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A Disease with a Bite: Vampirism and Infection Theories in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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Abstract

This literary analysis takes a historicist approach to Bram Stoker's 1897 gothic novel, *Dracula*, and places the novel's images of vampirism and disease in the context of Victorian medical knowledge. In studying *Dracula* and its subtext, it can be seen that vampirism is not only a curse that resurrects the dead as blood-sucking monsters, but is also a metaphor for disease. As a disease, vampirism can be seen relating to several illnesses present in Bram Stoker's time (such as cholera) through the concepts and necessary conditions for infection (e.g. mist and stagnant water), which can be seen in the viewpoints of three theories of infection: miasmatism, contagionism, and germ theory. Furthermore, vampirism can be associated with animal related illnesses (such as rabies and the bubonic plague) through *Dracula*'s metamorphosis and control of animals. Finally, vampirism can also be associated with the venereal diseases (such as syphilis) of Bram Stoker's time through the infection of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker.

Key Terms:

- Cholera
- Contagionism
- Germ Theory
- Miasmatism
- Syphilis
- Vampirism

As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me, which, do what I would, I could not conceal. The Count, evidently noticing it, drew back; and with a grim sort of smile, which showed more than he had yet done his protuberant teeth, sat himself down again on his own side of the fireplace (Stoker 24).

Bram Stoker's gothic novel, *Dracula* (1897), is replete with images of decay, contamination, sickness, and infection. As seen in the excerpt above, words such as "shudder," "rank," "nausea," and "grim" can be seen hinting towards the sickly effects of Dracula's presence. These words are not only used to describe an encounter with Dracula, but are also used in describing illness. This novel is centered on the legendary folklore of vampirism, a curse amongst the undead, but it also provides an interesting perspective on illness as a disease amongst the living. This is especially true in regard to the Victorian Era, the period in which Bram Stoker lived. According to Martin Willis, a researcher focused on the intersections between literature and science, and author of "The Invisible Giant, Dracula, and Disease," "Dracula's engagement with disease is so very apparent in the novel, it is clearly shown that vampirism is both infection and illness" (302). This understanding of vampirism being both infection and illness is most likely due to the substantial medical discoveries of the 1800s and deploys vampirism as "a metaphor for syphilis and other venereal diseases rampant in Victorian society" (Solano). Therefore, we can better

understand the novel's subtext by studying the Victorian social context and contemporary understanding of disease and their treatments so that we can gain a clearer knowledge of the real connection between the Victorian fear of disease and how it is connected to vampirism. Unfortunately, the Victorian understanding of contagious diseases and how they were contracted and contained was still very vague in the 1890s. However, by interpreting *Dracula* in the context of Stoker's limited epidemiological knowledge, vampirism can clearly be interpreted as a disease through the novel's sub-textual references to illnesses and treatments of the Victorian Era: the bubonic plague, cholera, rabies, syphilis, isolation, garlic, and sterilization

This approach by Stoker is not only derived from the medical discoveries of his time, but also from his family context. According to Martin Willis, "when it came to medical information, he was in a remarkably privileged position" because of his various relatives who were leading physicians (303). The first was his uncle, William Stoker, who was an "eminent Irish physician closely involved in the organization of the Dublin Fever Hospital," an organization dedicated to infectious disease in Victorian Ireland (Willis 304). The second was his younger brother George Stoker, who was the official physician of the same theatre where Stoker was theatre manager, the Lyceum Theatre (Willis 304). The last was his oldest brother Thornley Stoker, who, in the early 1890's, was president of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland while Stoker was working on *Dracula* (Willis 304). In fact, this might be the reason why the three primary Victorian theories of infection - miasmatism, contagionism, and germ theory - can be seen so strongly corresponding to vampirism, especially in

term of how it infects its victims through the contraction of a bite or through the consumption of a vampire's blood. Moreover, the oft-noted connotation of vampirism as a sexual disease, such as syphilis, can also be linked to Stoker's own family history, and is most likely due to Bram Stoker's infidelity to his wife and contraction and eventual death from its tertiary stage. According to Carol Senf, an associate professor of literature, media, and communications at Georgia Tech University, since Stoker's writings contain evident signs of guilt and sexual frustration, it is assumed that "he probably caught syphilis around the turn of the century, possibly as early as the year of *Dracula*" (Senf 38) or even earlier. As shown, it is quite evident that medicine and infection played a major and consistent role in Bram Stoker's life during the creation of his novel.

