

Contagions.

The Sleeping Beauty *topos* in *The Monk* and *Dracula*

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Abstract

A hundred years separate two of the most successful masterpieces of English Gothic Fiction: *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. The significance of this circumstance goes beyond mere chronological coincidence and is revealing of a closer connection between the two texts. Such a connection, made up of a network of allusions, echoes, anticipations and cross-references, derives from a specific set of narrative situations that *The Monk* presents and that *Dracula* redefines in order to reflect new and different axiologies. These situations focus on the motif of the Sleeping Beauty and its variations, a narrative *topos* whose morbid connotations both novels emphasize in a typically Gothic manner. The analysis of the ways in which Lewis and Stoker make up this motif sheds light on the dialectical relationship connecting the two texts. With specific reference to *Dracula*, it provides as well a new interpretative perspective based on a metaliterary reading of Stoker's novel, of the dark desires and evil pleasures it evokes one hundred years after Lewis's *The Monk*.

A web of references, echoes and shared themes creates a non-occasional connection between two of the most popular Gothic masterpieces of English literature: *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker¹. This affinity allows us to reconsider the paths opened and followed by the English Gothic from the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. While we can agree with Punter's statement (2012: 1) that "the notion of what constitutes Gothic writing is a contested site," an initial clarification might come from making a clear distinction between the presence of Gothic elements within heterogeneous narrative texts (they are copious, for example, already in some works by Dickens or by the Brontës) and the Gothic as a genre, as *the* genre capable of giving formal literary voice to a collective fear occasioned by the tension between the stability of the modern/present situation and an otherness apparently capable of undermining and destroying that stability. This otherness was long identified with the re-emergence of a culturally and socially backward past; during the nineteenth century, however, it was redefined above all in terms of a force that was the outcome and

¹ All references to the texts of *The Monk* and *Dracula* are to the editions by Anderson (Lewis 1998) and Hindle (Stoker 1993). Quotations are followed by page numbers in the body of the text, in brackets.

expression of the contemporary world, of a modernity perceived as “excessive” and therefore dangerous, of a technological and scientific progress that appeared uncontrolled and uncontrollable in its processes and that, from a certain point on, challenged at its core the fundamental nature of the human and the rational, establishing a destabilizing relationship between evolution and degeneration (Milbank 2002: 146-149; Moretti 2005: 104-105.; Ridenhour 2012: 4).

If we accept this point of view, we cannot fail to note that the novels of Lewis and Stoker mark the start and end points respectively of that form of the Gothic Novel that expresses the immanence of the threat by magnifying the power of a supernatural imbued with superstition, legends and centuries-old traditions. Within this form, during the nineteenth century, by stages but with ever increasing conviction through the works of Mary Shelley, Maturin, Le Fanu, Stevenson and Wilde, the Gothic also seeks to move from the past to the contemporary world; from a distant place that is variously identified (but always spatially and chronologically remote) to the heart of the nation-state and the city *par excellence*: London. London’s central role in this form of the Gothic that slowly reconfigures itself as “urban” is unsurprising in light of “its cultural, financial, and physical presence on the world stage.” More importantly, “the conflicting aspects of the British capital – wealth, culture, and industry interwoven with filth, poverty, and crime – serve as a ready-made symbol for the tension between perceptions of the modern and the primitive” (Ridenhour 2012: 1; 4)².

Within this framework, on a more circumscribed level, it is interesting to note that there is also a close intertextual relationship between *The Monk* and *Dracula*, as mentioned at the beginning, that unfolds from a core set of situations presented by *The Monk* and repurposed by *Dracula*, though redefined to reflect new or changed value systems. All these situations have at their root a specific motif: the reworking of the *topos* of the Sleeping Beauty, whose morbid subtext is made explicit by the Gothic, with its variants, to a greater extent than by other genres. Outside the realm of the fairy tale (Perrault’s version, the most famous, dates to 1697), the “sleeping beauty” lies in a state of abandonment such as to suggest a liminal state between life and death, drawing upon herself – within the confines of a room – a desiring glance that scrutinizes that body, whose helpless immobility ignites fantasies of sexual violation (see Vitale 2013: 169)³.

² A passage mediated by at least one other “hybrid” genre, the sensation novel, which, in the late nineteenth century, with Wilkie Collins or Elizabeth Braddon, blended “the exotic horrors of Gothic [...] and the daily life of readers” (Ascari 2002: 305). As Kathleen Spencer (1992: 201) clarifies: “The change from Gothic to Urban Gothic allows writers to call on the powers of what Henry James, in a review of the sensation novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, called ‘those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors’. As James observed, the innovation of bringing the terror next door gave an entirely new direction to horror literature: ‘The new strategy was fatal to the authority of Mrs. Radcliffe and her everlasting castle in the Apennines. What are the Apennines to us, or we to the Apennines? Instead of the terrors of ‘Udolpho’, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely more terrible’”.

³ Starting with the observations dedicated by Cixous (1975: 120-121) to “La Belle au bois dormant,” this *topos* has been thoroughly studied by feminist critics, who have identified its central role in the cultural creation of power relations between the sexes. On the nineteenth-century artistic, visual and narrative representation of the dying beauty, of the sick, bloodless or dead female body and its cultural and

The analysis of Lewis and Stoker's treatment of this motif thus provides information of help in clarifying some of the interpretations of the contagion of evil, understood both literally and metaphorically, that they codify. As concerns *Dracula* alone, it also provides a starting point for the formulation of a further interpretative hypothesis based on some distinctive features of both the vampire and the women who are the objects of his desire, as well as of the genre that hosts them.

