate illness and death (for love, of course) with True Womanhood.

Definitions of femininity according to Victorian morals and aesthetics are thus, to my mind, largely based on what Anna Krugovoy Silver calls ‘the anorexic logic’. She defines this notion – as applied to Victorian literature and culture – as being closely linked to the gender ideologies of the period and defines it by the characteristics quoted below:

an aesthetic validation of the slender female form as the physical ideal of beauty and a concomitant fear of fat as ugly and/or unfeminine; an understanding of the body as an entity that must be subordinated to the will and disciplined as an emblem of one’s self-control; the related, gendered, belief that the perfect woman is the one who submits her physical appetites . . . to her will, and that the ‘good’ woman is, either by nature or by training, more spiritual and less carnal than men; the belief that the slender body corporealizes this self-mastery and/or spirituality; and the belief that slenderness carries particular class connotations and most often is a sign of a woman’s affluence. (Silver 2002, p. 27)

In the introduction to her book Dedication to hunger: the anorexic aesthetic in modern culture, Leslie Heywood similarly defines the anorexic logic as ‘that set of assumptions . . . that values mind over body, thin over fat, white over black, masculine over feminine’ (1996, p. xii). Although anorexia was as real and serious a disease as it is today, I will employ Silver’s and Heywood’s concept for my analysis, since it does not only refer to the number of women who suffered from the actual disease but rather to its value as icon and metaphor, that is, to its aesthetic and cultural implications as they affected ‘healthy’ women. In my view, the ideology behind such a disturbing ideal reveals the violence of patriarchal strictures, which attempt to destroy women’s autonomy and self-worth under the pretence of adoring and protecting them.

Although women were idealised as angelic beings, they were simultaneously feared as sexually voracious monsters. Leslie Heywood, among other critics, has perceived that both mythology and ideology in Western culture have identified images of femininity as ‘devouring, insatiable . . . Hungering. Voracious. Without restraint. Always wanting’ (1996, p. 193). The True Woman was thus expected to regulate her behaviour and her appetite as a symbol of self-control over her potentially dangerous nature. Silver similarly contends that Victorian culture associated body fat with an unrestrained sexual appetite:
'female hunger ... as a sign of transgressive desires is fearful in and of itself ... women’s bodies reflect their sexual propensities’ (2002, p. 118). The upper-middle-class lady was, of course, the referent of True Womanhood and consequently, as Foucault notices, ‘the idle woman’ was the first to be invested with an inherently ‘nervous’ nature (1978, p. 121) that required strict surveillance. In The female malady, Elaine Showalter agrees that the medical discourse of the period reveals ‘male psychiatrists’ fears of female sexuality. Indeed, uncontrolled sexuality seemed the major, almost defining symptom of insanity in women’ (1985, p. 70). As the nineteenth century advanced, psychiatrists increasingly gained power and authority as regards the treatment of newly discovered mental disorders, while upper- and middle-class women obviously constituted the bulk of their patients.

The virgin and the whore, the saint and the vampire: these two contradictory definitions of woman pervaded Victorian popular culture, haunting men’s imagination – and destroying women’s lives. As Showalter poses, the very notion of anorexia in the Victorian period presents contradictions in itself: while the anorexic was idealised as the paradigm of the selfless and incorporeal Victorian angel, doctors linked fin de siècle epidemics of ‘female diseases’ such as anorexia nervosa to women’s ambitions to occupy a space in the public arena (Showalter 1985, p. 121). It is with this dual opposition that my article is concerned, which Dijkstra defines as ‘that of woman as man’s exclusive and forever pliable private property ... and her transformation, upon her denial of man’s ownership rights to her, into a polyandrous predator indiscriminately lusting after man’s seminal essence’ (Dijkstra 1986, p. 334). In my view, it is precisely this ambivalence of adoration, fascination, and abhorrence towards women that endowed the image of the anorexic-looking woman with an erotic appeal, presumably because the acute weakness and strict confinement of anorexic women dispelled male fears of female mutability. The artistic representation of this ethereal, skeleton-like beauty on the verge of death looked alluring to the anxious male because of her state of extreme (and therefore safe) passivity.

