



Satan and the Art of Darkness

A Bite of Theology: The Catholic Aesthetic in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

By Eleanor Bourg Donlon

[The landlord's wife] then rose and dried her eyes, and taking a crucifix from her neck offered it to me. I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous, and yet it seemed so ungracious to refuse an old lady meaning so well and in such a state of mind. [...] the crucifix is still round my neck. Whether it is the old lady's fear, or the many ghostly traditions of this place, or the crucifix itself, I do not know, but I am not feeling nearly as easy in my mind as usual.¹

The crucifix given to Jonathan Harker serves as a *mise en abyme* for Bram Stoker's use of the Catholic aesthetic in *Dracula*. Put simply, the plot is about good versus evil; more deeply embedded within the novel is a fascinating manipulation of Catholicism as a means for dealing with the supernatural. Characters, narrating their own story in the form of diaries, journals, and letters, base their interpretation of events on two simple yet interconnected principles: first, that Count Dracula is a supernatural being embodying the Christian concept of Satan; second, that the vampiric sucking of blood is an Anti-Eucharist. From these premises the novel constructs a religious paradigm—a decidedly Catholic paradigm—through which the characters can both understand and combat the perceived threat. Some admission is made of the sacramental power of Catholic accessories, but a fear of that power persists—Harker, as an “English Churchman”, tentatively ascribes his unease to “the crucifix itself”.² The novel,

unequivocally rejecting the evil intrinsic in the Romanian vampire, is in the end conflicted in its reception of Catholicism, and turns from this unresolved problem, to conventional, although complicated, Protestant resolution.

In a recent essay, D. Bruno Starrs skillfully addresses religious symbolism in *Dracula*:

[I]n the most basic of his many perversions of Catholic lore, Count Dracula is the figurative anti-Christ who promises eternal life through the ingestion not of sacramental wine representing the blood of Christ, but of actual human blood.³

The primary religious facet of Dracula is the classification of the Count as a satanic being.

Compiling a great deal of important biographical and historical evidence, Starrs argues compellingly that the possibility “that its author was a closet Catholic cloaking his dangerous views in a relatively safe literary medium” must be considered.⁴ Many biographical details support this idea of *Dracula* as “pro-Catholic propaganda”, especially the fact that Stoker's wife “apparently converted to Catholicism” after *Dracula* was published, but the novel itself may not unequivocally endorse such an ambitious theory.⁵ Alison Milbank suggests a deliberate conflation of Irish Catholics and Anglo-Protestants, a “union of Protestant word and Catholic sacrament,

figured as modern and ancient modes of communication”.⁶ This too, although insightful, oversimplifies the problem of the novel's religious affiliation. “Obvious” though it may be, the carefully-crafted and often contradictory religious structures of the work deserve methodical analysis and, perhaps, reconsideration.⁷

The primary religious facet of *Dracula* is the classification of the Count as satanic. Harker, traveling to Transylvania on a business commission from his London solicitor's office, arrives on the eve of the feast of St. George, the night on which traditionally “all the evil things in the world will have full sway”.⁸ St. George, legendary dragon slayer and lauded anti-satanic warrior, appears as a harbinger of the heroic cause Harker and his colleagues will embrace later in the novel. Harker passes through Garden of Edenesque scenery: his coach winds on a “serpentine way” driving past “a bewildering mass of fruit blossom”.⁹ Dracula appears in a “calèche, with four horses” that conjures up the Book of Revelation's four horses of the Apocalypse, and is met with “a chorus of screams from the peasants and a universal crossing of themselves”.¹⁰ The capitalization of personal pronouns in reference to Dracula is another indication of satanic power: “generally reserved for God, its use for Dracula is surely intended to represent him as emblematic of the Manichaeon Devil, on a par with God”.¹¹ The Manichaeon comparison has a weak point (*viz.* the vampiric Satan is defeated) but the novel's investment into religious vocabulary is undeniable. Descriptions of the Count are resoundingly satanic: he

assumes “his lizard fashion” and crawls down the side of a wall like a bizarre serpent; when enraged his eyes light with a fury like “the flames of hell-fire blazed behind them”; he flashes a “smile that Judas in hell might be proud of”, and, even from his vampiric sleep, bears a “grin of malice which would have held its own in the nethermost hell”.¹²

The identification of Dracula’s powers as both supernatural and evil is the basis for the subsequent action of the heroes. Those who fight against Dracula define themselves in direct opposition to him; since they have defined Dracula as a supernatural entity, their cause too must be based on a concept of the supernatural, and since Dracula is evil, they are good. Beyond the classification of “Christianity,” however, there is a deeper and more complicated religious question. The generic Christianity of the English characters (supplemented by the quasi-secular, rogue-Protestant American representative Quincey Morris), is compromised by the entrance of Van Helsing, “nominally an advanced medical student but more a lay priest (and necromancer) and the book’s main religious authority”.¹³ Van Helsing ratifies the symbolic association of “this man”, “this vampire”, with Satan.¹⁴ He unequivocally defines the fight against Dracula as religious:

to fail here is not mere life or death. It is that we become as him; . . . To us for ever are the gates of heaven shut; for who shall open them to us again? We go on for all time abhorred by all; . . . an arrow in the side of Him who died for man.¹⁵

In accordance with this religiosity, it is only natural that the heroes fight against Dracula using religious weapons.