Representative in Lewis of a specific manifestation of voluptuous evil, in Stoker the *topos* of the Sleeping Beauty is complicated by the more ambiguous and less clear-cut relationship between victim and persecutor. The vampire and his victims: a bond and a metaphor that have been subjected to a multiplicity of interpretations variously relating to the spheres of sexual perversity, the conflict between gendered socio-cultural and behavioural norms, the fear triggered by national and identity-related boundaries seen as overly porous and unclear. A wide range of meanings, with respect to which, however, we can still make room for a reading that is at least partly different, a reading in a meta-literary key of the wants, drives and evil pleasures at play in *Dracula*, evoking *The Monk* a hundred years later.

1. A Literature of Monsters

Some of the comments made about *The Monk* on its publication leave no doubt as to the unease and alarm provoked by this novel (see Blakemore 1998: 521-539)⁴. In his notice for *The Critical Review*, Coleridge (1797: 197) branded it "a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or a daughter, he could reasonably turn pale"; harsher still is the judgment of *The British Critic* (1796: 677; Art. 28), according to which "good talents have been misapplied in the production of [a] monster," a literary "monster" packed with "[l]ust, murder, incest, and every atrocity that can disgrace human nature, [...] without the apology of probability, or even possibility, for their introduction." In *The Flapper* (1796: 1-4), the defence of morality and plausibility takes the form of a letter written by a fictional "most devout novel-reader" who signs himself Aurelius. Ultimately repenting and emerging, thanks to the discovery of the Bible, from his condition of "inert imbecility," Aurelius warns Irish readers against perusing *The Monk*. The blasphemy and obscenity on display in a totally improbable story made it inadvisable even to touch such an immoral and unrealistic book.

Essentially, Lewis's masterpiece has two characteristic traits. The first, relating to the content, is its brutal staging of the inseparable union of evil and pleasure: from the sadistic cruelty of the Abbess to the blind lasciviousness of Ambrosio, the monk, who in a paroxysmic crescendo of lust and blood first kills his mother and then rapes and murders

philosophical implications, Dijkstra's study (1986) remains fundamental. Interesting ideas are also in Bronfen (1992).

⁴ Also interesting is the study by Agnieszka Łowczanin (2016: 17), in which "Lewis's own way of representing the female body – clothed and unclothed, revered and defiled, beautified and mutilated" is explained within the context of such politically-engaged texts as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).

the object of his unwittingly incestuous passion, that Antonia whom he will discover at the end, from the words of the devil, to be his sister. Pleasure *as* evil, according to an isotopy recurrent in the Gothic from the outset, combined with the pervasive deployment of a supernatural realm capable of taking on disparate appearances, none of which – going against the line suggested by Ann Radcliffe – can be rationally explained. There is thus room for the ghost of the “Bleeding Nun,” the Wandering Jew, infernal temptation embodied by the splendid and sensual Matilda, Satan himself in his dual role: the literary, Miltonian and later Romantic role of the fallen angel, and the “popular” role of Satan as monstrous creature (see Carter 1987; McWhir 1989: 29-47; Greary 1992: 59-69; Drury 2016: 217-233). *The Monk* gives this supernatural world the dangerous charm of a desire that principally takes the form of an irrepressible sexual impulse, capable – if not weakened and harnessed – of corrupting and perverting those who fall prey to it and of disrupting any type of social and above all family relationship⁵.

The second trait is formal in nature and relates to the structure of the text. In *The Monk*, the plot, constructed around the intersection and juxtaposition of the stories of three legitimate and “illegitimate” couples (Lorenzo and Antonia, and on her death Virginia, Raimondo and Agnese, Ambrosio and Matilda), proceeds by interruptions and resumptions, breaking off and recommencing. The narrative fabric is thus stressed and expanded both by the inclusion of heterogeneous materials (letters, poems, songs, prophecies) and by the interpolation of secondary stories (in prose or in ballad form) that take the technique of the *tale within the tale* to its extreme, as in the case of the *History of Raymond, Marquis de Las Cisternas*, whose similarly discontinuous development takes up almost a quarter of the book. Lewis’s novel is not unitary, linear, teleologically directed but rather composite, digressive, polyphonic, despite the presence of an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator. With these characteristics, *The Monk* marks a beginning, creates a model for the Gothic Novel that later finds in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), by Charles Maturin, its most radical development and in *Dracula*, by the Victorian Bram Stoker, the formulation of a compromise revelatory of an ongoing change⁶.

⁵ In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke attempts to draw a distinction, though not always coherent and linear, between *Love* and *Lust*. *Lust*, associated in the Burkian aesthetic with the sublime, is a primordial and animalistic impulse. Essential for triggering the desire needed for the propagation of the species, if left free to act it inevitably leads to promiscuity, degrading man to a brute. *Love*, on the other hand, belongs to beauty, and therefore to balance and order: it is a sort of “socialization” of lust, representing its channelling into forms compatible with society and morality. In a word, love is a sublimation – resulting from a repression – of libido. Transfigured by eros into sentiment, love, now devoid of any desire for possession, resolves into contemplation. In this way, on the one hand, aesthetics takes the place of eroticism, on the other, love, as tenderness and affection, comes close to the “sympathy” that is the social passion par excellence (see Sertoli 1985: 24-26). Clearly, in Gothic literature “evil” functions as an activator of that repressed and dangerous desire. The pleasure of evil, the sublime delight of terror here also has much to do with the distance-closeness to death and therefore with the very survival of the subject, with his self-preservation. Just as terror stops short of death and thus allows for the preservation of man as a physical subject, love likewise stops short of eros and thus allows for the survival of man as a social, *ethical* subject (see Sertoli 1985: 26).

