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Horrors and Whores in Fin-De-Siècle Forensic Psychiatry and the Popular Imagination. The Atavistic Metamorphosis of Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

In 1895 the London publishing house of Fischer Unwin issued the first English translation of a book-length work by the Italian “nerve physiologist” Cesare Lombroso: *La donna delinquente. La prostituta e la donna normale*.¹ It landed like a bombshell on a society whose foundations were already being vigorously shaken by the New Woman and her unrelenting demands for liberation from the subservient, idealized role British men had been proscribing to her for centuries. The translation, entitled *The Female Offender*, not only flamed the apocalyptic anxieties that characterized the fin de siècle but at the same time provided staunchly conservative, well-educated upholders of the status quo, such as Bram Stoker,² with a seemingly rational, scientific justification of their way of thinking and an arsenal of horrifying ammunition with which to attack the New Woman and defeat her cause. It supported their views that the New Woman’s call for more liberties was not progress but rather regression to a more primitive state of existence and that the New Woman, if not stopped in her tracks, would surely bring about the fall of the British Empire and the degeneration of the populace.

In this paper I will show how Stoker incorporated Lombroso’s notions on the nature of criminally degenerate women into *Dracula*, and how both Lombroso’s *donnas delinquentes* and Stoker’s female vampires, by way of implication, corresponded to the grotesque conservative cliché of the New Woman as an egoistic, licentious creature whose cry for more liberty amounted to little more than the desire to sleep with whomever she wanted whenever she wanted, to gain dominance over men and to completely upset the social structure in the process. For the purposes of the present discussion I will focus on the key “atavistic stigmata” of women predestined to a life of crime as described by Lombroso and show that only a short leap of the imagination was necessary to see them as bloodsucking nymphomaniacs – such as the three lewd, sexually aggressive female vampires who appear to Jonathan Harker in Count Dracula’s castle (and later to Mina as thinly veiled champions of women’s liberation) or as Miss Lucy Westenra after her metamorphosis. I will furthermore briefly discuss the interrelationship of the three different types of stigmata (moral, intellectual and physical) classified by nineteenth-century psychiatry in order to illustrate how Stoker made use of this central premise of the so-called “Degeneration Hypothesis” to explain the physical transformation of women – the appearance of the features of the vampire in their otherwise beautiful faces – once they had been contaminated with the blood of Count Dracula and had begun to decay morally.

¹ *La donna delinquente* was originally published in 1893. It was coauthored by Lombroso’s assistant and soon-to-be son-in-law, Guglielmo Ferrero.

² This is my own view of Stoker as extensively examined and supported in *The Degeneration of Women*. It does not correspond to mainstream interpretations of Stoker. See Kline 1992, *passim*.

First it needs to be mentioned that the postulations contained in *La donna delinquente* (1893) and in the work that preceded it by a dozen years, *L'Uomo delinquente* (1876), for which Lombroso is best known, were not nearly as original as current Anglo-American scholars appear to believe. The central ideas that form the basis of criminal anthropology, the science Lombroso is widely given credit for having founded, had been in circulation since the early years of the century, in England as well as on the European continent, particularly in France and Germany. Long before *L'Uomo delinquente* was written, European psychiatrists, or "alienists", as they were then called, had reached a consensus that criminal behavior was a special form of lunacy that seemed to affect only the "moral center" of a person. The French had coined the term "folie morale", which the Englishman Pritchard translated as "moral insanity" in his *Treatise on Insanity* (1835), where he defined the concept as a "morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect [...] and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination" (quoted by Ellis, 33). By the time Lombroso was writing, the majority of his colleagues agreed that the most outstanding "mental stigmata" of incorrigible criminals suffering from "moral insanity" were their egoism and utter disregard for the welfare of others, their inability to love combined with an enormous animal-like sexual appetite and their impulsiveness, or incapacity to control their primitive instincts. The famous Viennese sexual pathologist Richard Krafft-Ebing summed things up by saying that they simply didn't have a "heart"³ – and that is, of course, one of the chief personality traits of the vampires in *Dracula*.