The use of the crucifix and the consecrated host is deeply bound up with the theoretical basis of the vampire’s habits of consumption. Blood is the source and summit of Dracula’s existence: “he cannot flourish without the diet; he eat not as others [sic]”.¹⁶ Stoker never clearly defines the process by which certain individuals are transformed into vampires and others are not, but blood

remains as the most relevant attribute of vampiric existence. Ironically, the clearest presentation of the novel’s underlying sanguivorous theory is exemplified in a character who is not technically a vampire: Renfield, Dracula’s self-proclaimed disciple. Renfield, a lunatic in the asylum over which Dr. John Seward of the anti-vampiric force presides, interests Seward early in the novel because of the oddity of his maniacal practices, particularly the collection of flies, spiders (to which he feeds the flies), and birds (to which he feeds the spiders).¹⁷ Renfield eventually begs for a kitten to “feed—and feed—and feed!”¹⁸ Renfield even consumes his various pets—including the birds—raw.¹⁹ This “zoophagous (life-eating) maniac” wants to “absorb as many lives as he can, and he has laid himself out to achieve it in a cumulative way”.²⁰ Dracula promises him flies, moths, rats, dogs and cats—“All these lives will I give you, ay, and many more and greater, through countless ages, if you will fall down and worship me!”²¹ The lunatic looks to the vampire with a sense of assurance of “some higher life” through the consumption of “lives! all red blood, with years of life in it”.²²

Renfield merely desires the “life” in blood (perhaps identifying himself as more purely vampiric than the Count), and repeatedly insists, “I don’t want any souls!”²³ His desires are solely physical, even to the point of ignoring the spiritual implications of his relationship with Dracula, yearning for the “distribution of good things” in a Eucharistic analogy that points to the limitations of Renfield’s faith—“He thinks of the loaves and fishes even when he believes he is in a Real Presence.”²⁴ The human life of Christ made daily physical and intimate communion with God possible—beyond even the Old Testament experience of Enoch, with whom Renfield compares himself: “he walked with God.”²⁵ After the ascension of Jesus, mortality and the supernatural returned to their separate spheres. The Eucharist transcends this division; as the actual sacrifice of a Calvary occurring mystically in an unbloody manner, the sacrament brings the reality of a past action

into the reality of a present. In a dark mirroring of the sacrament, Dracula is a superphysical being in whom a supernatural power is lodged. The Eucharist is the ultimate transformative and life-giving agent;²⁶ vampires consume blood to perpetuate an undead eternity. The blood on the cross was given willingly;²⁷ vampire victims do not submit of their own volition, but are hypnotized, entranced, or otherwise reduced to an altered state of consciousness. Dracula as Satan is thus elaborately developed: engaging in an anti-sacrifice and an Anti-Eucharist, Dracula is the Apocalyptic Anti-Christ who comes to collect souls and set up an alternative eternity to that promised in the New Testament.

Considered in a more complicated light, however, the choice of weapons remains deeply problematic. The use of both host and the crucifix (an important distinction from the generically Christian “cross”) introduces an archetypal aspect of the tension between Protestant and Catholic. Many critics note the identification of Dracula with the Antichrist, and simultaneously note the Reformation-born tradition of identifying the Antichrist with the Papacy. Dracula the “Antichrist” might be placed on par with the Scarlet Lady, the “Antichrist” of Rome, “seen as a worker of wonders and a seducer”.²⁸ He violates the sanctity of female purity and of marriage (the sort of thing associated in Protestant literature with lecherous monks), and wields supernatural powers of a decidedly Continental (and thus, to the English, decidedly Catholic) flavor.

Protestant disgust with the trimmings of Catholicism is clearly reflected in the mid-century brouhaha over the Tractarians. At the same time, Protestant struggle against the trappings of Catholicism or Popery is paralleled by an infusing of the rejected ritual and sacramentals with a special power. The association is not entirely rational, and yet it is demonstrated throughout Protestant literature, particularly in anti-Catholic novels. From this comes the great anti-Catholic irony: to combat the symbolically-Papist threat of Dracula, they must use

the exceedingly-Papist tools of Rome herself. Valente identifies the conflicting influences within Stoker himself; he was not a “standard issue middle-class Anglo-Irish Protestant, as has been almost universally imagined, but an interethnic Anglo-Celt and hence a member of a conquering and a conquered race, a ruling and a subject people, an imperial and an occupied nation”.²⁹ The complexity of Stoker’s nationalistic identity is entirely in keeping with the complexities of religious identity within his novel.