⁶ An examination of the Gothic Novel as a destabilizing, anti-national and cosmopolitan genre is in Pepe (2012).

2. The Temptation of the Serpent

In *The Monk*, Ambrosio epitomizes the blend of sensualism and Gothicism that unfolds in the novel. His inner weakness and the torment of thoughts and dreams populated with images of sin and blasphemy lead him to yield to the temptations of evil, which takes on the caressing and intoxicating features of Rosario/Matilda⁷. The integrity of a man who appears to be a saint in the eyes of the people – transforming him into a rapacious villain – is shattered by the spectacle of Matilda’s white skin and perfectly round bare breasts, but the true entry of evil into Ambrosio’s microcosm, the contagion that irredeemably infects his soul, takes place through the bite of a snake – an all too explicit symbol – and the subsequent act of “vampirism” that it induces. To save the life of the object of her demonic passion, Matilda sucks the poisoned blood from Ambrosio’s wounded arm, thus establishing an indissoluble bond with him. Faced with a gesture of such devotion, maddened by desire and a sense of guilt, the monk lets himself be overcome and seduced: from this moment on, having broken the banks of will and determined sublimation, he is unable to combat the power of a sexual desire that, triggered by Matilda, soon turns obsessively to another objective: the possession of Antonia’s immaculate beauty⁸. Overcome by his boundless pride and voracious lust, Ambrosio is damned, fully deserving the long agony and atrocious death for which he is destined by Satan: an end meticulously described in the concluding chapter, which constitutes a second exemplary ending to the story, alongside the canonically “happy” ending – after trials and tribulations – reserved for the young lovers.

The motif of the sleeping beauty violated by the gaze is certainly referenced in Ambrosio’s first (unsuccessful) attempt to rape Antonia. The long scene is to be constructed around a series of contrasts – purity/corruption, innocence/lust, beauty/beastliness – and is emblematic in its development:

He now ventured to cast a glance upon the sleeping beauty. A single lamp, burning before the Statue of St. Rubella [*sic*], shed a faint light through the room, and allowed him to examine all the charms of the lovely Object before him. The heat of the weather had forced her to throw off part of the Bed-clothes: Those which still covered her, Ambrosio’s insolent hand hastened to remove. She lay with her cheek reclining upon one ivory arm; The Other rested on the side of the Bed with graceful indolence. A few tresses of her hair had escaped from beneath the Muslin which confined the rest, and fell carelessly over her bosom, as it weighted with slow and regular suspiration. The warm air had spread her cheek with higher color than usual. A smile inexpressibly sweet played round her ripe and coral lips, from which every now and then escaped a gentle sigh or an half-pronounced sentence [*sic*]. An air of enchanting innocence and candour pervaded her whole form; and there was a sort of modesty in her very nakedness, which added fresh stings to the desires of the lustful Monk. He remained for some moments devouring those charms with his eyes, which were soon to be subjected to his ill-regulated passions. Her mouth half-opened seemed to solicit a kiss: He bent over her; he

⁷ On the liminality of Matilda, see Brewer (2004: 192-193; 197-201).

⁸ An interesting reading of Ambrosio’s verbalization of desire is provided by Doyle (2000: 61-69); for an analysis of the beauty of the female figures closely connected to Ambrosio, largely derived from the models of classical statuary, see Ferguson (2018: 29-38); but, also, from a broader and more critical perspective, Kosofsky Sedgwick (1981: 255-270).

joined his lips to them, and drew in the fragrance of her breath with rapture. This momentary pleasure increased his longing for still greater (300).

In truth, the same situation had already appeared in the novel, many pages earlier, in a variant in which the positions are tellingly reversed, confirming the Gothic propensity to problematize gender asymmetries. Ambrosio and Matilda are the protagonists:

“He sleeps!” said She at length in a low voice, but whose accents the Abbot distinguished perfectly; “Now then I may gaze upon him without offence! I may mix my breath with his; I may doat upon his features, and He cannot suspect me of impurity and deceit! – He fears my seducing him to the violation of his vows! Oh! the Unjust! Were it my wish to excite desire, should I conceal my features from him so carefully? Those features, of which I daily hear him”. [...] As She said this, her voice was choaked by weeping. While She bent over Ambrosio, a tear fell upon his cheek. “Ah! I have disturbed him!” cried Matilda, and retreated hastily. Her alarm was ungrounded. None sleep so profoundly, as those who are determined not to wake. The Friar was in this predicament: He still seemed buried in a repose, which every succeeding minute rendered him less capable of enjoying. The burning tear had communicated its warmth to his heart [...].

“I was left alone with you: You slept; I loosened the bandage from your hand; I kissed the wound, and drew out the poison with my lips. The effect has been more sudden than I expected. I feel death at my heart; Yet an hour, and I shall be in a better world” (78-79; 88).