In fact, the three theories of infection mentioned above can clearly be seen in both historical accounts of cholera and in numerous descriptive passages in *Dracula*. Cholera, a water borne disease that was directly proportional to sanitation and public health, was one of the major fears of the Victorians in the 1890's. According to Stephanie Watson, an independent scholar and writer, over 130,000 British citizens have died over the span of five pandemics, including the number of soldiers in areas where the pandemic first struck. In 1831, during the world's second pandemic, the disease first came to England where it infected two men who eventually died from the disease. Confused by the cause of their deaths, doctors from around the country came to ascertain the cause and came to the conclusion that the men did not die from cholera because it was believed to be non-contagious at the time (Watson). However, in actuality, the disease is indeed contagious, and its method of contamination is partly associated with the theory of miasmatism, the belief that

"diseases were the product of environmental factors such as contaminated water, foul air, and poor hygienic conditions" (Willis 306). Miasmatists denied that diseases were contagious in any way, and instead believed that diseases came from the environment which gave rise to vapors that penetrated the human body and caused infection when people were exposed to the environment's putrid air or water supply, its inappropriate drainage and bad smells, or its lack of light and ventilation (Willis 306). Cholera was indeed spread by the poor sanitation of water, also known as stagnated water, which was commonly found in the water closets of the Victorian Era. In 1848, determined to find the origination of cholera, a young doctor named John Snow discovered that the disease could be spread if the feces of an infected person permeated the ground and polluted the nearby public wells, which was used for cleaning, cooking, and drinking (Watson).

This relationship of miasmatism, cholera, and *Dracula* can better be seen in the novel when Van Helsing, Dracula's Dutch nemesis and leader of the vampire hunters, explains that, "The Count, even if he takes the form of a bat, cannot cross the running water of his own volition" (Stoker 289). Van Helsing maintains that, similar to cholera, Dracula cannot pass nor have any effect in running water because of its purity and cleanliness; therefore, both Dracula and cholera can only cross and infect others via stagnant water. Moreover, the correlation of Dracula and the miasmatic theory of infection is shown repeatedly. According to the theory of miasmatism, diseases were contracted from environments such as sewage, swamps, stagnant places, dusts, and fogs. As Van Helsing informs his fellow vampire-hunters in broken English, "Dracula can come in mist which he create" (Stoker 211). Similar to the miasmatic

belief that diseases are contracted from environmental factors such as mists and fogs, Dracula can transform himself into these various forms. This association between the miasmatic environment and Dracula is seen again in his two homes. Two separate accounts written by the novel's protagonist Jonathan Harker, a lawyer and real estate agent of Dracula, furnish evidence for this reading: "At the bottom there was a dark, tunnel-like passage, through which came a deathly, sickly odour, the odour of old earth newly turned" (Stoker 50) and "the long disuse had made the air stagnant and foul. There was an earthy smell, as of some dry miasma, which came through the fouler air. But as to the odour itself, it was composed of all the ills of mortality and with the pungent, acrid smell of blood, but it seemed as though corruption had become itself corrupt" (221). As described here, Dracula's homes are closely associated with the miasmatic concept of infection. They are described as being filled with a sickly and pungent odor, an odor so horrible that "corruption itself seemed corrupt;" in fact, Stoker even utilizes the word "miasma" to describe Harker's interpretation of the monster's home: "There was an earthy smell, as of some dry miasma, which came through the fouler air" (221). In the novel's early stages, Jonathan Harker is diagnosed with "brain fever," which he most likely contracted from his nightmarish-like stay with the Count in Transylvania. Similarly, after Mina Harker's first attack by Dracula, she recalls that "the mist grew thicker and thicker, and...The last conscious effort which imagination made was to show me a livid white face bending over me out of the mist" (Stoker 227-228). These associations not only hint at, but point directly to the notion that Dracula is himself the source of disease.