Stoker is careful to locate the Catholic threat outside England; the peasants surrounding Dracula’s castle exhibit recognizable symptoms of Popish superstition, and Van Helsing, coming from the religiously complicated realm of Holland, is the carrier of a foreign religiosity embodied in the consecrated host as it is first introduced at the tomb of Lucy Westenra:

As to Van Helsing, he was employed in a definite way. First he took from his bag a mass of what looked like a thin, wafer-like biscuit, which was carefully rolled up in a white napkin; next he took out a double-handful of some whitish stuff, like dough or putty. He crumbled the wafer up fine and worked it into the mass between his hands. This he then took, and rolling it into thin strips, began to lay them into the crevices between the door and its setting in the tomb. I was somewhat puzzled at this, and being close, asked him what it was that he was doing. Arthur and Quincey drew near also, as they too were curious. He answered:—

“I am closing the tomb, so that the Un-Dead may not enter. . . .”

“What is that which you are using?”

. . . Van Helsing reverently lifted his hat as he answered:—

“The Host. I brought it from Amsterdam. I have an Indulgence.” It was an answer that appalled the most skeptical of us, and we felt individually that in the presence of such earnest purpose as the Professor’s, a purpose which could thus use the to him most sacred of

things, it was impossible to distrust.³⁰

The non-Catholic members of the anti-vampiric league are not shocked at the unbelievable claim that a priest might be induced to grant a dispensation (here, in garbled theology and garbled English, rendered “an Indulgence”) allowing the desecration of the host; they are shocked at the presence of the object itself. They do not even stop to consider that when the matter of the sacrament is materially altered, as it must be when mixed with “some whitish stuff, like dough or putty”, the sacrament itself becomes invalid.³¹ Skepticism, seemingly out of place amidst a group of men who are about to do battle with a woman formerly beloved by them all and now transformed into a vampire, is still directed towards the Eucharist; it remains “the to him most sacred of things”.³² The terms of belief, in which the threat is couched throughout, are directed towards the reality of vampirism, not the power of the sacrament.³³

In the end *Dracula* is not a Catholic novel, nor could it be legitimately argued to be such. No priests appear, no formal exorcisms are performed, and the nuns of the “Hospital of St Joseph and Ste Mary, Buda-Pesth” appear only as the nurses of Jonathan Harker’s illness.³⁴ The Catholic hospital provides an appropriately faith-filled atmosphere for the sacramental union of Jonathan and Mina, but it does not contribute materially to the struggle against Dracula in his satanic or his Catholic manifestations.³⁵ The Virgin Mary does not figure except in the prayers of certain distraught foreigners.³⁶ A rosary is mentioned once, but is, as pointed out earlier, dubbed a “crucifix”.³⁷ Churches appear infrequently; St. Mary’s in Whitby, and the Catholic ruin of Whitby Abbey appear in an early chapter of the novel, but overall the “pietistic ambience serves to some extent as a kind of magnifying medium designed as much to heighten the shock value of Stoker’s sensationalism as to impart religious edification”.³⁸ The “legend” of “a white lady”, never explained by the text, is less aimed at encouraging devotion to Saint Hilda (with

whom the white lady of Whitby Abbey is traditionally associated) than to establish the proper atmosphere for Lucy Westenra’s flitting about in a white dress in that spot.³⁹

Indeed, the somewhat anticlimactic conclusion of the novel reasserts the Protestantism of the text. The fate of Catholicism is prefigured even in the novel’s earliest moments, in Jonathan Harker’s journal:

Bless that good, good woman who hung the crucifix round my neck! For it is a comfort and a strength to me whenever I touch it. It is odd that a thing which I have been taught to regard with disfavour and as idolatrous should in a time of loneliness and trouble be of help. Is it that there is something in the essence of the thing itself, or that it is a medium, a tangible help, in conveying memories of sympathy and comfort? Some time, if it may be, I must examine this matter and try to make up my mind about it.⁴⁰