Of further significance in understanding Stoker's reception of the psychiatric postulations of his age and his integration of them into *Dracula* is the fact that the Westenra family has a history of degenerative heart disease, which gives the reader familiar with the Degeneration Hypothesis some advance warning about the course Lucy's life is destined to take. It was believed that because of the threefold interrelationship between mental, somatic and moral stigmata a defect in one of those areas would mirror corresponding defects in the other two. That belief is also central to criminal anthropology and its heavy reliance on such observation techniques as physiognomy, craniology, phrenology and even palm-reading, which Lombroso renamed "anatomico-pathological investigation."⁴ The upholders of the classical Degeneration Hypothesis believed that such defects were transmitted genetically from generation to generation, becoming progressively more pronounced until the family deteriorated completely and the line was extinguished (that principle was known as "Morel's Law").

At this juncture it needs to be emphasized that the Degeneration Hypothesis was not just somebody's wild idea but that it actually dominated psychiatric thought from the post-Darwinian era until Freud and the advent of psychotherapy in the early years of the twentieth century. Because it rested on the presumption that mental disorders were genetically acquired and thus incurable, it gave way to heated discussions, not only in professional journals but in the popular periodicals of the period on such issues as to what was to be done with the criminally, or morally, insane and how the population was to protect itself against them and their pollution of the gene pool. Not everyone in Great Britain accepted the hypothesis and, indeed, it had many outspoken opponents there, who claimed that it completely negated the principles of free will and personal responsibility, concepts that formed an integral part of the British way of thinking and cultural tradition. It is, in fact, for that reason that Lombroso's *L'Uomo delin-*

³ See Lombroso, 1877, 457. Krafft-Ebing's *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie* (Stuttgart, 1879) and *Grundzüge der Criminalpsychologie* (Erlangen, 1872) are cited.

⁴ See Lombroso and Ferrero, [1895] 1959, 103. Here Lombroso explains just what he means by "anatomico-pathological investigation".

quente was not translated in England or published there in its original form. Instead a thoroughly revised, virtually rewritten, version of it was published by Havelock Ellis in 1890: *The Criminal*. As he states in the preface, Ellis wrote the book in order to introduce English-speaking countries to the science of criminal anthropology in a manner compatible with their mentality; i.e. with less emphasis being placed on genetic predestination to crime. Whereas Lombroso consistently spoke of the “born criminal,” Ellis recommends replacing that term with “instinctive criminal”, since “it is not always possible to estimate the congenital element” (17, note 2). It is nevertheless certain that virtually every educated person living in England at the time *Dracula* was published was familiar with the Degeneration Hypothesis and its central tenets as well as with Lombroso’s notion of the born criminal whether they agreed with them or not.

Stoker’s readers would therefore have been able to understand the underlying significance of Lucy and her deathly ill, hysterical mother being introduced to the story as the last surviving members of an aristocratic family nearing extinction due to congenital heart disease. That somatic defect clearly indicated that Lucy was also suffering from its moral counterpart – a serious defect of the heart in the figurative sense, the inability to love, preoccupation with herself, licentious sexual impulses and all of the other symptoms of a moral degenerate. Her disposition and behavior even before her encounter with Dracula reflect those symptoms. As her letters to Mina indicate, she is narcissistically preoccupied with herself. Not only does she have a habit of studying her face in mirrors, trying to get to the bottom of her own perplexing personality, she confesses that she adores being the center of masculine attention, even though it means breaking the hearts of her would-be suitors and the men who have proposed to her. “Oh, Mina dear, I can’t help crying,” she writes in one letter without the least bit of sincerity and in her usual fluffy-headed style: “Being proposed to is all very nice and all that sort of thing, but it isn’t at all a happy thing when you have to see a poor fellow, whom you know loves you honestly, going away and looking all broken-hearted ...” (57). Lucy’s innate inability to love anyone but herself and her radically unconventional, polygamous fantasies are furthermore revealed when she goes on to ponder, “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men or as many as want her and save all this trouble?” (59). These personality traits make Lucy a classical example of a degenerate woman destined to a life of conflict with society and well on her way to complete corruption. It comes as no surprise that she is not attacked by Count Dracula in her own home but instead encounters him during one of her somnambulistic outings, when she is out strolling around London, scantily clad in her bed clothes, in the middle of the night. At the time Stoker was writing, somnambulism was considered to be an inherited (degenerative) form of neurosis and hysteria⁵ – and Stoker lets us know that Lucy’s father, who has already succumbed to his heart ailment when the story opens, suffered from somnambulism his entire life: “... he would get up in the night and dress himself and go out, if he were not stopped” (72). Thus, as we are led to believe, it was Lucy’s inherited hysteric personality that propelled her into the arms of the vampire and ultimately resulted in her complete demonic transmutation.