In this case it is the woman who, betraying an ardour initially concealed and restrained, contemplates the man’s body, almost overcome by the poison and therefore immersed in a torpor akin to death. When Matilda’s lips later rest on Ambrosio’s flesh to suck his blood, evil definitively binds the spirit of that long-desired victim to itself with its touch.

The dual presentation of the sleeping beauty motif reflects the two ways in which the contagion of evil is expressed in *The Monk*. The first is based on antithesis, an antithesis of emotional impulses and values: on the one hand innocence, virtue, sublimation; on the other depravity, vice, the temptation of the flesh. The only way to resolve this split, this duality that cannot be reduced to unity, is subjugation. The persecuted girl and the values she embodies can only be subdued by an act of violence perpetrated by the villain (following on from the lust of the gaze) against a heroine powerless to react or reduced to a state of unconsciousness, natural or unnatural (see Nadler 2016: 18-35). The second, more ambiguous and thought-provoking, is built on the oxymoron, on the coexistence of opposites. This is the process by which evil creeps in, attracts and draws people to itself, liberates and intensifies energies already present in the “victim” and, through contagion, assimilates him or her. In one case, evil and its pleasures find an outcome in the sensual satisfaction of the persecutor and, almost always, in the death of the victim; in the other, evil imposes itself as a pervasive force that the desiring subject discovers within themselves and manifests, rendering the distance between victim and persecutor imperceptible.

The latter is the prevailing dynamic in *Dracula*.

3. “Both thrilling and repulsive.” The Law of Desire

The situation of the Sleeping Beauty, with its intertwining of pleasure and evil, appears in three different versions in *Dracula*. The first staging takes place at the beginning of the

novel, in the Carpathian mountains, inside the Castle of the Count. Reworking the reversed pattern already prefigured in *The Monk*, here it is the young Jonathan Harker, in the torpor of a paralyzing half-sleep, who suffers the attack⁹. He is assaulted and subjugated by three women, the expression of an aggressive and impulsive femininity, three vampires driven by an irrepressible animal will that is “both thrilling and repulsive” to the male subject, passive and impotent. A pleasure to which the man abandons himself, “in a state of fascinated and morbid dread,” (Roth 1977: 114) prey to “a languorous ecstasy” that soon becomes conflicting as he waits for contact with their sharp and brilliant teeth and red and carnal lips:

I suppose I must have fallen asleep; I hope so, but I fear, for all that followed was startlingly real [...]. In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, for, though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor. They came close to me and looked at me for some time, and then whispered together. [...] All three had brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. [...] I lay quiet, looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. [...] There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed about to fasten on my throat. Then she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and could feel the hot breath on my neck. Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer – nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I close my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited – waited with beating heart (52-53).

Jonathan, therefore, awaits an erotic satisfaction that, in the terms in which it is described, “entails both the dissolution of the boundaries of the self and the thorough subversion of conventional Victorian gender codes,” which denied any mobility and fluidity to sexual desire, assigning exclusively “to the more active male the right and responsibility of vigorous appetite, while requiring the more passive female, to suffer and be still”¹⁰. A manifestation of weakness and passivity that the novel will eventually seek – as we will see – to compensate for and redeem.

The second transposition, with even more explicit sexual implications, features the young Lucy Westenra. After a series of nocturnal meetings during which Dracula's gaze and mouth rest on the body of the sleeping beauty, meetings of which, however, we are not offered the detailed description that we might have expected, Lucy becomes a vampire. One night, after several attempts at ambush and a close-run hunt, in the tomb where she has found refuge and repose, Lucy is caught by her fiancé, Arthur, and by Van

⁹ On “the ambiguous eroticism of Harker's exchanges with both Dracula and the vampiric women,” see Kuzmanovic (2009: 414-417).

¹⁰ “This moment, constituting the text's most direct and explicit representation of a male's desire to be penetrated, is governed by a double deflection: first, the agent penetration is nominally and anatomically [...] female; and second, this dangerous moment, fusing the maximum of desire and the maximum of anxiety, is posed precisely at the brink of penetration” (Craft 1984: 108).

Helsing, Quincey Morris and Dr Seward¹¹. The latter are to accomplish a task that is specific and atrocious: they must kill that creature which is no longer human following an age-old ritual, so as to preserve her immortal soul. The only character to manifest the symptoms of a sexual energy held in check with difficulty, Lucy appears – like Ambrosio and unlike her friend Mina – vulnerable to the fascination of evil and this seals her fate: death will come to her at the hands of her betrothed, on what, based on the dates, was to have been their wedding night¹². The scene has the syncopated and mounting cadence of sexual intercourse and, in paradoxical respect for the canonical roles of victim and persecutor, reverses both the nature and purpose of the aggression. The maiden, long in sight of her pursuers, is pierced by Arthur with a stake through her heart. Lucy is indeed brutalized, but here the violence exercised by the man – effectively a metaphorized rape – technically takes the form of a “therapeutic” and almost merciful act of liberation that serves to give the heroine back her lost peace, to restore her to that social respectability and decorum from which Dracula’s infection had removed her. In death, Lucy again becomes “the angel she had been in life; she also becomes a bond between three rivals, where in life she could only have been a source of division” (Spencer 1992: 212). That only death can heal Lucy’s “guilt,” her insubordination, her carnal exuberance, is certainly a painful condemnation, painful but not devoid of an undeniable pleasure for those called upon to enact it:

Arthur took the Stake and the hammer, and when once his mind was set on action his hands never trembled nor even quivered. Van Helsing opened his missal and began to read, and Quincey and I followed as well as we could. Arthur placed the point over the heart, and as I looked I could see its dint in the white flesh. Then he struck with all his might. The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam.