I will concentrate on the analysis of female vampire characters (especially those of Mina Murray-Harker and Lucy Westenra) in Bram Stoker’s Dracula, since the female vampire here manifests and encompasses many of the inherent contradictions in Victorian assumptions of femininity. The vampire displays all the main physical characteristics of the anorexic woman, thus becoming a hyperbolic manifestation of Victorian femininity. Her physical emaciation, however, is misleading, as this apparently virtuous refusal of food hides a much more dangerous hunger, a voracious thirst for blood. Dracula is undoubtedly a product of its time, considering the fin de siècle fascination for the vampire and Stoker’s treatment of the female characters. In the novel, all the vampires except the Count himself are female: it is relevant to consider that, although Renfield and Harker are attacked, only women mutate into vampirism. The transformations these women undergo provide the main source of horror to Professor Van Helsing and his group of vampire-hunters. These monstrous transformations are significantly reflected in the women’s bodies: in my view, the issues of hunger and eating, as well as the shift between anorexic emaciation and voluptuous flesh, achieve a remarkable symbolic importance in the narrative. As Silver notes, the act of eating in Dracula becomes not only aesthetically unacceptable, but also unnatural and grotesque. The female vampire thereby becomes an exaggerated representation of the Victorian culture of anorexia personifying male fears about women and unrestrained appetites, typified by hunger:

vampire literature takes the negative representation of eating ... to its hyperbolic end, transforming eating into a grotesque and monstrous act. Women’s hunger, in particular, with its symbolic association with lust, aggression, and lack of self-control, finds its apogee in
vampirism, which exaggerates cultural anxieties about consumption, in the figure of the bloodthirsty vampire. (Silver 2002, p. 20)

The novel presents two apparently conventional young ladies, the aristocratic and flirtatious Lucy Westenra and the sensible and intellectual Mina Murray. Despite their ladylike manners and behaviour, Stoker’s description of them is already indicative of their propensity to vampirism: their potentially voracious nature is significantly revealed through images of eating. For example, Mina symptomatically jokes about their excessive eating at teatime: ‘I believe we should have shocked the New Woman with our appetites’ (Stoker 2002, p. 108). Showalter remarks that, at the time, a carnivorous diet in women was associated with uncontrolled lust, and it was even thought to bring about nymphomaniac (1985, p. 129). Silver also points out that Lucy’s and Mina’s disproportionate indulgence in food underlies an equally ‘excessive’ sexual appetite that even surpasses the improper behaviour of New Women:

since vampires are defined by their monstrous appetite for human blood, obviously symbolizing erotic appetite, Mina and Lucy’s large appetites hint at the same sorts of desires, albeit genteelly repressed. These two ostensibly proper women reveal their latent physical appetites through eating and thereby demonstrate their innate tendencies towards vampirism. (Silver 2002, p. 129)

Mina and Lucy thus reveal their unconventionality – and hence, we infer their discontent at the roles they have been allotted – by acknowledging their instincts and satisfying their appetites, an exclusively male prerogative. Stoker here establishes an association between women’s refusal of traditional notions of femininity through their defiance of the anorexic logic, together with their desire to appropriate masculine privileges. In Dedication to hunger, Leslie Heywood interestingly relates anorexia with women’s desire to escape the feminine flesh and assume more masculine characteristics. As Heywood claims, anorexia can certainly be a form of protest against traditional gender roles through the rejection of a body that makes women ‘the negative other of culture’ (1996, p. 33). However, this process simultaneously affirms male standards by ‘killing’ women into perfect incarnations of ideal femininity. In my view, Stoker’s novel rather asserts the Victorian equation of women as ‘ethereal creatures’ who, as Heywood also acknowledges, ‘express their disembodiment, their non-carnal natures through refusal of food’ (1996, p. 176). I believe this correlation is more clearly illustrated through the novel’s portrayal of the three vampire sisters in Castle Dracula.