Lombroso’s science of criminal anthropology departed from the classical Degeneration Hypothesis in one very important way, one that is essential to understanding Lucy’s metamorphosis into a vampire: it applied Darwin’s theory of atavism to human beings. An atavism, as explained by Darwin in regard to plants, was a throwback to an earlier form of life, which is to say that following many generations of positive evolution, “primitive” traits could suddenly reappear in the species. That same theory could be applied to explain the origin and true nature of the “born criminal,” Lombroso argued in *L’Uomo delinquente*. The idea occurred to him by

⁵ Magnus Hirschfeld was still confirming this popular conviction as late as the mid-1920s, reporting to have observed somnambulism particularly in sexually deranged criminals. See Hirschfeld, 20.

way of a “revelation” he had while performing an autopsy on a criminally insane inmate of the Pesaro asylum where he served as director:

[...] and on laying open the skull I found on the occipital part, exactly on the spot where a spine is found in the normal skull, a distinct depression which I named *median occipital fossa*, because of its situation precisely in the middle of the occiput as in inferior rodents. This depression, as in the case of animals, was correlated with the hypertrophy of the *vermis*, known in birds as the middle cerebellum.

This was not merely an idea, but a revelation. At the sight of that skull, I seemed to see all of a sudden, lighted up as a vast plain under a flaming sky, the problem of the nature of the criminal—an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals. Thus were explained anatomically the enormous jaws, high cheek bones, prominent superciliary arches, solitary lines in the palms, extreme size of the orbits and handle-shaped or sessile ears found in criminals, savages, apes, insensibility to pain, extremely acute sight, tattooing, excessive idleness, love of orgies and the irresistible craving for evil for its own sake, the desire not only to extinguish life in the victims, but to mutilate the corpse, tear its flesh and drink its blood. (In Hibbert 210)

As the Swiss medical historian Ackerknecht significantly observes, Lombroso’s theory amounts in end effect to a definition of the world’s criminal population as a “sort of surviving primordial race” (Ackerknecht, 27).

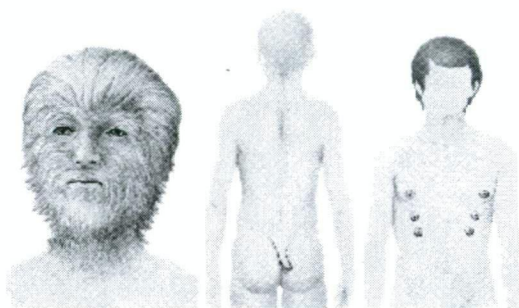


Figure 1

It is worth observing that fantastic speculation along similar lines had been going on since the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859. As this drawing (Fig. 1) shows, there were even some who believed that the real existence of wolfmen could now be scientifically explained and proven through application of the theory of atavism. In *Dracula*, Professor Van Helsing tries to do much the same thing concerning the existence of vampires. Having been called to the scene from abroad to help the protagonists understand and find