But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it; the sight of it gave us courage, so that our voices seemed to ring through the little vault.

And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth ceased to champ, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. The terrible task was over (277-278)¹³.

¹¹ With the exception of Van Helsing, in the early chapters all the male characters had competed to win her hand. Consciously (with a form of flirtation and self-gratification) or unconsciously, Lucy with her hesitations and her availability had turned those men into rivals and divided them, thus facilitating Dracula’s plans.

¹² On the “virgin/whore dichotomy,” repeatedly adopted and developed by critics “to show how Mina and Lucy are juxtaposed in terms of their femininity, with Mina representing the virgin and Lucy representing the whore,” but also on their “intimate friendship” problematized by that dichotomy, see Demetrakopoulos (1977: 104-113); Macaluso (2020: 19-36).

¹³ “The murderous phallicism of this passage clearly punishes Lucy for her transgression [...], as she finally receives a penetration adequate to ensure her future quiescence. Violence against the sexual woman here is intense [...] ferocious in its detail” (Craft 1985: 122). As also noted by Prescott and Giorgio (2005: 488): “Lucy’s descent into vampirism as well as Mina’s desperate attempts to disavow her own vampiric affinities reveal not only the coercive power of Victorian femininity but also the possibility of a cultural space in which to perform a radically different female agency.” The woman’s alleged, implicit desire to be raped, the Victorian man’s desire to subjugate woman and to dispose of her at will and, finally, violence as a tool for the male to reaffirm his role and his superiority over the late-Victorian “new woman” are analysed in Dijkstra (1986: 156-183).

The third version of the *Sleeping Beauty topos* is perhaps the most well-known and replete with implications. The protagonist this time is Mina Murray, the place of the attack is her bedroom. This is certainly one of the novel's crucial turning points, marking on the one hand the end of Dracula's long pursuit of Mina, and on the other the beginning of the final hunt for the vampire.

The scene encapsulates and elaborates upon the different Gothic variations on the sleeping beauty motif. All the relevant characters are present: the victim, Mina; the aggressor, Dracula; the victim's husband, Jonathan. As in the first case discussed, we see Jonathan asleep; when Van Helsing and the other members of the group rush into the room much has already happened: with a longing look the vampire has been able to caress – we must presume – the body of the persecuted young woman undisturbed before leaning over her and sinking – or trying to sink – his sharp teeth into her pulsating neck. However, something must have intervened because the girl is shown in an attitude that is far from passive. Kneeling on the edge of the bed, grasped by the nape of the neck in the bony hand of Dracula, who holds her close to him like “a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk”, Mina, almost in a “symbolic act of enforced fellation” (Bentley 1972: 30), presses her face and mouth against the Count's wounded chest, sucking and licking the thin red stream trickling down it¹⁴. The drops of blood staining her white nightgown also seem to suggest that she has just consummated a sort of “wedding night,” with Dracula fatefully appearing to her to claim his feudal rights over the woman's body:

On the bed beside the window lay Jonathan Harker, his face flushed and breathing heavily as though in a stupor. Kneeling on the near edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of his wife. By her side stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. His face was turned from us, but the instant we saw we all recognized the Count [...]. With his left hand he held both Mrs Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink. As we burst into the room, the Count turned his face, and the hellish look that I had heard described seemed to leap into it. His eyes flamed red with devilish passion; the great nostrils of the white aquiline nose opened wide and quivered at the edge; and the white sharp teeth, behind the full lips of the blood-dripping mouth, champed together like those of a wild beast. (363)

Surprisingly, “the vampiric sex scene between Mina and Dracula shows us not penetration of the neck as we expect, but rather Mina sucking on the breast of the Count,

¹⁴ As Craft (1985: 125) indicates and expands upon, “this scene of fellation is thoroughly displaced. We are at the Count breast, encouraged once again to substitute white for red, as blood becomes milk [...] Such fluidity of substitution and displacement entails a confusion of Dracula's sexual identity, or an interfusion of masculine and feminine functions, as Dracula here becomes a lurid mother offering not a breast but an open and bleeding wound. But if the Count's sexuality is double, then the open wound may be yet another displacement [...] and we have the suggestion of a bleeding vagina.” In this crucial scene, therefore, “the confluence of blood, milk, and semen forcefully erase the demarcation separating the masculine and the feminine.”

thus acting as a manifestation of the unfixing of gender boundaries" (Prescott, Giorgio 2005: 503-504).

It is no coincidence that, with regard to this and the other two scenes, when analysing the relational dynamics between the characters involved, critics have principally emphasized the explicit and implicit aspects of evil intertwined with pleasure, the power of a desiring sexuality, imbued with homoeroticism, and the definitive shift – already prefigured in *The Monk* – from a yielding, albeit tempting, femininity to one that by contrast is aggressive and emasculating. As Tota (2021: 1) remarks: "Stoker presents the 19th century concept of the sexually liberated and vocationally autonomous 'New Woman' as inherently vampiric, because to be a vampire is to transgress gender boundaries. Thus, when Dracula turns Mina and Lucy into vampires, it is because, as 'New Woman' characters, they were already vampiric"¹⁵.