In the second theory of infection, called contagionism, infectious diseases were believed to

be "passed from one person to another through close contact or touch" (Willis 305). This theory of infection closely corresponds to depictions of Count Dracula since the disease of vampirism was directly transmitted from an infected individual to a non-infected individual through a bite. Also, contagionists believed that the repression of a disease began with the containment of the individual believed to be contagious (Willis 305). Just as the infected might be quarantined, Dracula is isolated from the rest of society in his castle, which is notable for the absence of servants. This is noted by Jonathan Harker, who deduces thus: "if he does himself all these menial offices, surely it is proof that there is no one else to do them...there is no one else in the castle" (Stoker 32). This solitude of Dracula's can also be seen in his seclusion from Stoker's audience by natural borders such as the sea. However, this isolation is eventually thwarted when The Count, in the form of a huge black dog, arrives in England. Just as cholera was spread worldwide by merchant ships, Dracula, the disease-carrier, is transported by ships across the sea to England, where he begins to infect his foreign victims in the same manner. This isolation from society can also be seen in the victims of cholera. In response to the arrival of cholera, temporary hospitals were set up so that every case of the disease could be removed when discovered (Beardslee). However, in the novel, when Dracula appears in Piccadilly, Jonathan Harker reacts in a disbelieving and horrified manner when he sees that the monster is actually real and walking the very streets of his ordinary, modern city. In keeping with the new genre of "Urban Gothic," Stoker here utilizes "the innovation of bringing the terror next door" (Spencer 201) and relates Dracula to the theory of contagionism.

Unlike the first two theories of infection, the last theory, called germ theory, explains the actual cause of infection in diseases. Although this theory resembles the other two, it differs on the basis “that epidemic diseases are due to germs which float in the atmosphere, and produce disturbance by the development within the body of parasitic life” (qtd. in Willis 312). This theory argues that microorganisms, called bacteria, thrive in certain miasmatic environments such as stagnated water and can cause the contraction of diseases through the spread of these organisms. In the novel, such germs are suggested by the cloud of little specks that constitutes one of the many forms that a vampire may take. According to Van Helsing’s explanation of Dracula, “He come on moonlight rays as elemental dust” (Stoker 211) to infect his victims. Prior to her attack by the Count and subsequent infection, Lucy Westenra, an attractive young woman and confidante of the novel’s heroin, Mina, recalls seeing “The air full of specks, floating and circling in the draught from the window” (Stoker 132). Moreover, before Jonathan Harker’s second encounter with the three female vampires, he recalls that he “began to notice that there were some quaint little specks floating in the rays of the moonlight...from those moonbeams, were those of the three ghastly women” (Stoker 48). In association with the germ theory explaining that tiny germs floating in the air are the cause of disease, vampirism is depicted here as tiny specks that can transform into vampires. Furthermore, the germ theory can also be seen in the true cause of cholera. In 1884, Robert Koch discovered that cholera was due to the *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria, which supported John Snow’s assumption that this disease was due to the stagnated water that was infected with this devastating bacterium (Watson).

Dracula’s various animal forms also connect his representation in the novel to contemporary issues related to the spread of infectious disease. As Van Helsing informs Harker and the other protagonists, “He can transform himself to a wolf, as we gather from the ship arrival in Whitby, when he tear open the dog; he can be as bat, as Madam Mina saw him on the window at Whitby, and as friend John saw him fly from this so near house, and as my friend Quincey saw him at the window of Miss Lucy” (Stoker 211). In correspondence with Dracula, the rabies virus was frequently associated with bats, and it is possible that the virus actually originated from these creatures but has just transmitted itself to other animals such as rats (Plotkin 4). It was not until the late 1800s that the epidemic of rabies was controlled. In the novel, Dracula also had the power to control rats, which played a major role in the Bubonic Plague. According to Jonathan Harker’s encounter with rats during the vampire hunter’s invasion of Dracula’s home, “the brute beasts which are to the Count’s command are yet themselves not amenable to his spiritual power; for look, these rats that would come to his call...they run pell-mell from the so little dogs of my friend Arthur” (223). This plague “was typically passed from rodents to other animals and humans via the bite of a flea,” and had caused more than 17,000 deaths in England during the year 1665 (Lerner 678).