a solution to their dilemma, he begins by pointing out to Dr. Seward, who, like Lombroso, is the director of a mental institution, that as a psychiatrist he should be well informed about criminal behavior and understand that crime “is a study of insanity” (341). He proceeds to analyze Count Dracula in the terms of criminal anthropology: “This criminal has not full man brain. He is clever and cunning and resourceful; but he be not of man-stature as to brain. He be of child-brain in much. Now this criminal of ours is pre-destinate to crime also; he too have child-brain . . .” (341). The vampire on the loose in contemporary fin-de-siècle London, molesting the women of the city and turning them into criminals/vampires themselves, Van Helsing explains in his poor English, is a born criminal in the Lombrosian sense, his “child-brain” an atavism. Mina, to Stoker the epitome of a perfect woman before her exposure to Dracula, gets the point: “The Count is a criminal and of criminal type”, she repeats and even goes on to say that “Lombroso would so classify him” (342).

Not only did Lombroso note that the criminal man had an inborn tendency to drink the blood of his victims but also pointed out that his “canine teeth [were] much developed” and he typically tended to suffer from “spasmodic contractions on one side of the face, by which the canine teeth [were] exposed” (quoted by Ellis, 90). Abnormally long and sharp canine teeth were

likewise among the key somatic stigmata Lombroso claims to have observed in countless women with primitive sexual appetites⁶. The atavistic woman, he noted, furthermore often suffered from “an intense thirst, a dry mouth, a fetid breath, and a tendency to bite everybody she meets, as if affected with hydrophobia ...” (Lombroso and Ferrero, 296). As we can see here, the boundaries between fin-de-siècle psychiatry and fin-de-siècle fiction were at times indeed quite blurred. Lombroso’s oeuvre at least appears to be just as ‘late Gothic’ in terms of its horrors, specters and villainous monsters as does *Dracula*.

Although reader attention has been consistently focused on the figure of Count Dracula, who in our age has inspired countless spinoffs as well as an international subculture of avid fans, Stoker’s own focus was on the Count’s female victims, not the ones in Transylvania who appear to have been “un-dead” for centuries already when the story opens, but the young women living in contemporary London. Whereas Lucy represents the born criminal woman as depicted by Lombroso, poor Mina is an example of the perfectly normal British woman who is an innocent victim. In understanding the difference between the two women, and the way in which Stoker thematically incorporated the Degeneration Hypothesis into the story, it is important to note that, while the Count drinks Lucy’s blood, he forces Mina to drink his.

In the 1890s, and until Mendel’s Principles of Inheritance were rediscovered in the twentieth century, it was widely believed that the body’s genetic material in the widest sense, i.e. all the information pertaining to the mental, moral and physical makeup of an individual, circulated in the bloodstream.⁷ The only blood we ever see Count Dracula actually drinking is Lucy’s. We are led to believe that hers is the only kind he wants, the only kind consistent with his personality, and that drinking the blood of the other characters in the story would be contrary to his purpose, serving to make him healthy in mind, body and soul. Because of Lucy’s loss of blood, Professor Van Helsing in his infinite wisdom and erudition demands that all the male protagonists except Jonathan (who is a married man) donate their blood to her while he performs the transfusions. Since Lucy is a degenerate by birth, the heroic attempt to infuse morality, sanity and physical health into her, of course, miserably fails and only serves to leave the men thoroughly exhausted. The more blood they give, the more she needs.

A comment made by Dr. Seward regarding the transfusions indicates that Stoker was also using them as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, equating blood with the other known carrier of genetic material, sperm: “No man knows till he experiences it, what it is to feel his own life-blood drawn into the veins of the woman he loves” (128). Significantly, the transfusion from Seward to Lucy occurred behind her fiancé’s back. Van Helsing warns him not to mention a word about it to Arthur because it “would at once frighten him and enjealous him, too” (128). “Ho, ho!” Van Helsing roars after having given her a good portion of his own blood too, leaving no doubt in the reader’s mind as to what is happening on the allegorical story level, “...this so sweet maid is a polyandrist ...” (176).

