

# Violation and the inscription of opposites in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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## Abstract

Part of the power of myths and symbols is held to lie in their capacity to encompass opposites. This paper proposes that the mythologem of a male violation of a virginal female victim is inscripted to represent the opposites of fertility and infertility in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which represent the rape of Persephone by Hades and the vampiric attack on Lucy Westenra by Dracula, respectively. The opposition emerges partly in the fate of the victim. In the *Homeric Hymn*, Persephone is taken from above ground to the underworld by Hades, an allegory of the planting of the corn seed, which further symbolizes the cycle of fertility in which life emerges from death, as indicated by Kerényi (2002a). In *Dracula*, Lucy Westenra does not make this journey. When she dies after Dracula's attack, she is not truly dead, neither above nor below, but trapped in the middle, as one of the Undead. This version of the mythologem may thus be said to represent infertility. This conclusion may be sharpened in the light of a common reading of *Dracula* as reflecting the anxieties of Bram Stoker's Victorian society about women's sexuality. Lucy's transformation into a vampire is accompanied by an increased sexual boldness towards the men around her. This voluptuousness suggests unchastity, the "fate worse than death", represented by the fate of being undead. Unchastity in this light is opposed to, not fertility perse, but to socially sanctioned fertility.

## Introduction: The inscription of myth and symbol in literature

At the end of her 1996 Introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of *Dracula*, Maud Ellmann suggests that the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to the figure of Count Dracula "...perversion, menstruation, venereal disease, females sexuality, male homosexuality, feudal aristocracy, monopoly capitalism, the proletariat, the Jew, the primal father, the Antichrist, and the typewriter", (Ellmann, 1996, p. xxviii) may have the ultimate effect of rendering this fictional character meaningless<sup>1</sup>. In a sort of Occam's Razor of literary criticism, for some critics it may seem preferable for a literary figure or work to have a single meaning, or a small, manageable, set of meanings, with other interpretations readily identifiable as wrong. A wild proliferation of meanings, without obvious boundaries, may seem to make a mockery of the entire exercise of literary analysis. If something can be made to stand for anything, then, ultimately, it stands for nothing.

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Ellman provides a corrective to this feeling. According to her, *Dracula* “stands for the return of the repressed, the contents of which are forever shifting” (ibid.). From this psychoanalytic angle, *Dracula* is a symbol from the unconscious, a formation used by the unconscious to manifest itself to the conscious mind. This Freudian/Jungian perspective refreshes the issue. Now, rather than the reductive, objective view implied by the literary Occam’s Razor, *Dracula* as a symbol takes on a more subjective role. It becomes unsurprising that the symbolic *Dracula* attracts a wide range of content, in particular, that it attracts the individual preoccupations of *Dracula*’s numerous interpreters, hence the proliferation of topical interpretations linked to sexuality as well as social and economic structure. In a sense, *Dracula* holds a mirror up to every interpreter, whether literary critic and/or consumer of popular culture, in the same way that Jonathan Harker, looking at *Dracula* in the mirror, sees only himself, as pointed out by Stevenson (1988).

The idea of a symbol attracting content suggests that it is an element of structure, which is also a carrier of content. The figure of *Dracula* as a meaningful symbol should be placed within a structure comprised of other symbols and their relations to each other. Thus, Ellmann’s observation about *Dracula*’s psychological significance extends to the novel’s narrative as well (“an allegory of empire, of monopoly capital, of female emancipation, and of closeted homosexuality, (Ellmann, 1996, p. viii)). Furthermore, at the beginning of the Introduction, she describes the worldwide popular legend inspired by *Dracula* as a myth, with “luminous simplicity”, and cites Lévi-Strauss’s (1958) insistence that what is really important about a myth is its story (ibid., p. vii). Following this idea, it is not only the figure of Count *Dracula* which comes to symbolize a wide range of content, but also the narrative in which he plays a leading role.

In this paper, I follow Ellmann and others in assuming that *Dracula* has a mythological aspect and Lévi-Strauss in assuming that a myth has a structure. In what follows, I will explore one possible mythic structure in *Dracula*. I suggest that *Dracula* inscribes a particular mythologem, the male violation of a virginal female victim. I will refer to this as the violation mythologem. I assume that the violation mythologem represents archetypal material that may be inscribed and reinscribed to incorporate a wide range of symbolic content. In making this assumption, I follow the Jungian idea of myth as a reflection of material from the unconscious (see Walker 2002). As seen earlier, *Dracula* has already provided an allegory of violation for many interpreters.