Before the narrative moves to England and centres on Lucy and Mina, the story focuses on Jonathan Harker’s business trip to mysterious Transylvania, where we meet the Count for the first time. In Castle Dracula, Harker is strangely not attacked by the Count himself but by the three vampire sisters who inhabit the castle. Apart from their perverse anti-maternal delight in feeding upon babies instead of nurturing them, the three sisters display an aggressive sexuality. Their voracious thirst for blood, which is both horrifying and fascinating to Harker, is visually represented by their monstrous female anatomy. The sisters are equipped with sharp teeth, an aggressive instrument that subverts the masculine prerogative of penetration and subdues Harker into ecstatic passivity. Most importantly as regards my analysis, these abominations of deformed femininity significantly have voluptuously plump figures. When Van Helsing meets these three women in Castle Dracula, he recognises in them the same sensuality and potential deadliness that horrified and mesmerised Harker, symbolised by hunger and abundance of flesh: ‘I knew the swaying round forms, the bright hard eyes, the white teeth, the ruddy colour, the voluptuous lips’ (Stoker 2002, p. 359).
Lucy becomes Dracula’s first victim in England, and the successive transformations she experiences, literally inscribed on her body, evince anxieties in Victorian conceptions of femininity, as well as male desires and fears about women and hunger. On the surface, Lucy displays all the features of the sweetly languid Victorian lady, thus exhibiting the conventional image of femininity required of her: she is extremely sensitive to influences, walks in her sleep, and has an ‘anaemic look’ (Stoker 2002, p. 94). As has already been mentioned, Stoker establishes a parallel between images of hunger and male fears concerning women and unrestrained instincts: both Lucy’s sleepwalking and Mina’s somnambulism indeed reinforce the views on femininity that the novel reveals. These traits are connected to the unconscious and thus to instinct, unacknowledged desires and lack of control over impulses, features that can be associated with unrestrained appetite as well. In turn, these symptoms also hint at their attraction towards unladylike behaviour: for example, before she is first visited by Dracula, Lucy’s excessive appetite and the associated deviant sexuality it implies anticipate her descent (or her rise) into the Undead.

In a famous scene in the novel, which critics have abundantly discussed, Lucy reveals her repressed sexual desires when she refers to her three suitors (Lord Arthur Holmwood, Dr Jack Seward, and the American Quincey P. Morris) and complains at the obligation to choose only one of them for a husband: ‘Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?’ (Stoker 2002, p. 80). Lucy’s fantasy of a polyandrous marriage materialises once Dracula starts attacking her: apart from the Count himself, Lucy receives the blood of her three suitors and of Dr Abraham Van Helsing. The transfusions acquire the symbolism of a sexual union, especially when Van Helsing warns Seward not to tell Arthur (now Lucy’s fiancé) that all the other men have given Lucy their blood as well, since this ‘would at once frighten and enjealous him’ (Stoker 2002, p. 144). Besides, Arthur declares that the transfusion ‘had made her truly his bride’ (Stoker 2002, p. 186), at which Van Helsing laughingly reflects: ‘if so, then what about the others? Ho, ho! Then this so sweet maid is a polyandrist’ (Stoker 2002, p. 186).

Christopher Craft remarks that Van Helsing’s transfusions and morphine injections can be understood as an imitation of the Count’s demonic penetrations, precisely intended to counterattack their dangerous effects on Lucy (1989, p. 230). These ministrations, however, are useless: Lucy soon starts showing physical signs of consumption since, as Athena Vrettos contends in Somatic fictions, she is ‘literally being consumed’ by the Count (1995, p. 165). Lucy’s thin, pale and motionless state at this point leads the reader to equate Dracula’s literal blood-sucking with Van Helsing’s more sophisticated penetrations with a hypodermic needle. Although Van Helsing’s method is more subtle, and although it is carried out in an attempt to save Lucy’s life, it is also externalised in her corpse-like figure. Hence, it may suggest that both males struggle to subdue her into passivity and obedience through these violent assaults on her body.

As Lucy gradually transforms into a vampire, she significantly recovers her appetite and begins to gain weight. As she confides to Mina: ‘I have an appetite like a cormorant, I am full of life, and sleep well . . . Arthur says I am getting fat’ (Stoker 2002, p. 124). Very significantly, Lucy’s physical recovery does not imply a return to her old virtuous self but a degeneration into vampirism. Dracula’s diabolical kiss unleashes in Lucy an
aggressive and overtly sexual voracity that represents a threat to the adoring males around
her. As Silver observes: ‘until she dies, and afterwards as a vampire, Lucy is insatiable, her
vampire state a kind of nymphomania . . . Lucy’s fatness indicates her exaggerated,
carnivorous sexuality’ (2002, pp. 43, 123). Again, it is significant to see that these adoring
males, judiciously advised by Van Helsing and Seward, are not at all pleased with Lucy’s
‘abnormal’ recovery, as one would expect: instead, they grow more and more suspicious
of her increasingly uncontrolled appetite.

