

“The pleasure of fiends”: Degenerate Laughter in Stoker’s *Dracula*

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The phenomenon of laughter is typically studied in one of two ways: either scientifically as a “natural” biological and psychological human reaction, or philosophically as a consequence of comedy. The serious underbelly of laughter, including its affiliations with primitivism, immorality, disease, death, and hysteria, is rarely investigated. Yet, as authors of horror fiction have always perceived, laughter’s violent physicality and over-determined psychological motivations gives it the power to punctuate a moment of horror in a uniquely disturbing way. Therefore, I wish to suggest that in order to study laughter in horror fiction we must move beyond the paradigm that equates laughter with comedy. As humour critic Marcel Gutwirth notes, “laughter is not all bounty: it has its dark, its killing side... violence of some degree may well be of its essence, though held in check” (8). I hope to demonstrate that the horror of what I will term “monstrous laughter” in a text like *Dracula* is that the violent “dark side” of laughter is very deliberately *not* held in check. Like a contagion, it is released indiscriminately upon the world, threatening to contaminate the hearers – and by extension the readers of the text – with the perverse perspective of the laughing villains who find humour in murder and mayhem.

Laughter is both immaterial and non-linguistic; the first of these qualities allows it to spread its influence into any space, and the second invests it with meaning that extends beyond the constraints of language. For these reasons, authors of horror fiction in the late nineteenth century frequently turned to laughter to generate discomfiting effects in their narratives; for example, we might consider the hysterical laughter of protagonists on the verge of psychological collapse, such as Douglas Stone’s inappropriate burst of insane laughter at the end of Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Case of Lady Sannox.” Fictional laughter even has the power to become an intangible monster in itself, as with Bertha’s hauntingly transcendent laughter in *Jane Eyre*, or Griffin’s disembodied laughter in *The Invisible Man*. Despite the recurrent use of monstrous laughter by authors of horror fiction, critics of the genre have not yet explored how this laughter can open up discussions about the nature of not only humanity and monstrosity, but also culture and morality. This paper seeks to explore these issues in

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* through an investigation of several key moments of monstrous laughter.

By examining the ways in which laughter underscores the degenerate impulses of the female vampires in *Dracula*, we can better situate the novel within late nineteenth century debates about degeneration, physiognomy, hysteria, and sexuality. I am concerned specifically with the female vampires in Stoker's novel because unlike Dracula, who only laughs aloud once in the narrative (just before he assaults Renfield in the asylum), the vampire sisters are marked by their laughter; it is central to their textual representation. Though many critics have argued convincingly that the vampire sisters embody some of the most threatening figures of womanhood of the late nineteenth century – including hysterics, New Women, suffragettes, and dangerously sexual women – they have largely ignored the importance of laughter in Stoker's representations of degenerate femininity.¹ However, reading the vampire sisters through their laughter does not permit a singular picture of their textual significance to emerge; instead, it offers a far more kaleidoscopic understanding of their continually shifting and often contradictory roles in the novel.

Dracula is usually seen as a conservative novel that ultimately legitimises the cultural values of its time by punishing all of the degenerate vampires in the narrative with death.² However, Stoker's appropriation of degeneration theories in his novel can be read in more productive ways, especially when we explore the ambiguous nature of the laughter of the vampire sisters. Complicating the issues of sexuality and degeneration tackled in Stoker's novel is the undercurrent of irony imbued by this monstrous laughter. I wish to suggest that Stoker's use of laughter in *Dracula* is essential to our understanding of the novel because it offers a paradoxical perspective on degeneration by supporting popular conceptions of the degenerate whilst simultaneously revealing the artificiality of that constructed figure.

¹ Cyndy Hendershot, *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001) 22-23; Gail B. Griffin, "'Your Girls That You All Love Are Mine': *Dracula* and the Victorian Male Sexual Imagination" in *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, ed. Margaret L. Carter (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1988) 137-148; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997); Phyllis A. Roth, "Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Literature and Psychology* 27 1977: 113-121; Carol Senf, "*Dracula*: Stoker's response to the New Woman", *Victorian Studies* 26 1982: 33-49.

² Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 342; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1993) 174; and David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996) 69.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, many thinkers in Britain adopted degeneration as an explanation for the negative impact of urban growth on the moral and cultural values of society, both of which were widely perceived to be in a perpetual state of decay. Overcrowded urban centres, combined with the pollution caused by industrial activities, were thought to have resulted in an evolutionarily stagnated population. As Daniel Pick notes, “[a] certain image of degeneration had emerged to articulate in biological terms what was felt to be the widening political contradiction between national prosperity and empire on the one hand, and persistent urban poverty, criminal sub-culture and social pathology on the other” (200). Thus, degeneration – in both a physical and a moral sense – was thought to be the inevitable downside of an uncontrollably advancing civilisation. In *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* (1889), Edward Carpenter laments that civilisation is like a disease which “penetrates down even into the deepest regions of man – into his moral nature – disclosing itself there... as the sense of Sin” (3). Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, translated into English in 1895, also made this direct link between civilisation and disease; in his widely-read attack on the degenerate nature of artists and authors of the period, Nordau notoriously proclaimed, “[w]e stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria” (537). Therefore, urban lifestyle represented a paradox in the late nineteenth century: it was both a sign of Britain’s wealth and industrial progress, and also proof of its physical and moral decline.

Degeneration was closely linked to theories of physiognomy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly in studies of mental diseases and criminology. Physiognomy saw the human face as a site of meaning that offered a window into the internal (potentially degenerate) mental processes. In the 1870s, the Italian prison physician Cesare Lombroso popularised the idea that criminal traits could be identified and codified in the visible features of the face. Many of the physical attributes that Lombroso claimed were characteristic of the “criminal type” in *Criminal Man* (1876) – such as deformed ears, receding forehead, protruding jaw, and excessive hair – were distinctly simian in nature, and thus worked to link criminals to popular conceptions of the primitive man. As William Greenslade notes, “by the turn of the century not just the criminal, but the genius, the artist, the political revolutionary, the prostitute were all branded with the notorious physical stigmata of degeneracy” (92). Therefore, in the 1890s many readers in Britain were attuned to the textual cues regarding physical

descriptions of faces in fiction, and authors like Stoker frequently played to this new knowledge in order to examine the precepts of physiognomy and degeneration.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, degeneration was seen as a catchall term to explain subjects as diverse as the expansion of the empire, the state of the poor in London, the Woman Question, the causes of recidivism, the nature of hysteria, and the growth of aestheticism in the arts. In fact, as Chamberlin and Gilman note in their introduction to *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, the term “degeneration” eventually became so widely adopted that few people had any real understanding of its meaning (xi). Havelock Ellis was well aware of this problem, writing in his preface to the third edition of *The Criminal* (1900) “[t]hat the criminal is often a ‘degenerate’ might readily be granted were it not that ‘degeneracy’ has become so vague and meaningless a term of popular use that it means little or nothing” (xxiv). Therefore, no matter how thoroughly the theories of cultural and racial decline were disseminated in late nineteenth century Britain, it is important to recognise that they were not universally accepted. Although Nordau had many proponents in Britain and abroad, he faced just as many detractors as defenders. One of the most infamous responses came from George Bernard Shaw’s 1895 article in *Liberty* called “A Degenerate’s View of Nordau,” in which he summarily dismisses Nordau’s theory as being “nothing but the familiar delusion of the used-up man that the world is going to the dogs” (65).³ Therefore, degeneration was neither an established fact nor a monolithic conception in the late nineteenth century; instead, it was a controversial term laden with many incongruous meanings. Since Stoker wrote *Dracula* in this climate of uncertainty, it would be a mistake to assume that his text merely regurgitates the conservative values of his society which sought to destroy degeneration in all its forms. A more accommodating view of his novel might be found in Greenslade’s suggestion that “[s]o pervasive and seductive was the terminology of degeneration in this period that it was all but impossible to avoid: writers could be forgiven for resorting to its terms, even though, in other respects, their work serves notice on the value of its typologies” (8). Although Stoker references both Nordau and Lombroso directly in *Dracula*, his exaggerated appropriation of the discourse of degeneration to describe his vampires

³ Other critics who attacked Nordau included A. E. Hake, whose *Regeneration* (1895) primarily criticises Nordau for lacking a sense of humour, and Dr. William Hirsch, who argues in his psychological study *Genius and Degeneration* (1897) that Nordau consistently misuses the term degeneration (a term which, he argues, belongs only to the study of mental disorders).

may actually work to undermine that very discourse, especially in moments of monstrous laughter.