### **Historical and literary antecedents of *Dracula***

The idea that *Dracula* reinscribes an archetypal mythologem may shed light on the relationship between the novel and Stoker’s folkloric sources and literary antecedents. In folklore, vampires are held to be a nearly universal phenomenon. Nevertheless the details of the stories of supernatural, bloodsucking beings vary considerably across cultures. Stoker’s folkloric sources for *Dracula* come from Eastern European vampire folklore (Kirtley 1956). In particular, the character of *Dracula* has been claimed to have been based on the notorious Prince of Wallachia, Vlad Țepeș (Florescu and McNally 1989). However, the stories of Vlad Țepeș’s career bear little resemblance to the plot of *Dracula*, apart from his portrayal as a murderous figure of terror. On the other hand, the story line of *Dracula* owes more to literary predecessors such as Le Fanu’s 2000 (1872) *Carmilla* and Polidori’s 1819 *The Vampyre* (Spencer 1990), novels that, like *Dracula*, reinscribe the violation mythologem<sup>2</sup>. *Dracula* as a novel draws much of its richness from its folkloric sources, but I suggest that its enduring popularity has more to do with its use of the violation mythologem.

<sup>2</sup> The violator in *Carmilla* is a lesbian vampire, which represents an inversion of the male assailant represented by *Dracula*. *Carmilla* is an inversion of *Dracula* in the same way that the characters and narrative of *Dracula* are inversions of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, as is discussed below.

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**Dracula and the rape of Persephone**

In the remainder of this paper, I explore a further parallel, between *Dracula* and the ancient Greek myth of the rape of Persephone. This parallel, taken with contemporary interpretations, reinforces the idea that a particular structure, such as the violation mythologem, may support a wide variety of content, and that this variety itself suggests that the mythologem is archetypal. By way of proceeding, I will compare two texts. The first is, of course, *Dracula*. The second is the ancient Greek *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, of unknown authorship, which is the oldest and most complete literary expression of the foundation myth of the 6th century B.C. Eleusinian Mysteries (Lincoln 1979, Alderink 1982, Foley 1994). These two texts are very different in form, provenance and function. The first is a novel, the second a much shorter poem. The first was written for a late Victorian middle class audience, the second for an ancient Greek audience about whom not nearly as much is known. The theological function of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* cannot be matched by *Dracula*. Still, they both inscribe the violation mythologem, although in different ways and with different effects, as will be described below. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* portrays the abduction and forced marriage of Persephone, also referred to as Kore, glossed as “maiden” or “virgin”, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, by Hades, the God of the Dead and Lord of the Underworld. A corresponding event occurs in *Dracula*, when the vampire Count Dracula sucks the blood of Lucy Westenra, a young woman on the verge of marriage, in a series of attacks that culminate in her transformation into a vampire herself.

The parallelism between these two events in the *Hymn* and in *Dracula* may be made more specific by equating Hades with *Dracula* (the Lord of the Dead with the Lord of the Undead), Persephone with Lucy, and the abduction by Hades with the blood-drinking by *Dracula*. Another important contrast is between the crusading goddess Demeter, who raises an instant protest at her daughter's abduction and is willing to see the cosmos destroyed before she will consent to it, and Lucy's weak, ineffectual mother (Spencer 1990), who never fully understands the crisis her daughter is undergoing and who dies before it reaches its climax. Demetrakopoulos (1977) observes that “(t)he Victorian mother was central in defending the innocence of her daughter” (Demetrakopoulos, 1977, p. 109), i.e., she played the role of Demeter, but Mrs. Westenra plays no such role in the novel. The contrast between Demeter and Mrs. Westenra is also noteworthy in light of the comments of Jung (2002), and Kerényi (2002a, 2002b), citing Otto (1955), who emphasize the dual role of Demeter and Persephone in ancient Greek cosmology, who are revealed in the ancient sources as so closely connected that at times they are interchangeable. No such bond exists between Lucy and Mrs. Westenra.

The central event of the violation mythologem initiates other events in the respective stories that have very different outcomes. The eventual outcome of the rape of Persephone is that she is returned to her mother Demeter for part of the year, during which time the earth is fruitful and crops may be grown, and spends the remainder of the year with Hades, when the earth is barren and nothing may be grown, perhaps not the best outcome for either Demeter or Hades, but a balanced compromise that they both can live with, and which keeps the cosmos intact. On the other hand, the attacks on Lucy by *Dracula* result in her death and transformation into a vampire, whose subsequent attacks on children require a second, real death at the hands of her former fiancé, an outcome that produces only relief for the participants in this event and its onlookers, after earlier grief and horror. In other words, two initiating events with the same basic structure result in opposite outcomes. I propose that these opposite outcomes represent the particular opposition of fertility and infertility, and that the story of Lucy in *Dracula* is an inversion of the story of Persephone. In what follows, I will examine Persephone and Lucy in terms of how their stories reflect fertility and infertility in more detail.