4. The War of the Genders

The rapport between the energy (partly – but not exclusively – sexual) of the vampire and the limitations imposed by conventions of various types and natures, the relationship between liberty and appropriateness, interpreted on various levels, constitutes one of the novel's fundamental isotopies. Remaining within its confines but changing point of view, we could try to ask ourselves what this text could still tell us if we favoured an interpretative line that examined the victim-persecutor relationship not in the socio-cultural key of the persistence or pervasiveness of a patriarchal model and of gender boundaries, but in terms of genre, of the dialectics between narrative genres, on the threshold of the twentieth century. In other words, if we take the figure of Dracula – whose ability to camouflage himself and whose threatening, but also hybrid, changing, multiform nature are repeatedly emphasized – as an incarnation of the Gothic and the drives here associated with the genre, what meaning could we read into his attack on Lucy and his constant quest for contact with Mina, the vampire's only two genuine victims? Of which literary genres would the two female characters in turn be the metaphorical expression? And, in terms of the profound structure of the text, what interpretation might we then give to the role reversal staged in the revisitation of the *topos* of the sleeping beauty?

If *The Monk* has a double ending, *Dracula* has a double beginning. The first beginning takes us to the Carpathians, to a contemporary world that is not contemporary, a pre-technological world replete with traditions and superstitions. Within this distant and backward geographical setting, the story is confined as quickly as possible to the

¹⁵ Indeed, the issue of Stoker's *Dracula* and its relation to the New Woman has received extensive critical attention, but it remains an open question, subject to conflicting views, summarized in the position expressed by Senf in a fundamental article on the New Woman in *Dracula*. Senf (1982: 33-49; 45-46) admits that Mina exhibits "the independence and intelligence often associated with the New Woman," but these traits are combined "with traditional femininity." Thus, the fact that she is not a New Woman is evident "in [...] her choice of profession, [...] her decision to marry and her subsequent relationship with her husband, her desire to nurture and protect children, and – most clearly – her response to Dracula himself." On these aspects, see also Johnson (1984: 20-39).

crumbling and sinister manor of a mysterious and fallen aristocrat. This is a fully Gothic setting, just as the nature of the villain, the suspense, the sublime terror of the events will turn out typical of the Gothic, with the one significant difference that in this case the object of the “persecution” is a promising but not particularly attractive young man, Jonathan Harker.

After Jonathan’s improbable escape from Dracula’s castle, the novel begins again in chapter five: in England, this time, and with an exchange of letters between two friends, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray, who write of their hopes, of fiancés and admirers, of forthcoming weddings. *Dracula* starts again, then, in the forms of the *sentimental novel*, with at its centre the family and marriage, with their accompaniments of respectability, dedication, sense of duty, social stability or advancement.¹⁶ This specific genre is represented principally by Lucy. Lucy appears endowed with the honest charms of a good Victorian girl – good nature (“sweet and sensitive”, 116) and a respectable family; however, she also reveals a restless character that leads her into frivolous actions and less conventional desires. Absorbed by the game of courtship, for example, she is excited at the thought of having three suitors and clearly annoyed by having to choose only one (“Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?”, 81). In the end, albeit reluctantly, a decision will be made and the choice – she is already wealthy – will fall to the best candidate, the aristocrat Arthur Holmwood. She will be the vampire’s first female victim on English soil. And this is no accident.

One striking fact in the complex structure of the novel, to which we will return later, is that the vampire, Count Dracula, never takes on the role of narrator, we are never given his point of view on events; he is the object of speech but never the subject of the narrative. Similarly, in the dialogues, the character Dracula is granted very few lines and those only in his world, inside his castle, or, once in England, during and after the meeting with Mina. The vampire is effectively condemned to silence, is mute (see Stein 1972: 87-99; Campra 1992: 223-226). From the point of view of gender relations, then, Dracula’s decision to leave a distant time and place, his wish to move to modern England, could be interpreted as the Gothic attempt to finally and stably occupy a contemporary space and time. To revitalize itself, the Gothic needed to conquer a new world, a new word, a new authorship.

None of these things belong to the universe represented by Lucy who, in a sense, also belongs to the past and not coincidentally dies. Sentimental plots had always formed part of Gothic horror, constituting one of the mechanisms of activation: the temptation, the pleasure of subjugation, the persecution of the beautiful and defenceless young woman. This explains why Lucy is easily approached by Dracula, who makes her his own without particular difficulty. The Gothic vampirizes the *novel of sensibility*, not to destroy it but to incorporate and resurrect it – from the beginning – in a recognizable but

¹⁶ If on the one hand “the two genres seem to struggle for control of the plot and for the attention of the reader,” on the other “they both narrate, in turn, the same story [...], the story of how individual erotic desire is transformed into legitimate and socially productive structures” (McCrea 2010: 254). Case (1993: 223-243) focuses on this specific aspect.

“monstrous” form, of wicked enjoyment, of fatal attraction to flesh and blood. The vampire does not kill, he assimilates; the Gothic does not exclude, it hybridizes¹⁷.