So once again Stoker is trying to make it clear to the reader that Lucy was a classical example of Lombroso’s criminal woman before she turned into a vampire. According to Lombroso, the female counterpart of the ordinary male criminal was a “prostitute” – and by that he meant simply any woman who engaged in promiscuity or any other type of sexual activities that could be considered a pathological deviation from the behavioral norm that prevailed in late-nine-

⁶ Lombroso and Ferrero [1895] 1959, 91. The German psychiatrist Paul Näcke, who was often critical of Lombroso, confirmed his findings in this regard, reporting that he, too, had consistently observed long, sharp incisors in the criminally insane women of Germany and that they were clearly atavisms. See Näcke, 1894, 150.

⁷ See Stubbe 1963.

teenth century Europe. The ordinary female criminal and prostitute, he claimed, could be characterized by “an inversion of all the qualities which specifically distinguish the normal woman; namely, reserve, docility and sexual apathy” (Lombroso 1959, 297). The atavistic woman, like her primitive predecessors and savages, was not generally criminal or homicidal, he notes, but seemed driven by her animal instincts to “primitive pairing” and actual enjoyment of sexual intercourse.



Figure 2



Figure 3

It is important to note that although Van Helsing's snide remarks about Lucy being a polygamist insinuate that she somehow enjoyed draining the men of their blood, the transfusions are completely in the hands of the men. They give their blood to her willingly while she lies apathetic, passive, lifeless and motionless on the bed, much like in the scene that is depicted above (Fig. 2). Once Lucy metamorphoses into a vampire and begins aggressively demanding their blood, however, once she begins reversing gender roles as in the 1897 painting by Philip Burne-Jones entitled “The Vampire” (Fig. 3), her love turns to hatred and a burning desire to kill, to drive their phallic stakes right through her heartless heart and revel in the joy of her degenerate blood splashing upon them.

Since Dracula was not interested in drinking Mina's blood, she did not require any transfusions. As perplexing as it may seem to those who refuse to see any kind of allegorical message or content at all in *Dracula*, Mina's victimization consisted of her being molested in her own bedroom, where she was peacefully sleeping next to her husband, and of her being forced to drink the contaminated blood of the vampire, as portrayed in this still from Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation of *Dracula* from 1992 (Fig. 4) – incidentally the first, and to my knowledge only, film to have ever staged this scene accurately. Van Helsing is horrified at the atavistic metamorphosis that begins to occur in Mina shortly afterwards: “I can see the characteristics of the vampire coming into her face [...] Her teeth are some sharper, and at times her eyes are

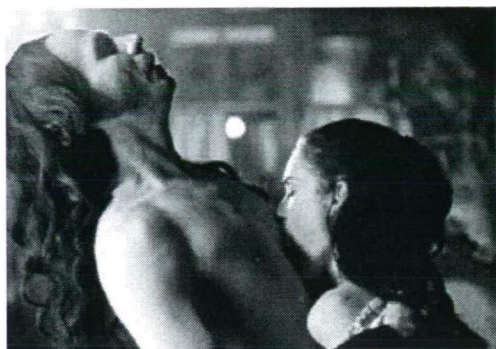


Figure 4

more hard. But these are not all, there is to her the silence now often; as so it was with Miss Lucy" (323). Before being raped by Dracula, Mina had been the very epitome of the "old English ideal," which Lynn Eliza Linton – a very loud and prolific opponent of the "Wild Women" who were causing "Modern Topsy-Turveydom" – described as "once the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world [...] with her tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties" (Linton 1886, 340)⁸ – an ideal that the "Social Insurgents" seemed bent on destroying. In the terminology used by many others

with the same complaint as Mrs. Linton, including Queen Victoria herself, the modern British woman was in the process of "un-sexing herself." To Stoker's mind, she was in the process of converting herself into an "un-dead." And it is precisely that diabolical transformation of the old ideal that he is stressing in *Dracula*. "Madam Mina", Van Helsing wails, "our poor, dear Madam Mina is changing" (323).