The Persephone myth has been interpreted as representing the seasonal cycle (Harrison 1903, Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1932), women's initiation in ancient Greece (Lincoln 1979, citing Jeanmaire 1939), and the agricultural cycle, a reading that dates back at least as far back as Cornford (1913). I will focus on the third reading. This interpretation arises from the functioning of the myth as an account of the origin of the agricultural cycle with alternating growing seasons and barren seasons. The fertility in mind here, then, is the fertility that results in the production of food, the survival of human beings and, as the *Hymn* makes clear, continued sacrifices to the gods. From a broader perspective, it is the fertility that may be associated with social and cosmological order.

This latter interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the *Hymn* repeatedly alludes to the acceptance and approval of Persephone's abduction in the community of gods, apart from Demeter. The abduction is arranged and sanctioned by Zeus (Ins. 5-10)<sup>3</sup> and receives the approval of Gaia, who sets the narcissus as a lure for Persephone as a favour to Hades (ibid.). Furthermore, the sun god Helios reproves Demeter for her grief over Persephone, stating that Hades is a good match for her daughter because of his power and wealth, considerations that many mortals would appreciate (Ins. 80-90). Finally, Hades himself apparently regards what he has done not as a crude act of kidnapping but as a way of acquiring a socially recognized wife, to whom he will be a good husband (In. 363). There are also indications that the *Hymn* alludes to more formal rituals of marriage. Lincoln (1979), in developing his thesis that the myth of Persephone is a "Greek scenario of women's initiation" points out that Persephone, in picking flowers with her agetates, enacts a Greek ritual prelude to marriage (Lincoln, 1979, p. 224). In addition, the abduction of brides is fairly commonly attested in the cultures of the world (Barnes 1999), and Hades' abduction of Persephone may reflect such a practice in ancient Greece. All of these factors point to an interpretation of the myth of Persephone as reinforcing social and cosmological order.

In addition, the fertility reading may also be seen as arising from the structure of the violation mythologem itself. Here there are two possibilities. The first is attributed to Cicero by Kerényi (2002, p. 138). It analogizes Persephone and the corn seed. During the abduction, Persephone is swiftly and suddenly taken beneath the surface of the earth and this is what also happens to the corn seed when it is planted. (This analogy may be thrown into doubt by the fact that the corn seed is planted in the earth, Gaia, whereas Persephone is carried to the chthonic underworld, which is not the same thing in the Greek cosmos, as pointed out by Hillman 1979.) Kerényi (ibid.) also alludes to the harvested corn, the mown ear, as representing the separation between Demeter and Persephone. In this analogy, we can see Persephone as also the ear of corn which is suddenly slashed from its stalk. So the figure of Persephone represents fertility in that she stands for the corn. We can go further than this to say that Persephone is both the corn seed and the harvested corn, and thus a figure that unites these opposites in a single mythological symbol. From this perspective, we may see her as both the beginning and the end of the cycle, the alpha and omega, and note in this connection that it has been proposed that the Eleusinian Mysteries influenced later Christianity (Beach 1994).

Bearing in mind the argument that the inscription of the violation mythologem in the myth of Persephone as presented in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* may be taken to represent fertility, and, more specifically, socially sanctioned fertility, I now turn to *Dracula* and the story of Lucy Westenra which forms one of its subnarratives. Lucy, like

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<sup>3</sup> Line references are to the 2000 translation by Gregory Nagy.

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Persephone, is a young, carefree, unmarried woman who is subjected to a sudden attack by a terrifying male figure. I suggest that Dracula's attack on Lucy is a reinscription of the violation mythologem seen in the myth of Persephone. However, in contrast to the myth of Persephone, I also suggest that the story of Lucy represents infertility, i.e., it is an inversion of Persephone's story<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, just as Persephone's representation of fertility is socially sanctioned fertility, Lucy's infertility represents a travesty of the social order, reinforcing interpretations of *Dracula* as reflecting Victorian anxieties about social change and decline (see, among others, Arata 1990, Craft 1984, Demetrakopoulos 1977, Griffin 1980, Roth 1977, Senf 1982, Spencer 1990, Stevenson 1988). Persephone's abduction and return are part of a sequence of events that reinforce the social and cosmological order, whereas the attack on Lucy and her subsequent vampirization is perceived as a grave threat to her society, and the plot of the novel revolves around removing this threat.