Once Lucy becomes one of the Undead, the physical differences between Lucy’s
corpse during the day and her vampire self at night become even more striking. As she lies
in her coffin, she looks ‘more radiantly beautiful than ever’ (Stoker 2002, p. 209), but her
beauty becomes ‘adamantine, heartless cruelty’ and ‘voluptuous wantonness’ at night
(Stoker 2002, p. 218). As Auerbach notes:

the word ‘change’, sometimes modified by ‘strange’ and ‘terrible’, almost always
accompanies Lucy in the text; . . . in her fluctuations between passivity and prowling,
consciousness and dream, innocence and experience, pallor and ruddiness, she can be said to
be ‘a different being’ every time she appears. (Auerbach 1982, p. 23)

Kim Chernin similarly observes that ‘women’s body . . . stands for all that is inscrutable,
unpredictable, and uncertain’ (1981, pp. 146–147). The fact that the male characters
regard Lucy in such different ways illustrates their fear at her capacity to transform and the
terrifying power it entails, but also reveals the contradictory reactions of idealisation and
fear that the anorexic woman represented. The anorexic woman’s protest against her
traditional role by becoming ill and therefore refusing to become a wife and mother is also
made patent in Lucy’s striking change. The prospective bride and future mother that Lucy
had been and whose corpse is mourned during the day, at night mutates into a deadly
creature who sucks children’s blood, and the terror and hatred this provokes in male
characters is evidenced by Stoker’s portrait of Lucy as increasingly associated with images
of monstrosity.

After her mutation into vampirism, Lucy is evocatively described as a Medusa:

the eyes seemed to throw out sparks of hell-fire, the brows were wrinkled as though the folds
of the flesh were the coils of Medusa’s snakes . . . If ever a face meant death – if looks could
kill – we saw it at that moment. (Stoker 2002, p. 219)

As another cultural icon of female monstrosity, Medusa’s terrifying powers of
transformation are effectively eliminated by means of Perseus’ murder/castration. The
feminist statement that Medusa symbolises the devouring female genitalia (or vagina
dentata) can be easily associated with the vampire’s teeth and equally dangerous
voraciousness (Bronfen 1992, p. 69). Incidentally, the 1992 film version of Dracula by
Francis Ford Coppola replicates, perhaps unconsciously, Stoker’s association of the
vampire woman with Medusa. At one point in the film, during Harker’s first encounter
with the three sisters at Castle Dracula, one of the women is suddenly shown to have
snakes instead of hair (Coppola 1992). As I contended in the opening pages of this article,
women’s potential transformative powers and the fear they provoke in males encourage
the erotic appeal of the anorexic-looking woman. Therefore, since the insatiable and fleshy
vampiric Lucy represents an exaggeration of these anxieties, the conflict is solved only
when Lucy is safely dead for the second time.

As Heywood claims in Dedication to hunger, the hierarchy of the masculine and the
mind over the feminine and the body, which has articulated Western thought since Plato,
seeks ‘to subordinate, if not to sacrifice, the feminine flesh’ (Heywood 1996, p. 20). Lucy’s
monstrous deviation, typified by unrestrained eating (or, to be more precise, drinking),
justifies the men’s need to immobilise her into their fixed conception of femininity. The sexual violence implicit in the act becomes clear, for example, when Van Helsing opens Lucy’s coffin in order to check whether she has become one of the Undead: ‘it seemed to be as much an affront to the dead as it would have been to have stripped off her clothing in her sleep whilst living’ (Stoker 2002, p. 206). These words expose a male fantasy of sexual power, while they reveal a morbid attraction for Lucy’s corpse that borders on necrophilia and conforms to the anorexic ideal.

Disguising their fear as medical authority and religious duty, the vampire-hunters unite their efforts to ‘save’ Lucy’s soul. Strangely enough, this merciful act consists of an extremely violent staking that most critics perceive as a sexually charged ‘corrective’ penetration, and which I would define as a covert form of gang-rape. Any woman, I believe, would shrink at the size of the stake, if read as a phallic symbol: ‘a round wooden stake, some two and a half or three inches thick and about three feet long’ (Stoker 2002, p. 221). In a significant act, Van Helsing hands this monstrous phallic instrument to Arthur and grants him the honour of driving in the stake:

he looked like a figure of Thor as his untembling 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. (Stoker 2002, p. 223)

The religious connotations with which Stoker describes Arthur’s staking of Lucy disclose the author’s belief in the rightness of sacrificing her. They somehow encourage the reader to identify with the vampire-hunters, which is in my view analogous to identifying with those who victimise and savagely destroy women. Lucy’s decapitation again echoes Medusa’s terrifying powers, which she has embraced as a vampire; Van Helsing and his men turn her, quite literally, into a body, and thus back to conventional femininity.

