Revamping the Roles of Women in Vampire Film
Or Women Who Suck the Life Out of You

Christy Freadreacea
University of Kentucky, clfrea2@uky.edu

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As a graduating senior with majors in Sociology and English, I received the Coleman Award for Outstanding Senior in Sociology and graduated Summa Cum Laude. I love film and am considering pursuing a higher degree in film theory so that I can teach at the college level. I absolutely loved compiling the data for this project. I’m no stranger to watching movies with a pen in hand and I devoured the reading material. Dr. Bordo was fantastically supportive and enthusiastic, as she always is with her students.

As previously mentioned, I’m a film buff! I’ve been involved with the University of Kentucky Academic Team, and was in UK’s first production of The Vagina Monologues this past spring. I spent time volunteering for the UK Women’s Place, which is UK’s new initiative to prevent violence against women on campus. I’m also a big fan of the girl scouts, and make sure I have time every summer to spend a week at camp teaching young girls the Girl Scout ways.

What I like most about Christy’s work in “Revamping the Roles of Women in Vampire Film Or Women Who Suck the Life Out of You” is the combination of solid, scholarly research peppered with lively, colloquial language and a sardonic wit that lets the reader know the tropes of popular stereotyping are as silly as they are serious. In this paper, Christy deals with age-old constructions of women and the woe that comes to those who depart from their proper roles — a theme that could and has been dealt with by others in a grim, puritanical manner — yet she never loses her sense of humor about it all. Having chosen a subject matter that invites a light touch, she never wades into academic pretentiousness. Her writing is crisp, clear, direct, and playful. She critiques, yet is not condescending about the enduring appeal of the themes and images she deals with. And she recognizes and relishes the subversive undercurrents in the cautionary messages. Women have loved vampire movies, after all, and Christy never loses her amused appreciation for that fact, even as she draws critical blood from the genre.

I began my study of women in vampire films with a taste for blood and dove straight into texts soaked with the blood-sweat of academics pounding out works of feminist film theory, essays on the construction of horror movies, and Freudian analysis after Freudian analysis of the horror genre. Eventually I had a fairly good idea of the kind of vampire films about which people are writing. I was ready to head out to my local big name video rental store and sink my teeth into some celluloid.

What I found when I got there was only a dismal selection of the films I sought. Vampires have a deep and far-reaching lore woven into texts of literature and film since at least Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella Carmilla in 1871. There are several films based on this text about a female vampire who lures young girls to fulfill her unnatural desires, but Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) is what grabbed hold of the public’s jugular. Stoker picked and chose what he wanted from extensive vampire lore and wrote an enduring epistolary piece that has spawned dozens and dozens of film versions with countless spin-offs involving the character Dracula and other vampires. Apparently Blockbuster knows little of this.

Scouring the city, I came up with a decent selection of vampire movies, many actually based loosely on Stoker’s novel. From this selection, I drew my sample of films that people have actually seen, though they may not have been extensively written about. From the hodge-podge, I selected movies that span nearly a century.

Though the films all have the “vampire” they differ somewhat in the details of the supporting lore. All of the vampires had to sustain themselves on blood; however, some drew it with fangs,
Nevertheless, I've done my best to spare you from the worst of the worst, limiting myself instead to the films that at least attempt to take themselves seriously, even if they are serious spoofs. The movies I selected are: Nosferatu (1922), Dracula (1931), Son of Dracula (1943), Dracula, Prince of Darkness (1966), Andy Warhol's Dracula (also known as Blood for Dracula (1974)), The Hunger (1983), Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992), and Interview with the Vampire (1994).

From this collection I've found several themes that spring from both traditional vampire lore and the original Stoker novel and directly pertain to the roles of women in vampiric fiction. All of these films contain themes of purity and violation, marriage, female intuition, and sexuality, which are inseparable from the lives of the female characters. In fact, without these themes there is no motivation for the plot of most of these films.