Furthermore, Dracula cannot ingest garlic, a detail Stoker took from Transylvanian folklore, but which may derive from its natural healing properties. Nor can he enter a house without being invited in. According to Van Helsing, “He may not enter anywhere at the first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come though afterwards he can come as he please...Then there are things which so afflict him that he has no

power, as the garlic that we know of” (Stoker 211-212). Since ancient times, garlic has been used for its natural healing powers. It is a herb that “acts as an antibiotic, antifungal, antiparasitic, antiviral, antiprotozoal and anti-cancer” (Ferlow). In fact, “Dr. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1895) used the herb to successfully treat cholera” (Paradox and Wells 894).

Although it is clearly shown that vampirism is closely associated with the infection of diseases such as cholera, rabies, and the bubonic plague, it is also related to the venereal diseases of Bram Stoker’s time. In the 19th century, an outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis was seen as a consequence of the rise in prostitution (Jang). However, these diseases “were not exclusively contained to female prostitutes and males who purchased their services, but also spread to the wives and children of the latter” (Jang). Many believed that venereal diseases were therefore the result of “the moral and societal decay in England” (Jang), and that prostitution was an evil of society. Syphilis was known to be an infectious disease that infected a person through a small cut or wound that could have been caused from the friction during sexual intercourse. The disease consisted of four stages – primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary – of which its tertiary stage was its last and fatal stage. This venereal disease was most commonly spread among prostitutes and its influence is suggested in the novel by depictions of the three female vampires who accompany Dracula. Jonathan Harker’s description of an encounter with these vampires displays what the Victorian audience would have considered to be a dangerous and illicit sexuality: “I felt in my heart a wicked burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips...The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating. There

was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive” (Stoker 42). This account clearly shows the “voluptuousness,” and the sensual allure that they have in common with prostitutes and their clients in the popular imagination. In fact, “these women were epitomes of monster women, for real women in Victorian society are not allowed to display such voluptuousness” (Solano). Similar to these clients, as mentioned earlier, Stoker himself also contracted syphilis because of his unfaithful marriage with his wife.

In the case of Lucy, although she is “the embodiment of the positive feminine qualities of sweetness and light,” prior to her contraction of vampirism, she would sleepwalk on various nights (Willis 315). Although these events of sleepwalking occurred subconsciously, it was a way for her human counterpart to defy society’s standards. According to Lucy’s mother, Lucy inherited the sleepwalking trait from her father, which resembled how syphilis “was invariably transmitted to innocent wives and children” (Senf 43). Literary critics have suggested that her sleepwalking is suggestive of her contraction of a sexual illness; it is the metaphor that brands her as one of “them,” as one of the female vampires. However, it is only after her infection that she transforms from a “virginal aristocratic girl” into a more sexual and voluptuous woman (Willis 316). According to Dr. Seward, a talented young doctor and pupil of Helsing, Lucy said to Arthur, her fiancé, “in a soft, voluptuous voice, such as I had never heard from her lips: - ‘Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me’” (Stoker 146). This sexual behavior by Lucy – considered aggressive by Victorian norms – can be seen again after her death and full transformation into a vampire. As Dr. Seward recalls, “She still advanced, however, and with a languorous,

voluptuous grace, said: - ‘Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!’” (Stoker 188). These two accounts not only depict how a supposedly innocent Victorian woman can transform into a sexual monster, but also how Lucy is suggestively compared to a prostitute since she threatens to infect an innocent man with the syphilis-like vampiric disease. Moreover, this can also be seen in the blood transfusions between herself and the four men after the Count’s various attempts to leech Lucy of all her blood.

According to John Allen Stevenson, a scholar of eighteenth-century British literature, blood can represent many things in *Dracula*, such as food and semen. In fact, the novel depicts blood and semen as interchangeable fluids since Dracula attacks his victims in an attempt to gain his victim’s “vital fluid” (Stevenson 144-146). After the death of Lucy, Arthur “feels that, as a result of having given her his blood, they are in effect married” (Roth 415). If this is true, then since the other three men (Seward, a young doctor, Quincey, Lucy’s American suitor, and Van Helsing) have also given their blood to Lucy, then they must all too be married to her. If this is also true, then Lucy must be a polyandrist since all four men would be considered her husbands. Furthermore, according to literary critic Phyllis Roth, “Van Helsing makes it clear that the transfusions are in their nature sexual; by warning Seward not to tell Arthur that anyone else has given Lucy blood, it indicates the sexuality of the operation” (Roth 415). Lucy is therefore depicted in a similar manner to the other three female vampires because of their aggressive sexuality.