To continue the comparison between Persephone and Lucy, recall that a key part of the symbolism of the Persephone myth comes from the fact that Persephone is carried underground, into the underworld. In contrast, Lucy does not make this journey. Instead, her transformation into a vampire traps her between worlds. She is neither alive nor truly dead, a state captured in the term Undead used for vampires. If we analogize her situation to Greek mythology, we may say that she is wandering on the banks of the river Styx, unable to go forward or back. The undead, vampiric state is a state of infertility, at least from the human perspective, since it removes a potential mother from the cycle of reproduction. (From the vampire's perspective, on the other hand, reproduction is enhanced; see Stevenson 1988). On the symbolic level, if we extend Persephone's association with the corn seed and the harvested corn ear to Lucy, we see a seed that is not planted, so that no ear of corn can be harvested. Again, just as Persephone represents fertility, Lucy represents infertility.

Lucy's predicament in the middle region between Upperworld and Underworld suggests a further link to the Greek cosmos as portrayed in the Hymn. Kerényi (2002a) suggests that the borderline between maidenhood and motherhood is a region in itself, occupied by murderousness, among other impulses (2002a, p. 124). In particular, this region is inhabited by the goddess Artemis, who "carries death in herself in the form of murder" (Kerényi, 2002a, p. 127). Artemis appears in the *Hymn* as one of Persephone's companions at the time she was abducted (ln. 424) and Kerényi suggests that they are "like two sides of the same reality" (ibid.) Seen in this light, the murderous Artemis, Persephone's darker twin is also Lucy. It is Lucy, not Persephone, who realizes the consequences of being Artemis. Her vampirization entails that she will kill human beings, a process begun with her attacks on children (another sign of infertility). Furthermore, in remaining a virgin, it is Lucy who is aligned to Artemis, not Persephone.

The exact nature of Lucy's infertility bears closer examination. Numerous commentators (see, for example, Arata 1990, Demetrakopoulos 1977, Griffin 1980, Roth 1977, Senf 1982, Spencer 1990, Stevenson 1988) have noted that Lucy's transformation into a vampire is accompanied by an increasing sexual brazenness on Lucy's part. Her sexual precocity as a vampire is part of the horror of the transformation, since it contrasts with her earlier more maidenly modesty. Furthermore, her transformation is foreshadowed in certain suggestions of immodesty, such as her somewhat unseemly pleasure in having received three marriage

<sup>4</sup> The term "inversion" here refers to reversal, not the sexual inversion discussed by Craft (1984). Stevenson (1988) also notes a number of ways in which the horrifying aspects of Count Dracula are vampiric inversions of human behaviour, to the point where vampirism is described as "a parodic mirror" (p. 142).

proposals in one day and her night wanderings which culminate in Dracula's first attack (Spencer 1990). This sexual precocity, so unseemly in the Victorian context, provides another link to infertility. How so? I suggest that it is possible to see Lucy as representing not only infertility but unchastity, that is, sexuality (with the possibility of procreation) that is not contained within the social order. The contrast between Persephone and Lucy, then, is not just an opposition between fertility and infertility, but also between chastity and unchastity, which is not an opposition between virginity and non-virginity, but between socially sanctioned sexuality and non-socially sanctioned sexuality. Lucy's infertility, then, emerges as Victorian unchastity. Unchastity is the clichéd "fate worse than death", and Lucy suffers from this fate by becoming a vampire, one of the Undead, with the clear implication is that undead is worse than death.

So far, I have proposed that both the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and *Dracula* inscribe the violation mythologem, which represents fertility in the former and infertility/unchastity in the latter. Part of my purpose in this paper has been to indicate how a single mythologem may be used to inscribe the opposite concerns of different cultures, time periods and audiences. In this inscription of opposites, we may see how the same cluster of archetypes interacts with specific cultures to produce different readings. My conclusions so far raise the question of how and why this mythologem inscribes opposite readings in these two texts. Here I propose to examine the different social and cultural contexts in which these texts were composed, on the assumption that the opposite interpretations of the violation mythologem in each text are a result of the particular concerns of the cultures and times in which they were composed.