Once she is safely dead and unable to undergo any transformation, Lucy is no longer dangerous: she recovers her anaemic emaciation and, with it, her ‘true’ femininity. Thus, in order to save Lucy’s soul, her body must be destroyed and horribly mutilated. Silver again points at the disturbing allure of the anorexic-looking woman as it is reflected in Lucy’s transformations, an ideal which clearly denigrates the body: ‘the thin, “wasted” body that Lucy recovers, though indicative of great suffering, is finnally more beautiful than the fatty female body . . . Lucy takes her place with other properly passive – and slender – Victorian heroines’ (Silver 2002, p. 124). In the same way that women’s bodies (and minds) were smothered and fixed under the corset of beauty standards, Lucy is literally killed and immobilised into a beautifully emaciated image that pleases male eyes:

[She was] Lucy as we had seen her in life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity. True that there were there, as we had seen them in life, the traces of care and pain and waste; but those were all dear to us, for they marked her truth to what we knew. One and all we felt that the holy calm that lay like sunshine over the wasted face and form was only an earthly token and symbol of the calm that was to reign for ever. (Stoker 2002, p. 224)

Looking at Lucy’s coffin, the vampire-hunters complacently reflect that she makes a ‘very beautiful corpse’ (Stoker 2002, p. 175). Even more striking is Jack Seward’s account of the vampire-hunters’ feelings after the brutal staking and decapitation of their adored Lucy: ‘there was gladness and mirth and peace everywhere, for we were at rest ourselves on one account, and we were glad’ (Stoker 2002, p. 224). Lucy’s dead body, now petrified and purified, dissipates the fear of her otherness and her uncanny mutability. Her voracious nature, symbolised by body fat, is erased through an act of sexual violence that reveals the male characters’ (and perhaps the author’s) misogyny and which fits into Silver’s logic of anorexia.
Upon Lucy’s death, Van Helsing and Lucy’s suitors transfer their loyalties and their affections to Mina, now Jonathan Harker’s wife. Mina Harker is sensible and educated instead of beautiful and flirtatious, but she mimics her friend in her hypnoid conditions, hallucinations, amnesia, somnambulism, and ‘morbid’ appetite. Mina’s behaviour clearly evokes Lucy’s and thus hints at her propensity towards vampirism and the monstrous appetite it unravels. The affinity between the two friends is further emphasised by the fact that they both suffer the effects of Dracula’s vamping, as well as the vampire-hunters’ anxious attempts at ‘correction’. They are both awakened to a voracious hunger and then repressed by the Victorian culture of anorexia that Van Helsing and his men defend. Their mutual affection and strong identification with each other is shown especially throughout the period of Lucy’s illness, during which Mina struggles to protect her from the Count. Although she is unwilling to leave her dying friend, she is forced to abandon her in order to take care of Jonathan in Romania and thus fulfil her duty as a prospective wife. As Robert Tracy remarks, this ‘leaves Lucy more vulnerable and contributes to the latter’s death’ (1990, pp. 46–47). Furthermore, in the same way that Lucy reproduces the aggressive sexuality of her three vampire sisters in Transylvania, Mina is attracted by the dangerous voluptuousness that empowers these three women and which she also shares. Near Dracula’s castle, the vampire sisters beckon to her: ‘Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come!’ (Stoker 2002, p. 359).