Laughter was intimately associated with disease, death, and degeneracy in the late nineteenth century. In 1875, Dr. George Vasey published one of the most scathing accounts of the degenerate nature of laughter in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*. Rather than subscribing to the popular belief that laughter is healthy, convivial, and natural, Vasey argues that the shortness of breath, convulsions, unnatural circulation, and involuntary movements of the body that frequently accompany laughter are fundamentally unhealthy. He even suggests that the physical consequences of laughing can cause death, or at the very least, extremely unattractive contortions of the face causing “hideous wrinkles” (41). Despite his over-zealous tone, Vasey’s attack on laughter received considerable media attention; it was reviewed by no less than nineteen British periodicals – including *The Spectator*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Oxford Chronicle*, and the *Edinburgh Daily Review* – though its reception was mixed.

Vasey’s debt to physiognomy is evident in his argument that the immoral and irrational aspects of laughter are reflected in the laughing face. Rather than promoting beauty, laughter instead “distorts every feature, and renders even a handsome face unpleasing and ridiculous, so that a refined and intelligent spectator is apt to turn away from it” (105). Just as specific physiological features were seen as signs of criminality or hysteria, Vasey claims that the facial distortions caused by laughter mirror the degenerate impulses that stimulate the phenomenon, providing an interpretable link between physical appearance and inner character. In order to legitimise his point that laughter embodies the basest elements of human nature, Vasey links laughter directly to degenerate society:

We at once acknowledge the obvious fact that an immense number of human beings *do* laugh, but these are principally restricted to those countries where what is called civilisation has made considerable progress – where vice and dissipation and all manner of crime abound; and, above all, where levity and frivolity, and every species of folly, constitute the predominant characteristics of the inhabitants, as in England at the present day, to a very great extent, and in France to a very much greater (44-45).

Here Vasey suggests that laughter signifies criminality, insanity, and ignorance – in short, all the ingredients of degeneration that are borne out of the uncontrollable advancement of civilisation. Laughter is therefore the physical expression of the very worst forms of human deviance.

Although Vasey repeatedly emphasised the novelty of his theory, it was not entirely original; three years before his *Philosophy* was published, Darwin linked the laughter of men and monkeys in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, noting that laughing humans share similar facial expressions with laughing baboons and chimpanzees. Vasey clearly borrowed heavily from the following passage from *Expression*, in which Darwin notes the varieties of laughing and smiling and describes the physical aggression associated with “excessive laughter”:

A graduated series can be followed from violent to moderate laughter, to a broad smile, to a gentle smile, and to the expression of mere cheerfulness. During excessive laughter the whole body is often thrown backward and shakes, or is almost convulsed; the respiration is much disturbed; the head and face become gorged with blood, with the veins distended; and the orbicular muscles are spasmodically contracted in order to protect the eyes. Tears are freely shed (206-207).

The inherent violence of Darwin’s description of extreme laughter – denoted by words like “thrown,” “shakes,” “convulsed,” “disturbed,” and “spasmodically contracted” – articulates one of the ways in which evolutionary theories influenced Vasey and others who perceived laughter’s primitive physicality as a throwback to the atavistic elements of mankind and therefore as something that must be eradicated in order for civilisation to evolve and flourish.⁴

Laughter’s associations with violent primitivism, degenerate hysteria, and perverse sexuality are encoded in the vampire sisters’ first appearance in *Dracula*. In Harker’s early narrative describing his late-night exploration of Castle Dracula, he writes that while he lay passively on the couch awaiting the kiss of the “fair” vampire sister, he heard the vampires laugh:

They whispered together, and then they all three laughed – such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips. It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses when played on by a cunning hand (69).