#### **Social and cultural contexts of *Dracula* and the rape of Persephone**

Turning first to the Persephone myth, recall that it is linked in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to the Eleusinian Mysteries. It is a common assumption that so-called primitive or pre-scientific societies, such as the ancient Greece of the Eleusinian Mysteries, use mythology and religion to ensure agricultural productivity (although this is clearly not the only use to which mythology and religion may be put or, for that matter, the only way to ensure agricultural productivity). The symbolism used by the Eleusinian Mysteries as described by Kerényi (2002a) (see above), of the corn seed and the mown ear, suggests that agricultural productivity was among the concerns of this mystery religion. I suggest that the violation mythologem reflects this concern. How so? Here I return to the imagery pointed out by Kerényi (*ibid.*): the violence with which Persephone is raped beneath the earth has been analogized to the planting of the corn seed. Another way to read this image is that the soil must literally be violated for there to be good harvests. At the same time, Persephone, as the ripened ear of corn, is violently slashed from its stalk. This perspective makes it possible to see the violation mythologem as representing fertility.

Turning now to *Dracula*, if the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* links the violation mythologem to good harvests, can we say that the inversion of this reading in *Dracula* is linked to poor harvests? All societies share anxieties about poor harvests. We can look for such a reading in *Dracula*, recalling that its Irish author was certainly aware of the Irish Potato Famine earlier in the century. However, I think it is more fruitful to link the infertility interpretation of the violation mythologem in *Dracula* to late Victorian social anxieties.

Arata (1990) notes that the Great Britain in which *Dracula* was written and published was a society undergoing a crisis of confidence. Among the most worrisome issues inflaming this crisis, he identifies a perception of loss of colonial domination and prestige, including loss of overseas markets, degeneration of the English race, and the erosion of traditional

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values concerning the role and place of women. Thematically, these anxieties may be seen as manifestations of a desire to maintain clear boundaries between inside and outside, good and evil. Similar points are made by Craft (1984), Senf (1982), Spencer (1992) and Stevenson (1988). Arata's goal is to "... examin(e) .. how that perception is transformed .. into stories that the culture tells itself ..." (Arata, 1990, p. 622). One of these stories is *Dracula* and the story of *Dracula* is built on the violation mythologem. Recall that in the myth of Persephone, fertility comes about through the violence done to the soil and the plant to produce food. On the other hand, in *Dracula*, violence against the female victim turns her into a force for the destruction of the status quo. Lucy becomes a vampire and hence, simultaneously, a racial outsider, a degenerate, and a monstrously unchaste woman. The violence perpetrated against her by Dracula, then, serves as a metaphor for the perceived erosion and destruction of the British Empire and late Victorian society along precisely the fault lines of race, degeneracy and voluptuousness. The violence of production in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is inverted in the violence of destruction in *Dracula*.

I would like now to return to the opposition between socially sanctioned fertility and fertility as unchastity and correlate these opposites with another structural characteristic of the myth of Persephone that is inverted or twisted in *Dracula*. This characteristic is the crossing and recrossing of boundaries entailed by Persephone's annual journey to the underworld and return to the Upperworld, a cycle that mirrors the agricultural cycle. This cycling is reminiscent of the repetition compulsion which is described by Freud, most prominently in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990 (1950)), and exemplified by the fort da game. Part of the psychological satisfaction of the Persephone myth may come from its scratching of this particular itch, the urge to repeat.

Now, when we turn to *Dracula*, we may look at this boundary crossing in two ways. First, if we see the agricultural cycle as the archetypal crossing and recrossing of boundaries, part of the tension in *Dracula* may come from the thwarting of this back and forth movement by trapping Lucy between the Upperworld and the Underworld. Second, we can see that *Dracula* himself crosses boundaries that are much less like boundary between the Upperworld and the Underworld but more like, for example, a cell membrane that is invaded by a virus. In other words, in the Persephone myth, boundary crossing represents the growing of food, whereas in *Dracula* it represents invasion and contamination. In this connection, I also note that Spencer (1992) and Arata (1990) interpret *Dracula* not as involving the crossing of boundaries but as the eliminating of them; in other words, as blurring distinctions of gender and race that late Victorians were anxious to maintain.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with a few comments about *Dracula* as a novel. Critics have been considerably nervous about its literary merit, a squeamishness which I think is misplaced (no one quarrels about the literary quality of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*). Demetrakopoulos (1977) describes *Dracula* as "tedious" but reveals her fascination with it in her subsequent discussion. Ellmann, in a notable quote, states that "... the novel wouldn't be so good if it weren't so very bad" (Ellmann, 1996, p. viii) Still, we don't respond to it as camp, and it's impossible to deny its power and fascination for many. Part of this fascination may come from its inscription of a powerful archetype, or cluster of archetypes reflecting one circumstance of human life, the life change which can propel, suddenly, a young girl into womanhood. This archetype comprised the central, motivating myth of the Eleusinian Mysteries for over two thousand years, and I think it is reasonable to say that the continuing power and fascination of *Dracula*, in spite of critical trepidation, comes from its reinscription of the myth of Persephone.

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