PURITY

Purity and violation is universal subject matter in vampire films. As early as 1922, the German film Nosferatu leaves the vampire's destruction dependent on a woman who is pure of heart. Nina, though married and presumably not a virgin, is painted from the beginning as the picture of purity. Though she is a tall woman with a strikingly strong jaw, she is dressed in lace and frills and bonneted when first onscreen. She is infantilized through her childish delight taunting a kitten with a piece of yarn, and fairly skips across the frame to meet her husband when he presents her with flowers picked from their garden. She is further constructed as innocent when her husband returns home from his business trip to meet the Count with "The Book of the Vampires," which he forbids her to read, so as not to trouble her mind.

Eventually, it is this carefully constructed purity that saves the town. "The Book of the Vampires" dictates that only a woman who is pure of heart can rid the town of the Count by willingly giving herself to him and keeping him with her until the morning light destroys him. No one is better qualified than Nina and her 24 carat purity to sacrifice herself for the town.

In Andy Warhol's Dracula the story is motivated by Count Dracula's quest for virgin blood, which is in short supply in his hometown. He sets out for Italy, seeking virgins in a good religious household, settling in as the guest of a family with four sisters. Dracula assumes he can sink his teeth into at least one of them before his strength runs out completely. Because it is a comedy, the two sisters he tries for first are almost...
so busy screwing the gardener and one another that they nearly screw the Count over with their indifference to him. However, their lust for money and pressure from their family eventually lead them both to swear their virginity to the Count, giving him enough confidence to glut himself on their “virgin” blood. Immediately after both encounters, the deceived sex, and the youngest is simply too naive and innocent, and underdeveloped as a character to have had any interesting forays. However, once the gardener figures out that the vampire is after virgin blood and that the two sisters whose company he has enjoyed so frequently have been turned into vampires as well, he swiftly comes to the rescue of the youngest.

The other two sisters actually are virgins. The eldest is crazy, presumably because she isn’t having sex, and the youngest is simply too naive and innocent, and underdeveloped as a character to have had any interesting forays. However, once the gardener figures out that the vampire is after virgin blood and that the two sisters whose company he has enjoyed so frequently have been turned into vampires as well, he swiftly comes to the rescue of the youngest.

Costume plays a large part in setting up the relative purity of Mina and Lucy in both Dracula (1931) and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1994). The first time Lucy and Mina are on screen in the 1931 version, the two women sit in a box at an opera house with Mina dressed in a high collared white number with puffy white marshmallow sleeves. Lucy, on the other hand, is wearing a strapless dark colored dress with dark fringe at the top, a tight black choker tied around her neck. The Mina/Lucy contrast is further developed by the skimpier appearance of Lucy’s nightgown, and her vanity as she and Mina talk before bed. Lucy fusses with her hair and recites bawdy poetry to the blushing Mina.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula has an opportunity to construct the difference between the two women much more vividly because it is in color. Mina is a proper school mistress with her hair tied up tightly in a knot at the nape of her neck, and though she mischievously peeks at sex manuals in preparation for her marriage, she is clearly devoted to her fiancé, about whom she is almost constantly writing. Lucy, on the other hand, is an aristocrat’s daughter who flirts with the subtlety of a freight train. She moves very freely, arms thrown wide, hair hanging down her back, from suitor to suitor. Mina’s wardrobe is always more drab than Lucy’s, but as the film progresses, Mina wears more and more white and Lucy wears more and more red, especially in their nightgowns. Mina’s are long, white, flowing, concealing vestments whereas Lucy’s are red, racy, and revealing.

The contrast is most striking in Lucy’s first encounter with Count Dracula. Lucy has been entranced and drawn out into the garden, when Mina discovers her absent from her room. Mina goes out to the garden to search for her, finding Lucy in obvious ecstasy with her scarlet dressing gown thrown open and nightgown pushed up as Dracula performs oral sex on her on a slab of rock.

Dracula promptly flees, and the confused Lucy is led back to the house by the confused Mina (who apparently hasn’t learned much from her sex manuals) with the white and red of their nightgowns pressed against one another. On their walk back to the house, a storm rages overhead. The weather is not only an ominous sign of the danger presented by Count Dracula, but of the increasing conflict between Mina’s purity and Lucy’s corruption.