The sound of the vampire sisters’ laughter evokes masculine penetration and feminine receptivity, a subject which Christopher Craft’s influential psychoanalytic article ““Kiss me with those red lips”” explores further. This laughter is borne of the hardness of the vampires’ brilliant white teeth rather than the softness of their voluptuous lips; it is disturbingly monstrous yet familiarly human, frightening yet alluring, and saturated

⁴ Some nineteenth century physiognomists also suggested that laughter was ugly and immoral, including Almiré Lepelletier de la Sarthe in *Traité complet de physiognomonie* (1864) and Joseph Simms in *Physiognomy Illustrated: or, Nature’s Revelations of Character* (1887).

with violence and sexuality. After Dracula interrupts the vampire sisters, the fair-haired vampire mocks him “with a laugh of ribald coquetry” into which the other two sisters join, and Harker writes that “such a mirthless, hard, soulless laughter rang through the room that it almost made me faint to hear; it seemed like the pleasure of fiends” (70). While the aggressive sexuality of the vampire sisters’ laughter is signified by the quickened breath, flushed face, and paroxysms of the body that evoke the sexual orgasm, the violent physicality of their laughter – involving barred teeth, sudden movements, and the release of non-linguistic noise – harkens back to a primitivism that is directly opposed to their apparent femininity.

Even when divorced from its associations with vampirism, female laughter has always been considered exceptionally subversive, as Andrew Stott notes in *Comedy*:

Not only is the intimation of forbidden knowledge worrying, the effect of laughter upon the body is a contributing factor to the equation of women’s humour with sexual threat as it dissolves good posture, contorts the face, causes physical abandon, and produces a loud noise. Laughter shatters the illusion of women as quiet and poised and reveals them as fearfully bodily and biological creatures. The horror of the exposed female body threatens to debase the ideals of beauty and romance transposed onto women by men (100).

Thus, the laughing female body represents a paradox: its extreme physicality is both sexually alluring and horrifically ugly, qualities which are dramatised to great effect by the vampire sisters in *Dracula*. The bodily nature of the vampire sisters’ laughter forces the men of the novel to recognise both the vampires’ frightening potential for fecundity and their degenerate sexuality. Ultimately, it is the threat represented by this monstrous femininity that drives the masculine quest to destroy the female vampires in the narrative.

The vampire sisters are never portrayed in *Dracula* without their characteristically disturbing laughter. Even during their briefest appearance, when Harker opens the door to his bedroom and discovers them hovering in the hallway outside, they laugh: “As I appeared,” he writes, “they all joined in a horrible laugh, and ran away” (82). Nina Auerbach suggests in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* that because no vampire is like any other in *Dracula*, they hint at the possibility of multiple selves: “Lucy is transformed into a ravenous animal, Mina into a clairvoyant; neither is like their progenitor Dracula... nor do they have the ironic tinkling laughs of Dracula’s Transylvanian sister-brides” (87). However, Lucy and Mina *do* engage in the laughter of the vampire sisters, an eerie laughter that, I suggest, does not promote their individuality so much as become the rallying cry of their weird sisterhood. When Lucy

laughs after recalling her strange actions on the night she meets Dracula at Whitby, Mina writes in her diary that “[i]t seemed a little uncanny to me, and I listened to her breathlessly. I did not quite like it” (133). Later, as the men confront Lucy outside her tomb after she has completed her degenerate transformation, Dr. Seward recounts in his journal that her voice took on the horrid yet “diabolically sweet” sound “of the tingling of glass when struck”, in a passage that directly echoes the language Harker used to describe the laughter of the three vampire sisters in Castle Dracula (250). As Mina’s vampiric transformation begins to take hold, she too adopts what Van Helsing describes as a “low” and “unreal” laugh (408). In a scene that provides the most potent illustration of the unifying power of monstrous laughter, Mina’s “low” laugh is echoed by the vampire sisters when they come for her in the Transylvanian wilderness; in fact, the text hints that it may even be her laughter that summons them to the spot. In his narrative, Van Helsing writes that

They smiled ever at poor dear Madam Mina; and as their laugh came through the silence of the night, they twined their arms and pointed to her, and said in those so sweet tingling tones that Jonathan said were of the intolerable sweetness of the water-glasses: – ‘Come, sister. Come to us. Come! Come!’ (408).

The laugh of the vampire sisters is terrifying to Van Helsing because it is even more transcendent than their immaterial bodies; not only does it have the ability to penetrate the minds of everyone within earshot, but it can even travel within the holy circle that Van Helsing has drawn in the middle of the forest, allowing their influence to spread to a forbidden space into which they cannot physically tread. Therefore, this monstrous female laughter poses a double threat in that it works to lure men like Harker to the vampire sisters, whilst simultaneously heralding their camaraderie with other vamped women like Mina.