At the end of his journey to the west, it is thus no surprise that Dracula’s first step after arriving in England, at Whitby, is in the direction of what is familiar to him; initially he moves within known confines and for this reason his choice falls on Lucy. But this is just a temporary resting place. The true objectives are others: in the first place London, to which the vampire moves, occupying the two parts of the city variously (and for a long time separately) recounted by the Victorian novel: first the most squalid suburbs; shortly afterwards Piccadilly, the West End, the centre. And then Mina, the key figure of the novel and of the reading that we wish to propose here.

In *Dracula*, unlike *The Monk*, there is no omniscient narrator, but only individual and separate points of view, at least in the first part of the novel. Indeed, as in *Frankenstein* and to an even greater extent in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, one of the characteristic features of *Dracula* is the singular interweaving and multiplicity of the narrators. With a specific and peculiar feature, that is to say that, as mentioned earlier, in the sequence of letters, diaries, notes, telegrams, notices, recordings, articles, logs, shorthand notes, the description and ordering of events that constitutes the narrative function proper, is denied to Dracula. The viewpoint of evil is missing and is revealed in the novel only through its effects: the liberation of impulses, transgression and the reaction that all of this provokes.

The story unfolds exclusively under the aegis of mainstream Victorian English culture, which ultimately also translates into a homogeneity of vision, achieved through the systematic integration of different points of view. In the second part of the novel, that of the search for the vampire, more than of distinct narrators, we can speak – as does Moretti (1987: 122) – of a “collective” narrator. There are no longer different and therefore partial and inexact versions of the same episode as at the beginning: from a certain point onwards the story proceeds by collation and the narrator always expresses the general point of view, the version of events “approved by all.” The person who thematically and chronologically rearranges the notes, the testimonies, the diary pages (in essence, the narrator), is Mina Murray Harker, it is she who “[as] transcriber, typist, compiler, and writer in her own right, [...] most consistently and devotedly facilitates the circulation of texts that produces the knowledge so helpful in fighting the vampire” (Pope 1990: 211). Soon after returning from Budapest, where she had joined and married her fiancé Jonathan, who was very ill, and where she had learned the news of the death of her dear friend, Lucy, Mina offers to copy in full the testimonies, written or recorded by phonograph, of the mysterious and dramatic events that were unfolding, to offer everyone an organized and complete documentation of them. And it is important to stress that this copy is the only text to survive, after Dracula destroys the original materials. In fact, therefore, the novel is the reconstruction of events as assembled and arranged by Mina, as editor: it is the story of Dracula seen through her eyes. She is the main speaker; it is who constantly restores the narrative balance, thus giving intelligible form and meaning to a

¹⁷ “Dracula represents the [Gothic] novel as a parasitic and appropriating genre and offers vampirism as a model” (Pope 1990: 199).

fairly obscure tale. This function clarifies why Dracula *principally* tries to reach her: Dracula wishes to take possession of the world of words represented by Mina, to appropriate her authorial nature.

However, Mina Harker has two other fundamental distinguishing features: first of all, she is devoid of any flirtatiousness, full of culturally and socially correct values, a reflection of a conscious, mature Englishness by virtue of which she has taken duty as the inspiring principle of her conduct and founded her union with Jonathan on sharing, on the common project of building, through work, of social stability¹⁸: “I want to see you [Lucy] now, and with the eyes of a very happy wife, whither duty has led me; so that in your own married life you too may be all happy as I am” (74). But Mina is also a modern woman, a woman who is in no way passive, fully bent on bettering herself and capable of skilfully mastering new technologies: “I have been working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan’s studies, and I have been practicing shorthand very assiduously. When we are married I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan, and if I can stenograph well enough I can take down what he wants to say in this way and write it out for him on the typewriter” (74).

In addition, endowed with an open and perceptive mind, she knows how to apply a rigorous deductive scheme, proceeds with lucid care to analyse the clues and reconstruct a well-founded and persuasive chronological and causal account of the events. And, in the final phase of the vampire hunt, her contribution, thanks precisely to these qualities, is crucial: “Ground of Inquiry – Count Dracula’s problem is to get back to his own place. He must be brought back by someone [...] How is to be taken? 1. *By Road* [...] 2. *By Rail* [...] 3. *By Water* We know from the record that he was on the water; so what we have to do is to ascertain *what* water. Firstly. We must differentiate [...] Secondly, We must see” (451-453).

Once, thanks in part to her, the veil of mystery enveloping the vampire has been torn, logic and reason bring order to the hitherto enigmatic course of events. Significantly, the novel changes its mode and purpose: the fear generated by a sense of indecipherable danger is replaced by the anxiety of incoherence, the frantic cadence of flight and pursuit, the study of clues, the enlightened deciphering of detail. *Dracula* transforms once again: from a novel of terror, interwoven with sentimentality, it becomes a sort of crime and adventure novel, with heated pursuits, strategies to be devised, duels to be fought, with a tendentially paratactic narrative order and a timing that privileges the present. Almost the confirmation of a destiny and the admission of a failure.

¹⁸ “Because her own self-representation is often annoyingly self-effacing, it is not surprising that Mina’s multifaceted agency is frequently downplayed in the criticism of the novel” (Prescott, Giorgio 2005: 488). For instance, Sally Ledger (1995: 30) presents Mina as “a stereotypically ‘good’ little Victorian Miss”) and, again, as “a woman who, firmly rooted in the maternal paradigm, settles for the ‘ideal’ of middle-class Victorian womanhood.” By remodelling herself into a “modernised version of the ‘angel in the house,’” Mina “inscribe[s] herself within the paradigm of ideal Victorian womanhood by acting as a moral guardian of society” (Ledger 1997: 105-106).