These are only a few examples of the ways in which purity versus impurity permeate the texts of these films. Though the Dracula stories take many liberties with the plot and the characters from the original Bram Stoker novel, the theme remains constant throughout the eighty or so years covered by the films I viewed. The “impure” woman is always taken first, and quickly discarded in favor of pursuit of the more virtuous woman.

The virtuous woman has more defenders, because she, presumably, has more to lose, and is a source of fixation and exaltation for the men in her life. She is the reason to fight evil so that the world will be a safe place for her and the status quo can resume its reign. The theme of purity versus impurity reinforces the patriarchal order of society that requires women to be virtuously devoted to one man, and to be under sexual control, as will be discussed later.

FEMALE INTUITION

Interestingly, these women who are so highly exalted hold very little sway in the world of vampire lore that values them so much. In nearly all of the films I watched, female intuition was utterly ignored in favor of heeding the words of a masculine authority figure.

For example, in Nosferatu, Nina intuitively knows that Harker should not leave her for the business trip to see the Count. Her reaction is more than just childish jealousy at having her love leave her for his work; but it is obvious from her varying histrionic and deadly serious expressions (give her a break, it was the silent era) that it is deep seated and beyond even her explanation.
Nina also maintains some sort of psychic connection with the Count. She claims to be waiting for her Harker to return from his trip, but she waits by the sea when he went by horse. The Count, however, is arriving by sea. (Waller, 1986, p. 91) She seems to sense his nearness, and her thoughts seem to be constantly of him.

In spite of her objections, Harker insists on making the trip, and insists that she be left out of all dealings with the vampire, though she does not, of course, heed his advice, and eventually goes on to be the town’s salvation.

In Dracula, Prince of Darkness (1966), Helen seems to be the only one who knows there is a problem when 1) a monk warns them of the dangers of Dracula’s castle, 2) their carriage driver to the castle refuses to go any further, 3) a black carriage appears as if from nowhere and takes them careening toward the castle, and, 4) when they arrive, a table is mysteriously set for the number in their party. Helen is also the first to hear noises in the castle at night and the one to beg her husband not to investigate them. All of these events are the sorts of things that people in horror movies are supposed to ignore; however, it would not have been a giant leap of faith for the rest of the party to have felt some sort of apprehension at the bizarre sequence of events. Heedless of Helen’s advice, the party stays the night in the castle, costing Helen and her husband their lives in exchange for the re-resurrection of Dracula.

Son of Dracula provides an interesting twist on female intuition by having the main female character, Katherine, dabble in the occult to gain her knowledge of the vampire character, Count Alucard (that’s Dracula backwards). She waits anxiously for Alucard and is eager to marry him and become one of the undead. While she is not warning anyone of the dangers of the Count, she is the only character who is aware that he is a vampire, as the men fumble blindly to find an expert who can explain the strange situation.

More recently, in Interview with the Vampire, the plot varies slightly from the Anne Rice novel, on which it is based, drawing out a slave woman as the first to notice the vampiric transformation overtaking her master, Louis, after he begins to entertain his strange houseguest, LeStat. She notices that her master no longer eats, that he no longer drinks, that he is out all night, and that many of the animals on the New Orleans plantation are dying inexplicably. She also notices that the rest of the slaves are becoming downright frightened of their former master figure as he becomes more and more a creature of the night. Being the sweet submissive motherly stereotype she is constructed to be, she tries to warn her poor, troubled master, only to have the life drained from her.

Louis, of course, does not take her words to his cold, undead heart, but ignores her, and in wild desperation burns down his own plantation when the slaves are ready to overtake him to rid themselves of the vampiric plague.