However, Lucy is not the only victim of this blood sucking disease; Mina (Harker’s wife)

too, is a casualty of Dracula’s fangs. Unlike Lucy, who wants to defy society and escape its confinements, Mina Harker is a “lady whose honor and virtue are protected” (Senf 33). Although Lucy and Mina are best friends and were both defiled by Dracula, they were infected in a much different way. Lucy’s situation was depicted as a consensual act due to her subconscious case of sleepwalking, an aspect of Lucy’s that depicted an inner urge to break free from the chains of society. However, unlike Lucy’s situation, Mina’s infection was portrayed in the form of a rape. According to Dr. Seward’s recollection:

With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away from her arms at full tension his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man’s bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink (Stoker 247).

In this excerpt, Mina is being forced by Dracula into drinking his own blood. Since blood is represented as more than just food in *Dracula*, but also as semen; this scene represents more than just a conversion from human to monster, but a rape. Furthermore, Stoker’s description of Mina’s nightdress is also symbolic. Her white nightdress being smeared with the crimson color of blood not only illustrates the situation but also represents her purity being tainted and corrupted by this monster. This can be seen by Mina’s response after the host had left a mark on her forehead: “Unclean, unclean! I must touch him or kiss him no more. Oh, that it is I who am now his worst enemy, and

whom he may have most cause to fear” (Stoker 259). This response by Mina represents two things. One is her tainted flesh and blood due to the consumption of the Count’s blood. She is depicted as “the leper of old” (Stoker 259), one who has contracted leprosy, a disease of the skin that marks a person as unclean. Second, her response represents her guilt and self-revulsion; to her, the scar is a sign of disgrace and humiliation because she is ashamed of having drunk the blood/semen of her husband’s enemy.

As I have demonstrated, the connotations of vampirism as an infectious disease can clearly be illustrated through *Dracula*’s many associations with various diseases of the Victorian Era such as the bubonic plague, cholera, rabies, and syphilis. It is by utilizing a historicist approach in the study of *Dracula* and in studying the life of Bram Stoker and how it was related to his novel that we can establish a connection between the substantial medical discoveries of his time and how “vampirism is both infection and illness” (Willis 302). Not only that, but by studying the novel’s subtext and investigating the events of the 1890’s, vampirism can be clearly established as a metaphor for venereal diseases, such as syphilis, that flourished during the Victorian Era (Solano). These connections can not only be seen in *Dracula*’s supernatural aspects of his nature, but also in his weaknesses and the events that lead to his death. As portrayed in the novel, mysterious boxes of soil called “earth boxes” present themselves towards The Count as a “double-edged sword.” These boxes not only contain Transylvanian soil, but are actually the source of *Dracula*’s weakness and power. As Van Helsing explains to the rest of the vampire hunters, the graves of *Dracula*’s ancestors “make sacred the earth where alone this foulness can dwell. For it is not the least of its terrors that this evil thing is

rooted deep in all good; in soil barren of holy memories it cannot rest” (213). Although these “earth boxes” restore his powers and revitalize him, they restrict him in that he can only rest in his native soil. The sterilization of these “earth boxes” therefore leads to his isolation and subsequent destruction. Likewise, diseases can be prevented in the same manner: by applying current medical knowledge and sterilizing potentially dangerous objects capable of transmitting pathogenic organisms. (Sutton). In accordance with each theory of infection in Bram Stoker’s time, diseases could have been isolated and kept to a minimum if sterilization, cleanliness, and hygiene were set as a priority. The process of sanitizing an object is highly important in the prevention of an illness, and it is by first understanding the disease and its pathogen that it can be truly prevented and stopped. Similar to this medical method, our protagonists from the novel – Seward, Harker, Mina, Quincey, Arthuer, and Helsing – utilize the knowledge of The Count’s weakness to holy objects to successfully place a Eucharistic wafer in each earth box, therefore sterilizing each one. It is this understanding of *Dracula* and utilization of this knowledge that allowed our heroes to isolate and finally eradicate him (Sutton). This connotation of killing The Count by sterilizing the environment thus provides the final piece of evidence that vampirism is sub-textually associated with the contemporary anxieties about contagious disease.

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