5. The Future Behind the Neck

At the end of the nineteenth century, fear and a certain timorous enjoyment of evil were increasingly seeking refuge in different types of plots: for example in those of detective fiction, of whose protagonists Mina, to the same or greater extent than Van Helsing, encapsulates the distinctive traits. These plots often drew inspiration from news stories of crimes and misdemeanours. The Victorian public had already long been drawn to these gruesome topics (reaching peaks of morbid fascination as in the case, for example, of the murders of “Jack the Ripper,” of 1888) and increasingly began to demand from literature too stories cathartically played out on the solution of atrocious mysteries, compelling and above all “hot off the press.” And so the detective story, based on the solution of “cases” through the analysis of the tiniest clues, difficult to grasp, gradually gained greater space until it took over the literary market starting from the last decade of the century – coinciding with the appearance on the scene of Sherlock Holmes –, first invading, then enveloping and reducing to silence many of the potentially competing forms, including the Gothic¹⁹.

Indeed, in the encounter-clash with Mina – enterprising, rational, detective-like – and with the world of which she is the expression, the vampire’s defeat seems complete: on a snowy day at the beginning of November Dracula dies, his lovers are destroyed; but Mina manages to break the bond of death in life and thus to reaffirm her autonomy and identity. From many points of view – at least in literature – *Dracula* truly symbolizes the defeat of the Gothic on the threshold of the new century. To regain force, the genre would need a long time and a long convalescence in the territories of other forms of expression, especially cinema. There remained, at the time, the anxieties, the collective fears to which the Gothic – from a certain point on – had given literary form. There was still a content in search of a form²⁰.

Stoker’s novel ends with a note by Jonathan Harker informing the reader of the fate of the protagonists seven years after the events recounted. Specifically, it reveals that his union with Mina has been blessed by the birth of a son. Evidently this postscript serves to “redeem” Jonathan “for his assumption at castle Dracula of a ‘feminine’ passivity, [announcing] the text’s last efficacious penetration.” The birth of a son, Little Quincey,

¹⁹ The detective story takes its first steps in the English-speaking world as early as the 1840s (with Auguste Dupin by Edgar Allan Poe). Further significant developments take place from the 1860s (among the plots of sensation novels), but it is between 1887 and 1893, with the first novels and stories by Conan Doyle starring Sherlock Holmes, that the genre becomes established on a grand scale. During the 1890s the *Strand* published as many as one hundred and eight detective stories, in addition to those of Sherlock Holmes, almost one per month, almost all forgotten today. See Šklovskij (1976: 161); Priestman (2002: 1-6); Moretti (2005: 90-93) and, on the importance, but also on the unreliability of crime-reporting, Bertoni (2012: 87-101).

²⁰ In this sense, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* can be seen as a “case” of attempted mediation with crime fiction, starting from the structures of the Gothic, and a sign, albeit ambivalent and contradictory, of a tension, if not of an imminent shift, in the power relations between the two genres. Certainly, Stevenson’s text is “very close formally to the classic novel of mystery and detection,” yet, “the gothic epistemology of [the] book” still threatens “the very method of detection and puts in question the effectiveness of the new idealized type of ratiocinative detective who will debut in 1887, one year after *Jekyll and Hyde*” (Hirsch, 1987: 228).

“represents the restoration of ‘natural’ order and especially the rectification of conventional gender roles” (Craft 1985: 129).

In truth, considering the premises, were it not clear that the child’s birthday falls on the same day as the death of Quincey, the only one of the group to be killed (he too a vampire, if we accept Moretti’s seductive hypothesis – 1987: 119-120), more than one reader could be induced to think him the son of Dracula. Even without wishing to go so far, however, “since Dracula’s blood runs through Mina’s – and perhaps Harker’s – veins, Dracula is inside the boy as well”; that child would, therefore, be a hybrid, the initiator of a new race, *the coming race* (see Kuzmanovic 2009: 422).

In the light of this final element, continuing to think in terms of gender relations, we could ask ourselves if something of the profound and archetypal nature of the Gothic does not also survive, beyond the persistence in much contemporary and later narrative fiction of typical features of its setting or characterization. Perhaps, but this is a mere hypothesis, some of its genetic characteristics do indeed re-emerge, combining with more specific requirements, in the late nineteenth-century dystopias that later filter into the twentieth century, imposing themselves as a very popular and widespread form.

The sense of an immanent, collective and inescapable threat induced by a disturbing pseudo-alterity emanates, for example, from many of the worlds constructed by that dystopian literature in the first three decades of the twentieth century: frighteningly perfect worlds, regulated and planned according to rational – and often scientifically-based – principles of optimization, uniformity and control²¹. Worlds of alienation teeming with new “undead” and “unliving” beings, once again able to arouse in the reader a feeling “both thrilling and repulsive,” the mysterious negative pleasure of terror, the irrepressible attraction and contagion of evil, shown here under the false guise of a chilling perfection. Human machines, devoid of energy (sexual or otherwise), probably unaware of pleasure and indifferent to good and evil.

If the sleep of reason produces monsters, its awakening – almost always – sees them triumph.

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²¹ Suffice it to think of Forster, Zamjatin or Huxley, to mention only the best-known.

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