These examples make it seem as though the women have greater perceptive abilities than the male characters in the films, or are at least willing to act upon their own impulses instead of trying to overcome them. The male characters, however, proceed heedlessly into battle, often at the expense of their lives or of the lives of their loved ones. Why, then, do the female characters continue to be dragged by the hair into dangerous places by the men in their lives? All of these men have direct social control of the women in the story, usually in the form or matrimony or impending matrimony.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Marriage runs like cheap panty hose from beginning to end of many of these films. Mina and Lucy are constantly fighting their way to marital bliss. Mina is usually already engaged, while Lucy is fending off proposals from her personal male harem to buy herself enough time to pick one. These are standard features of most Bram Stoker adaptations because that is the situation in the original novel. However, Dracula himself, and even other vampire characters not based on Bram Stoker’s novel, is also perpetually wife hunting. In the novel, Dracula never outlines his motive himself, and it is only inferred that he wants Mina for his own. Yet finding a bride is his major motivation in many films. In the novel and some of the films, he has several already.

The depictions of the brides Dracula already has are quite similar to one another. Typically, they are kept in his castle. They speak little, if at all, and walk around in long white gowns (they are brides, after all), or almost nothing at all. Though uncontrollably sexual creatures in the novel and in Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1994), they lack the suavity and charisma of their master. While well bosomed, these women are not brilliant conversationalists. No wonder Dracula keeps looking for better prospects.

In Son of Dracula, Katherine has already had her father’s will changed so that she will be sole proprietor of the family estate when he dies, leaving all of the other family assets to her sister, the golden haired good girl. In this film, Count Alucard and his bride are not just wed through the exchange of blood as is
the case in many other films, but actually wake the town justice of the peace in the middle of the night to wed them so that they can begin their undead life together respectfully as man and wife. Because Katherine already has the estate, Alucard catches himself a bride, a plantation, and a position in the community all in one simple ceremony.

As in Son of Dracula, an exchange of blood is usually enough to make two vampires family. Interview with the Vampire is an unusual case, because the vampiric exchange is between two men. The exchange of blood was not enough to cement them as a family, thus LeStat sought another element to bind himself to Louis for eternity. This element came in the form of Claudia, who was born into vampirism when Louis drained her blood and Lestat let her drink of his. Though this was done against Louis’s will, Claudia’s creation was a literal combination of their reproductive fluids creating the child-vampire Claudia. The two men thus reproduced together and became a “real” family with the “birth” of their child.

The 1931 Dracula provides some interesting wedding imagery. In the final scene, Jonathan Harker has finally rescued his fiancée from the Count, and they ascend the stairs of Carfax Abby together at the pace of a walk down the aisle. Mina is naturally wearing a long flowing white gown at the time. One can almost imagine the wedding march in the background the two so resemble a bride and groom.

In Bram Stoker’s Dracula the wedding scene is fantastically shocking. Jonathan and Mina’s wedding is cross-cut with Lucy’s final encounter with Count Dracula. As Mina and Jonathan walk down the aisle, Lucy can sense Dracula’s approach and begins tearing at her clothes, writhing in rapture as the Count approaches. As Mina and Jonathan partake of wine, the symbolic blood of Christ, to sanctify their marriage, Dracula partakes of Lucy’s blood sanctifying her as one with him. Bram Stoker’s Dracula makes it perfectly clear that what we are witnessing in both cases is voluntary mutual bondage.

SEXUALITY

The raw sexuality in the scene in which Lucy becomes a vampire is an extremely powerful example of the theme of female sexual desire in vampire films. There is not an ounce of doubt in the viewer that Lucy is having a purely sexual experience. As Dracula approaches, she runs her hands down her body from her breasts to beneath the sheets (the nightgown, is of course, red). As he gets closer, she begins writhing and pulling her clothes off such that one breast is exposed by the time Dracula is in the room. As he approaches her, he becomes a wolf. When he preys upon her, she is in obvious ecstasy. The scene finishes with an explosion of blood from the very walls of the house — a not-so-subtle symbolic orgasm and ejaculation.

In case that example is not enough to cement a vampiric encounter as a sexual experience, Bram Stoker’s Dracula offers the viewer several others. Of course, there is the aforementioned scene in which the Count goes down on Lucy in the garden, but Jonathan also has a sexual experience at the hands of vampires.

