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Puppeteers and Patients: Gender and Power in *Dracula*

My first impression of Davidson's theatre program's production of *Dracula* was not one that contributed to my understanding of justice. Through conversation with student Chloe Butler '29 about the play's portrayal of female characters, however, I grasped the work's valuable commentary on injustices within Victorian understanding of gender—similar to the commentary made by Ariel Dorfman in his play *Death and the Maiden*, as both pieces shed light on male tendencies to undermine female authority.

Dracula opens with Mina Murray, Jonathan Harker's faithful wife, played by Julia Goode '29, bidding him goodbye as he embarks on his journey to the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania to finalize a real estate deal with Count Dracula, played by Jamey Davis '28, whose true identity as a vampire is unknown to Harker, played by Eli Lacey '29. Shortly after his arrival, Dracula reveals his taste for blood to Harker and imprisons him. With the matter of real estate settled, Dracula sets course to London, England, where he preys on Lucy Westenra, fiancé of Dr. John Seward, played by Lucy Truhe '28 and Baris Kalaycioglu '28, respectively. Harker escapes and returns to London, where he is further toyed with by Dracula before Mina recovers him.

Dracula begins visiting Lucy in her dreams, to which she has vehement, bodily reactions. Seward brings Lucy to the asylum for further observation and calls on Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, a colleague and experienced vampire hunter, played by Butler, with whom I spoke, for expertise.

Seward believes Lucy is simply unwell—a case of hysteria—a common diagnosis for women displaying unexplained symptoms of Lucy’s kind: insomnia, hypersexuality, irritability, and loss of appetite. Van Helsing argues Lucy’s behavior is not her own but instead her puppeteer Dracula’s. Lucy’s condition being the main point of contention in the play serves as the foundation for the audience’s understanding of unjust gender expectations.

Only after Dracula lures Lucy into his clutches does Seward join Van Helsing and Mina in their conviction that Lucy’s “hysteria” involves Dracula. The three set out to retrieve Lucy from the crypt, but it is too late; Dracula has already turned her. In a massive display of courage, the three fight off Dracula’s defenses, including Lucy, who is killed by Seward. Soon thereafter, Dracula summons Harker from the shadows. Mina finishes it by driving a stake through Dracula’s heart, releasing Harker and the others from his possession before they can do further harm. The play ends with Van Helsing urging Mina to join in her expedition to rid the world of vampires, a request Mina politely rejects, and warning Mina of the possibility of Harker’s vampirism resurfacing, which Mina also brushes aside.

Chloe Butler shares her experience playing Van Helsing, originally written by Bram Stoker to be male: “It wasn’t until recently that traits seen in Van Helsing’s character—his assertiveness, persistence, and courage—could also be described as feminine.” Butler’s choice to have Van Helsing dress more ruggedly, wearing clothing traditionally worn only by men, largely stems from Van Helsing “feeling a need to project a masculine appearance to be taken seriously,” buttressing those “masculine” traits of confidence. Most women’s clothing during the Victorian era didn’t suit the physical demands of Van Helsing’s work, anyways, so for practical purposes, she opted for pants over the multi-layered, restricting garments worn at the time.

Beyond just her physical appearance, Van Helsing takes care to present herself as emotionally resilient: “The most overt or high-valence emotion we see from Van Helsing is anger, typically associated with the male gender,” Butler voices. The one time Van Helsing demonstrates fear is in urging Mina to take up arms against the vampires; “I’m terrified too,” she confesses to Mina. In this scene, Butler recalls instructions by Professor Mark Sutch to allow the audience to witness Van Helsing’s vulnerability in the presence of another woman—a privilege withheld from male figures of authority like Seward for fear that her vulnerability would be weaponized in dismantling her credibility as a medical professional and in calling into question her capacity for vampire-hunting.

In addition to the oppression experienced by Van Helsing is the mistreatment Lucy endures by Seward. Shortly after Lucy begins demonstrating symptoms of possession by Dracula, Seward admits her to the asylum where “disturbed” women are boarded, such as R.M. Renfield—Dracula’s faithful yet unrecognized servant, played by Seren Dornsmith ‘29—also admitted under the pretense of female hysteria. Seward’s premature diagnosis is representative of many faulty diagnoses made by male medical professionals of this time. His refusal to hear out Van Helsing’s alternate explanation for Lucy’s behavior was in keeping with doctors’ refusal to attribute such symptoms to anything other than female hysteria, denying many women of proper treatment and accurate diagnoses. Similarly, Paulina’s character in *Death and the Maiden* encounters dismissal by her husband on the premise of female hysteria. Instead of viewing her perceivably irrational behavior as a response to the trauma she endured at Roberto’s hands, Gerardo attributes her actions to a streak of madness. This presumption is supported by Paulina’s supposed abuser, undermining her credibility as his victim and destabilizing her argument. Had Van Helsing’s character been male, it is probable that the discussion between Van Helsing and

Seward would have resulted in an attempt to subdue Lucy's "hysteria," following the same trajectory of male gender solidarity observed within Gerardo and Roberto's character dynamic.

Work Cited

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