Catholicism is relegated to the realm of a “[s]ome time” consideration.⁴¹ The true climax of the novel comes early with the dramatic moment where conflicting manifestations of the Protestant relationship to Catholicism meet face to face—when Van Helsing confronts Dracula with “the envelope which contained the Sacred Wafer”.⁴² This display, however melodramatic, of the true power of sacramentality transforms Dracula into a threat that can and will be combated and propels the narrative into a decline. Its immediate result (the legendary chapter XVIII) demonstrates this—Van Helsing, building upon the pseudo-Catholic theological and symbolical paradigm established throughout the novel, *explains* the reality of vampires. The complicating presence of Dracula is removed for most of the rest of the story. When he reappears it is daylight and he is in his coffin, incapable of defending himself.⁴³ The sacramental theology of the text is simplified. The Host, which Van Helsing places on Mina’s forehead, scorches her, leaving a “red scar”, a “mark of shame”.⁴⁴ Because Mina has not only been bitten by Dracula,

but has taken part in a vampiric act, consuming the Anti-Eucharist as it were, she cannot come into contact with the actual Eucharist. Van Helsing insists that salvation, and a return of purity, are possible for Mina “when God see right to lift the burden that is hard upon us. Till then we bear our Cross, as His Son did in obedience to His will”.⁴⁵

The equation of their battle to the suffering of “His Son”, refers back to Van Helsing’s early pronouncement: “to fail here is not mere life or death. . . . To us for ever are the gates of heaven shut; for who shall open them to us again?”⁴⁶ If the vampire’s Anti-Eucharist works in opposition to the sacrifice of Jesus (through which mankind was cleansed of sin, and the gates of heaven opened), a second sacrifice must be required to renew that cleansing. Even with the high-priestly authority of Van Helsing, the anti-vampiric league is essentially anti-priestly in its makeup. It functions as a democratized, multiplied Protestant discourse. This is why the arbitrary self-sacrifice of Quincey Morris, the extraneous American, is sufficient to defeat Dracula.

In a virtual reenactment of Christ’s death, Morris is killed as he assists in ridding the world of Dracula: “with his left hand he was clutching at his side, and . . . the blood was spurting through his fingers.”⁴⁷ The sacrifice at Calvary redeemed the world and conquered Satan. The sacrifice of Morris both redeems Mina and conquers Dracula. “The curse has passed away,” declares Quincey Morris as he dies, “with a smile and in silence”, “a gallant gentleman”.⁴⁸ This final descriptive moment robs Quincey Morris of even the generic Christian referentiality to Christ. He dies, not a warrior, nor a martyr, but a “gentleman”.⁴⁹ Convention, not Catholicism, closes the novel. The Harkers have a son named “Quincey” (“the Jesus-like death of Morris leads to a form of *spiritual* rebirth. He is resurrected a year later in the shape of Mina and Jonathan’s baby”⁵⁰), the two remaining unmarried suitors of Lucy Westenra are “both happily married”, and Van Helsing is a familiar family friend.⁵¹ The supernatural implications of the struggle against Dracula

are set aside, and the final words of the story assert a romantic plot—the men all fought against the Count for the sake of the beloved woman, Mina Harker—rather than a religious one.⁵²

The supernatural, as the mysterious and unknown, demands what is, by definition, the impossible: explanation. In *Dracula* this is developed into a deep and intricately worked theological structure. The theoretical basis by which the characters are enabled to approach and understand the threat they face is carefully constructed upon that system to which they, as Christians, relate. As they define the unfamiliar in opposition to what is familiar, they are able to reduce that which they fear to a concept they can, to some degree, understand, and therefore attack and ultimately defeat. In the end, however, the ostentatious Catholicity of their defense is clearly set aside. Marriage, a Roman Catholic sacrament, retains social credence and acceptance in Protestant England; the Eucharist, that which is from a Protestant perspective the archetypal aesthetic representation of Catholicism, is too foreign, too powerful, and too inexplicable. It is marriage that concludes *Dracula*. Both the threat of Dracula and the unease produced by a surfeit of Popery are expelled from the novel, allowing a Catholicized Protestant contentment to reign supreme.

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References

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- 2 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 8 Stoker 12.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 14; 15.
- 10 *Revelation* 6:1–8; Stoker 17.

- 11 Paul Murray, *From the Shadow of Dracula: a Life of Bram Stoker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004. 193.
- 12 Stoker 39; 43; 52; 54.
- 13 Christopher Herbert, “Vampire Religion.” *Representations*, 79 (2002 Summer), pp. 100–21. 101.
- 14 Stoker 209.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 137; 211.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 244.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 236–38.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 236.
- 26 *John* 6:58.
- 27 *John* 15:13.
- 28 Murray 193.
- 29 Stoker 4.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 186–87.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 186; A popular misconception from the Reformation onward was that Catholics could buy indulgences in anticipation of a sin not yet committed. John Henry Cardinal Newman deals skillfully with this grossly inaccurate idea at length in his *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 187, my italics.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 179; 187.
- 34 Stoker 95.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 12–13.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 63; Herbert 101.
- 39 Stoker 63.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 247.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 325.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 405.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 406.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 323, my italics.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 324
- 48 *Ibid.*, 326
- 49 *Ibid.*, 326
- 50 Starrs 15.
- 51 Stoker 326.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 327.