Jonathan’s encounter is with Dracula’s wives. As he lies prisoner in Dracula’s castle, three topless women materialize on the bed around him, one on either side, and one from between his legs. The women are obviously giving him great sexual pleasure. The film, Dracula breaks up the orgy and the eroticized women become the sniveling servants of the Count once again.

Finally, even sweet, pure Mina has an inkling of the sexual power of the Count. She has spent time with him before, though mostly in the most virtuous of ways; however, she comments after her wedding with Jonathan, “Now that I am married, I have begun to understand my attraction to (the Count).” Because Mina’s virginity is made an issue at the beginning of the film, it is not a far leap to assume that now that she has acted upon her sexual urges, she has recognized that the root of her attraction to the Count was a desire for sex.

Other themes of female sexual desire are less explicit, though this is likely a result of many of the other films having been made at a time when sexual acts were less acceptable onscreen. However, they are still very much present. For instance, in Nosferatu, recall that the town can only be saved by a woman pure of heart giving herself willingly to the count. Because Nina is a married woman, giving herself to the Count and keeping him in her bed all night amounts to committing adultery.

The character Helen from Dracula, Prince of Darkness, is another interesting depiction of female
sexuality. Helen is the one who spends the beginning of the film whining, complaining, and griping about being on schedule and about her fears of the castle. However, all of this ceases when she is bitten by the Count. She is softer, quieter, more alluring once she has been made a vampire. The film indicates that all she needed was a good hard bite. After her transformation, she also takes to wearing the color red — a color associated with impurity (as well as blood), and therefore sexuality, in vampire films.

The sexual nature of her conversion is even more apparent right before her destruction. She is captured and taken to the monastery for her soul to be released. As the monks pin her to a table, she is writhing, thrusting her hips up and down and tossing her head back, as if in orgasm.

Generally speaking, every woman and every man bitten by a male vampire is sexually transformed. There is no doubt about the sexual ecstasy experienced by a vampire’s victims. Often, the victims at first fight and refuse the vampires’ advances but eventually give in. The classic “woman who says no, but means yes” is depicted over and over.

LESBIANISM

In Le Fanu’s Carmilla, a female vampire lures young women to fulfill her “unnatural” desires. Thus, lesbianism and vampirism have been joined from the beginning. While the vast majority of male vampires seek only female victims, female vampires often seek female victims as well, or at least seek blood indiscriminately.

Sexuality in vampire films poses a chicken-or-egg question. Does being a vampire make you a lesbian (or at least bisexual), or does being a lesbian make you vulnerable to damnation for all eternity?

The Hunger (1983) provides an interesting perspective. The main vampire in The Hunger is a woman seeking a new partner in modern America. She sets her sights on a doctor, who happens to be a woman, and befriends her. While the woman doctor knows the vampire is coming on to her, the viewer gets the impression that the vampire has done this before, and that the doctor has not. The two women have sex in what is a very long scene full of gentle caresses and billowing sheer fabric around the bed. At the end of the encounter, the woman doctor is well on her way to becoming a vampire.

In this instance, the lesbian act results in the woman being condemned to an eternity as a vampire. She is punished by being forced to feed upon the blood of the living, and by being forced to walk the earth forever with her soul never at peace.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula indicates the same result. The only sexual act between two women occurs between Lucy and Mina, and it is disputable whether or not the exchange is sexual. The two are frolicking in the garden in the rain when they share a kiss. Though the kiss may have been to exemplify their innocent childish play, the film makes it seem sexual. Lucy and Mina are both soaking wet, which means their clothes are clinging to their bodies in a way that is often used to eroticize fully clothed female bodies. The kiss’s duration is also questionable because it is more than just a peck on the lips. The kiss begins playfully, continues passionately, and the scene is cut to another shot before the kiss ends. Soon thereafter, the women begin to be plagued by Count Dracula.