Once Dracula starts attacking Mina, ‘her body and soul’, as Robert Tracy contends, ‘become the arena of a struggle between the Professor and the vampire until Dracula is destroyed’ (1990, p. 44). While the Count bites her throat, Van Helsing uses his hypodermic needles to subdue her; similarly, his morphine injections and his hypnosis mirror Dracula’s hypnotic power. Both Dracula and Van Helsing leave the marks of their aggression in Mina’s body: the Count pierces her neck with his teeth, while Dr Van Helsing uses his needles to prick her arms and his consecrated Host to burn a mark on her forehead. Reflecting on these episodes, Christopher Craft aptly perceives that ‘both men prefer to immobilise a woman before risking a penetration’ (1989, pp. 234–235). Again, Mina’s passivity and emaciation adjust to the anorexic paradigm, since both Dracula’s attacks and Van Helsing’s ministrations affect her appetite and reduce her to selfless passivity in a disturbingly erotic way. Unlike Lucy, Mina becomes thinner as she mutates into vampirism: she stops eating at the same time she starts waking up at night. On the other hand, and very symptomatically, she never completely becomes a vampire: I assume that is the reason why her body does not become fleshier and more voluptuous like Lucy’s. Stoker never provides a physical description of Mina, but her lack of appetite leads the reader to assume she is slim, if not skinny. Her slenderness and her refusal to eat greatly disturb Van Helsing, presumably because he suspects that her apparently conventional slender figure is only the mask for a much more terrifying hunger.

Dracula’s assault on Mina is the only one that Stoker describes with full detail. However, Mina is dazed by Dracula’s hypnotic powers, so her story is told only after Dr Seward has reported his version of the events he has witnessed. The medico-scientific perspective that predominates in the novel (two of the vampire-hunters are doctors) combines with patriarchal assumptions to endow the male characters with authority to define the women around them. Especially as regards Lucy’s and Mina’s vampiric mutations, Van Helsing and Seward seem to possess the power to diagnose their voracious hunger as a ‘disease’ and provide an effective (if brutal) ‘cure’. As Michel Foucault contends in The history of sexuality, the nineteenth-century preoccupation with female sexuality involved ‘a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex’ (1978, pp. 105, 146–147) and therefore a strict control on these from the medical profession, of course in
the name of women’s responsibility towards their children, the family and society. Similarly, as Athena Vrettos notes in *Somatic fictions*, ‘the doctor’s claim to medical and scientific legitimacy . . . also became a symbol of masculine authority’ (1995, p. 91).

The scene is overtly sexual and almost perverted, since Mina is attacked while lying in bed beside her stupefied husband. The Count bites her throat and sucks her blood, but he also cuts one of the veins in his chest and forces her to drink his blood, in what Robert Mighall among other critics describes as a fellatio image (1999, p. 232). To my mind, Mina’s encounter with Dracula is more like a blood christening (some distorted version of a *blutbruderschaft*) or a symbolic wedding night, her initiation into a vampiric life that awakens a dangerous sexuality. By making her drink his blood, Dracula attempts to make her ‘flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, kin of my kin’ (Stoker 2002, p. 288), echoing the typical marriage vows. She seems to be aware of the sexual implications in Dracula’s penetration/impregnation, since she describes herself as ‘unclean’ (Stoker 2002, p. 285), and when Van Helsing touches her forehead with a consecrated Host, it leaves a ‘mark of shame’ (Stoker 2002, p. 296). When she recalls the scene, though, she realises that ‘strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him’ (Stoker 2002, p. 287). Despite the violence of Dracula’s assault on Mina, her words imply that, even if only unconsciously, she wanted it to happen. Among other critics, Silver points at Stoker’s equation of unrestrained hunger with ‘unnatural’ sexual desires in women: ‘Dracula . . . reveals and exploits Mina’s own appetite: female hunger signifies female sexual desire which, in Stoker’s novel, literally makes women monsters’ (2002, p. 120, emphasis in original).

Mina is, however, less rebellious than Lucy: her status as a married woman and her identification with culture and science signal her allegiance to her husband and the vampire-hunters and thus, by extension, her acquiescence with their notion of her position in patriarchy. Although her intelligence hints at her potential dangerousness, Van Helsing’s praise of Mina is illustrative of his approval of her: ‘Ah, that wonderful Madame Mina! She has a man’s brain – a brain that a man should have were he much gifted – and woman’s heart’ (Stoker 2002, p. 240). As Bronfen points out, she takes sides with Van Helsing by surrendering her newly acquired supernatural powers to help him find the Count, hence becoming ‘a seminal accomplice in their search. Unlike Lucy . . . she accepts her fixture within the symbolic order’ (Bronfen 1992, p. 319). As a result of her conformity, and again unlike Lucy, she is safely brought back to orthodox femininity instead of being more effectively ‘saved’ – that is, staked. Most significantly as regards my analysis, Mina’s salvation is inscribed on her body: she remains conventionally slender and never becomes a monstrous, fleshy vampire.