Stoker uses a rather interesting dramatic technique to illustrate that British womanhood was in the process of descending deeply into moral corruption. He combines the tenets of criminal anthropology with what was popularly known of Morel's Law and simply speeds up the metabolic process, resulting in an atavistic metamorphosis of women. Whereas according to Morel's Law the degeneration process was slow and gradual, occurring over the course of several generations, in Stoker's fiction it frequently occurs in one and the same person. In fact, women can physically turn into monsters overnight if they have suddenly dropped to that level spiritually by committing some atrocious offence against the moral code.

He uses that technique most dramatically in his final novel, *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911). The hero-teacher in that story, Sir Nathaniel, explains to his novice, Adam, in a series of coded messages that Lady Arabella finally turned into a disgusting, huge white worm because her latent sexual appetite erupted into uncontrollable lust. She had "no soul, no morals, and therefore no acceptance of responsibility" (131). She had been a "monstrosity in human form" (131) all along, he explains. When naïve Adam is unable to understand how pathologies of the mind and spirit could possibly be linked to physical characteristics in such a way as to cause such a horrifying bodily transformation so rapidly, Sir Nathaniel lets him know that even he himself cannot rationally or scientifically explain atavistic metamorphoses of that nature. But, he adds, "someday the study of metabolism may progress so far as to enable us to accept structural changes proceeding from an intellectual or moral base ..." Adam is convinced enough in the probability of that prediction to help his mentor blow up Lady Arabella's lair (or her "hole" as it is sometimes referred to with vulgar explicitness) with (phallic) sticks of dynamite.

A further interesting technique that Stoker uses is the reversal of the atavistic metamorphosis that occurs in the case of Mina. Fortunately for her, the men are able to detoxify her by protecting her against any further exposure to Count Dracula than the initial one while at the same time working to re-purify her thoughts, which in turn purifies her body and soul. As Lom-

⁸ Also see the remaining articles by Linton as listed in the references, which provide excellent examples of how the New Woman was viciously attacked in the popular press by representatives of middle-class British society.

broso noted, most criminal women consisted of "occasional offenders," including even "normal women in whom circumstances have developed the fund of immorality which is latent in every female" (Lombroso and Ferrero, 216). Such women were usually the victims of suggestion and could be readapted to society. Van Helsing is convinced that Mina's soul can still be recovered when he sees how horrified she is when the Transylvanian vampire-women reappear on the scene and try to recruit her into their midst, chanting, "Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come!" (367) in much the same way that the enthusiastic feminists of the day were marching through the streets of London and Manchester, calling out to the good housewives in the crowd to come and join their ranks. "In fear I turned to my poor Madam Mina, and my heart with gladness leapt like a flame," he exclaims, "for oh! The terror in her sweet eyes, the repulsion, the horror, told a story to my heart that was all of hope. God be thanked, she was not, yet, of them" (367). Mina proves that at heart she is still her old self when she begs her husband to have her killed if she ever degenerated so far as to become one of those creatures herself. When asked at which point, exactly, she wished to be murdered for her own good she responds, "When you shall be convinced that I am so changed that it is better that I die than I may live. When I am thus dead in the flesh, then you will, without a moment's delay, drive a stake through me, and cut off my head..." (331). That is when the men realize that she sees things just the same way they do and can therefore be completely reintegrated into their midst.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. Werewolf illustration reproduced in "Evolution: Zufall oder Sinn?" *Bild der Wissenschaft*, 4, 1979.
- Fig. 2. Drawing courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.
- Fig. 3. Philip Burne-Jones, *The Vampire*, 1897. Originally exhibited in the National Gallery in London. Current location unknown. Reprint courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Copyright expired.
- Fig. 4. Francis Ford Coppola, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992.