These examples seem to indicate that non-traditional sexual activity, specifically lesbianism, is a good way to damn your soul. However, Andy Warhol’s Dracula plays both sides of the field. Admittedly, the film is a spoof, but a spoof is essentially an exaggeration of the characteristics of the genre, and is thus a good place to turn when examining it.

Andy Warhol’s Dracula wastes no time developing the non-virgin sisters as sexually corrupted. Early in the film, the director makes it clear that the movie will involve a comical number of breast shots when the sisters throw open their shirts while working in the fields. The virtuous sister averts her eyes and blushes, scolding them. Their shirts remain cast open until their pal the gardener arrives and tells them condescendingly to cover up.

When we discover the nature of the relationship between the two girls and the gardener, they have stolen away to his house where one seductively eats a strawberry while watching her sister have sex with him. She’s waiting her turn, and when they’ve both finished with him, they stand topless and make out with one another.

After the sisters have been made vampires and the rest of the characters are becoming aware of the problem, the family finds the two of them in bed together. The half dressed sisters are so busy kissing and caressing one another they hardly pay any attention to the other people in the room.

Though the sisters engage in lesbian acts onscreen both before and after their vampiric transformations, the same conclusion could be reached as Bram Stoker’s Dracula and The Hunger suggested. In spite of appearing to be sexually liberated women, engaging in lesbian activity is used as a way to exemplify the totally amoral nature of the vampires. Lesbian acts are thus a great way to summon a vampire and, perhaps, to damn one’s soul.
PATRIARCHY

Throughout the rich history of vampire cinema the heterosexual patriarchal order reigns unchecked. In spite of liberties being taken with every aspect of ancient vampire lore and the standard written texts from which this genre springs, the female roles continue to be characters present for the consumption of the male spectator. The throbbing vein of marriage, the emphasis on the necessity of purity, the lack of value of the feminine opinion, and the condemnation of women’s sexuality all reinforce the message that women are subject to male control. The line between acceptable and unacceptable is clearly drawn; the female characters are divided dichotomously into virgin or whore. Whether present as the pure feminine ideal (typically, Mina) or as the sexually ravenous harlot (typically, Lucy), women are virtually ignored, except as sources of pleasure as they are handed from one proprietor to another.

While there is much delight to be found in the blood-sucking undead, the female spectator faces a particular dilemma in the genre. If Laura Mulvey’s theory of visual pleasure in narrative cinema holds true, female spectators have the choice to either desire the image, or identify with the image. If a woman desires the women in the film, she, by proxy, becomes subject to damnation. Just as Bram Stoker’s Dracula condemns Mina and Lucy after they share a kiss or as The Hunger seals the fate of the doctor when she has her first sexual experience with a woman, the viewer, too, is made vulnerable to damnation for having lesbian urges or for wanting her sexual desires to reign unchecked. If a woman desires to be the image, she must identify with the virgin or the whore. She either watches herself violated and corrupted, or condemned to the undead for her sins.

There is, however, another, gentler interpretation of identification when dealing with female vampires. It is possible to view the women in these films as released from the bonds normally imposed on them by society. They no longer dress in the restrictive clothing of the time period in which the film was made. They act on their every impulse, and they constantly fulfill their own desires, even if it is at the expense of the lives of others. They are sexually available and in control. They let their hair down. Although they eventually pay a terrible price, women whose lives have been touched by vampires experience a liberation that many women in the audience must fantasize about. They are freed not only from the expectations of society, but also from the expectations they place upon themselves. Though female viewers may be forced to identify with images of women who are punished for their deviance in the end, there is, nevertheless, something delightful about a woman out of bounds even if her fun does not last.

Perhaps that is why so many have ventured into the horror genre before me and read the “Be Kind Rewind” stickers on vampire films from the past and present. There is something empowering about seeing one’s own image as desired, even if it is through the traditional male gaze, and something more empowering still about seeing one’s image as rebellious, wielding power in life. The negative connotations of the female role in these films notwithstanding, the average viewer can find some image in the film with which to identify that makes these films an enjoyable experience for women, even if that identification makes them delight in their own deviance.

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