The novel thus concludes with three happily married couples and a grandfatherly Van Helsing: Dracula is finally destroyed and Mina is ‘saved’: she gives birth to a child and thus returns to her proper sexual role. The Harkers christen their son after the vampire-hunters: his ‘bundle of names’ (Stoker 2002, p. 368) is a tribute to male solidarity, although the reader cannot help remembering that four men (five, if we include Dracula) apart from her husband have also given Mina their blood. Recalling Lucy’s symbolic polyandrous marriage, the blood transfusions and the name of Mina’s son stand for her awakened sexuality, while they also signify Van Helsing’s victimisation of her body through ‘corrective’ penetrations, aimed at returning her to ‘true womanhood’.

To my mind, Stoker’s notion of the ‘true woman’ is analogous with Silver’s definition of the anorexic logic as applied to standards of femininity: slenderness, purity, passivity, weakness, and helplessness. As she notes:
within an anorexic paradigm, the vampire’s insatiable desire for blood can be read as a metaphor for the enormous appetite with which the anorexic girl struggles … the female vampire is a grotesque personification of a woman’s hunger, the hunger that the good woman resists. All women, Stoker suggests, harbour tendencies toward uncontrollable appetite and desire; … evil and disorder, in the novel, are signified by appetite, a paradigm that conforms to anorexia nervosa. (Silver 2002, pp. 125–126)

Stoker’s treatment of women in the novel thus affirms his adherence to the Victorian culture of anorexia. In the novel, hunger is not only regarded as anaesthetic and immoral, but also as grotesque, unnatural, and diabolical. Silver aptly perceives that ‘by associating hunger with desire, a debased carnality, and a loss of control, as opposed to mind, will, and self-control, Stoker accepts traditional binaries that are also implicated in anorexic logic’ (2002, p. 121). Women’s hunger in Dracula hence becomes a symbol ‘of irrepressible and predatory sexuality, debases them from true womanhood to “devils of the Pit” … fat is a sign of woman’s sensuous and sexual appetite, although in Dracula, the fat woman becomes not merely contemptible but deadly’ (Silver 2002, p. 121). Stoker’s message is therefore that the fleshy voluptuous woman is not only sexually incontinent but also fatally dangerous, and therefore needs to be corrected – if not savagely eliminated.

Victorian culture defined women as nature/body and positioned them as Other in relation to the traditionally masculine mind/spirit, consequently affirming their ‘natural’ role as wives and mothers. On the other hand, the logic of anorexia that Silver exposes contradicted itself by denigrating the body and its appetites as opposed to the ‘truly feminine’ lack of carnality, thus encouraging self-hatred and self-destructive tendencies in women. In the already mentioned ‘process of hysterisation of women’ that Foucault describes in The history of sexuality, sex was interpreted by patriarchy in a way that contributed to reinforce women’s sense of otherness, being understood as both the essence of women (because of reproduction, their bodies were kept in constant agitation by hormones) and at the same time as that lacking in women, since it ‘belongs, par excellence, to men’ (Foucault 1978, p. 153). The equation of bodily emaciation and spiritual purity, as I contended earlier in my article, again falls into a contradiction: while the anorexic was revered as an example of virtue, spirituality, and self-denial, the image of the corpse-like woman was simultaneously portrayed by popular culture as sexually appealing. As Dijkstra puts it, both Stoker’s fictional ladies and the real women they imitated ‘provide a striking indication of the bizarre manner in which the male ideal of the dead woman, as well as men’s fantasies of female vampires, had come to influence women’s conception of themselves’ (1986, p. 348). The Victorian culture of anorexia as it is manifested in Stoker’s text unveils masculine anxieties at women’s transformative powers, and comfortably solves this crisis with a violent attempt at erasure of the feminine. Stoker’s treatment of the female vampires indeed reveals male fantasies of total sexual power and an intense hatred for women, since it unmasks an almost necrophiliac desire for women on the verge of death, that is, in a state of complete immobility and passivity. To my mind, a reassessment of such negative icons of feminine beauty can certainly help us understand the past, but it can also make us aware of present cultural attitudes that intensify women’s sense of inadequacy, and hopefully contribute to modifying them in the future. The Victorian culture of anorexia indeed existed and I believe continues to exist in Western societies, not just as a severe mental disorder affecting a percentage of women, but rather as an unattainable model of feminine perfection that seriously undermines the self-esteem of many ‘normal’ women – that is, if such women ever existed.
Notes on contributor

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