At the same time, the femininity of this laughter can be read as a subversive response to masculine aggression. As Van Helsing relates when he advances on the vampire sisters with the holy wafer in the wilderness, “[t]hey drew back before me, and laughed their low horrid laugh” (408). This reiterates the scene earlier in the novel when the vampire sisters respond to the Count’s angry interruption of their near-attack on Harker in Castle Dracula “with a laugh of ribald coquetry” (70). In both cases, this laughter acts as a form of empowerment for the vampire sisters, which is especially potent since, as Simon Critchley argues, “[b]y laughing at power, we expose its

contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact... just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed” (11).

Continuing with this feminist reading, we might turn to Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” to help explain the ways in which the vampire sisters’ laughter works as a tool of emancipation from patriarchal constraints. Cixous argues that writing offers women both a gateway for the celebration of their sexuality and a method of escaping the patriarchally-imposed alienation from the female body. Reading the vampire sisters in *Dracula* through Cixous suggests that their physical attacks are allegorical attempts to write with their bodies in the most literal sense. The vampire sisters are unafraid to open their mouths in order to inject themselves forcefully into the narrative; however, since their actions mimic the masculinised process of writing through violence and penetration, it does not allow them to express themselves in their own individual, feminised way. Ultimately, the vampire sisters fail to write their own history; instead, their existence is always mediated through male narrators (Harker, Seward, Van Helsing, and Stoker) and male progenitors (the Count). This masculine narrative interprets the laughter of the vampire sisters in a singular way: as proof that they are degenerate women whose “moral insanity” makes them completely immune to the effects of conscience.

Yet perhaps, like the story of Medusa, it is the masculine narrative that has mythologised the vampire sisters in *Dracula* into the threats to humanity that they have come to represent. As I have already suggested, monstrous laughter in *Dracula*, as in most horror texts, is paradoxical; it never represents just one concept or ideology, but rather signifies many contradictory meanings at once. Therefore, however much the laughter of the vampire sisters works to underscore their degeneracy, it also possesses an ironic undertone – because it is *laughter*, it suggests that there is something to laugh *at*. Cixous argues that the false mythologisation of Medusa’s story occurred because men must associate women’s sexuality with death in order to produce their own history. Yet, as she notes, “[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). *Dracula* reveals the possibility that the gendered perspective of the male narrators has led them to misinterpret the dangers posed by the female vampires, thus giving the text an ironic undercurrent that is expressed most subversively in moments of female laughter.

Although the vampire sisters are defined by every cliché of degeneracy, perhaps their laughter signifies the text’s resistance to the unequivocal nature of the theories of

degeneracy popularised during the 1890s. For, although Stoker ultimately participates in the social condemnation of the degenerate by destroying his vampires at the end of the novel, the fact that Dracula and the vampire sisters are so easily disposed of in Transylvania almost makes a mockery of the severity of the Crew of Light's terror about them. Perhaps this is the very point that the moments of laughter in the text have foreshadowed throughout the novel: that the fears about degeneration expounded by critics like Vasey and Nordau (and embodied by the Crew of Light in Stoker's novel) are in fact even more hysterical than the so-called degenerates themselves. After all, by writing about degenerates and giving them centre stage in his novel, Stoker was actively participating in the very proliferation of sensationalistic literary degeneration that Nordau so emphatically condemns.

Finally, the very inexplicable and ambiguous quality of the vampire sisters' laughter that this paper has attempted to illuminate hints at the inadequacy of the discourses of degeneration, physiognomy, or even psychology to offer any sort of universal explanation of human nature or cultural decline. As Troy Boone suggests in his article on the politics of decadence in *Dracula*, Stoker's novel "declare[s] the impossibility of solving Victorian problems in Victorian terms" (78). Perhaps *Dracula* points to the need for a more complex psychological model than the monolithic outlook elucidated by degeneration theorists, one that instead attempts to incorporate diverse modes of perceiving progress and decline.

I wish to conclude with a suggestion that much of the appeal of monstrous laughter is that it offers readers the chance to vicariously celebrate the release of rules and boundaries, of morality and manners. Monstrous laughter flouts convention with verve, and permits the veneer of civilisation to disappear, if only temporarily. Given its dangerously contagious powers, perhaps the most intriguing suggestion offered by these moments of monstrous laughter in *Dracula* is that "the pleasure of fiends" that Harker warns us against might in fact be our own.

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