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English 72.02: Decadence, Degeneration, & the Fin de Siecle

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Medicine, Religion, & Art in the 19th Century:

Treating Decadence and Degeneration

Machinery

In the past three years, studies at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai have shown that deep learning and artificial intelligence can be used to predict future schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis in patients with up to 83 percent accuracy (Brandt; “Speech Analysis Software Predicted Psychosis in At-Risk Patients with up to 83 Percent Accuracy, Mount Sinai Researchers Find”). Current standards within the medical field require “the presence of one (or more) delusions with a duration of 1 month or longer” among other things (American Psychiatric Association). Naturally one must ask how such new technology can be capable of what medical professionals have failed to achieve despite a significant head start.

From Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* to Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, physicians and authors alike have sought to ground the senses and their destruction in physiology. And yet neither has escaped rebuke—the medical field still incapable of understanding the underlying science and the literary field criticized for getting caught up in the aesthetic traps thereof. Walter Benjamin recognizes just this as he writes:

When Zola undertook to defend his *Thérèse Raquin* against hostile critics, he explained that his book was a scientific study of the temperaments. His task had been to show, in an example, exactly how the sanguine and the nervous temperaments act on one another-to

the detriment of each. But this explanation could satisfy no one. Nor does it explain the unprecedented admixture of colportage, the bloodthirstiness, the cinematic goriness of the action. ... The book's atmosphere is saturated with the poisons of this process, and its people are destroyed by them. (875)

In exploring the illness, Zola himself falls ill. As a writer he is required to embody the degenerating characters and to revel in their demented senses. His own writing suffers from their ailments to convey the symptoms to the reader in their most pure form, perhaps too pure. It is not too absurd to think the same of many shrinks, whose job differs very little from what Zola claims to be doing, as people who are bound to go crazy themselves. Thus, the sickness of the mind appears no less contagious than that of the body. And so it fits that machines are the ones that can sufficiently deal with these pathologies. Medicine took a huge leap with the discovery that proper hygiene (hand-washing prior to surgery, etc.) could prevent the spread of illness, but no such discovery has benefited the field of psychiatry or even literature. Despite Zola's attempts at washing his own hands within his "Preface to the Second Edition," he still had to get his hands dirty within the novel itself. Perhaps lack of speech could help the field of psychiatry, but even then it will only be to an extent because acting mute will severely hinder treatment. For literature, what would be left without words? Language thus establishes itself as a necessity—for sanity as well as insanity. Machines and artificial intelligence are likely the most well aware of this; they can detect psychosis through one's own use of language. But, would it have been capable at discerning something like Zola's claim that he was merely writing in order to study mental illness or would it have classified him as mentally ill? It is all a wonder. Corelli seemed interested in a tangential idea: how technological forms of media production in the late 19th century were capable of rendering delusions into reality rather than exposing them. Maybe

technology's ability to solidify what appear as misconceptions is what renders machines better than humans at recognizing mental illness. For them there is no difference between visible and invisible, physical and metaphysical. Even when a physician discovers the cause of psychosis, perhaps a brain tumor, it is through modern media—an MRI that shows the mysteries hidden beneath the skull. The key for humans then might just be better imagery, more tangible imaginations and more flexible definitions for reality. It is just this which decadent writers and physicians in the late 19th century attempt with varying degrees of success: enhanced imagery.

Imagery and Transfiguration

During the late nineteenth century, the obsession with decadence and degeneration that plagues art, literature, and culture in general serves to bring together many images: the poet and the martyr in the case of Baudelaire, the woman and the medium for Praed, and perhaps most revolutionarily, the patient and the monster or criminal. This relationship between images and figures appears in several iterations, blending and transfiguring into its final form.

The Mechanical and the Animal

First, man is depicted as an uncanny being only capable of sembling sentience. In Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, even Thérèse, who is drawn out as a colonial body of natural (and unnatural) impulses, and arguably the least human character in the novel:

could not see a single human, not a living creature, among these grotesque and sinister beings with whom she was shut up. At times she would suffer hallucinations, thinking that she was buried in a vault together with mechanical bodies whose heads moved and whose arms and legs waved when their strings were pulled. The heavy atmosphere of the dining room stifled her, and the eerie silence and yellowish glow of the lamp filled her with a vague sense of terror, an inexpressible feeling of anxiety. (Zola and Buss)

This image of men as well-oiled machines distances humanity from nature. It describes the repetitive and artificial existence of everyday life, pitting Thérèse against the other characters and the colonies against the mainland, with no clear winner. However, it also accomplishes what may seem like a contradictory stance—setting up a base on which the mechanical man can be compared to animal, something fatally natural as opposed to the supernatural role that humans often take in relation to the rest of the biological world. By painting an image of man as machine, the ideas of free will, choice, and personality are stripped. Not only do the characters become pre-programed, metal, automatons, but they can also be seen as living corpses, or better yet, cold-blooded animals that simply react to the strings of the world around them—slaves to desire, victims of temptation, creatures of instinct.

With the first kiss, [Thérèse] revealed the instincts of a courtesan. Her thirsting body gave itself wildly up to lust. It was as though she were awakening from a dream and being born to passion. She went from the feeble arms of Camille to the vigorous arms of Laurent, and the approach of a potent man gave her a shake that woke her flesh from its slumber. All the instincts of a highly-strung woman burst forth with exceptional violence. Her mother's blood, that African blood burning in her veins, began to flow and pound furiously in her thin, still almost virginal body. She opened up and offered herself with a sovereign lack of shame. From head to toe, she was shaken by long shudders of desire.
(Zola and Buss)

In this movement towards mechanical and animalistic behavior, blame shifts from the human to the environment—the world which brings out one's preordained impulses. Although one might find it increasingly difficult to see the characters as human, by the end of the novel a hint of pity begins to form. We watch Laurent rape his wife, learn how she makes use of this

domestic violence to end her pregnancy, and witness Laurent's relief at learning of Thérèse's infidelity. Their actions become more inexplicable, inexcusable, unimaginable. Yet, the lack of humanity within these characters and their actions is what draws us further away from the uncanny to the unfamiliar, creating room for mercy. Perhaps these characters deserve sympathy rather than contempt, as does any criminal.

The Criminal, the Victim, and the Ill

Further into the 19th century, this idea becomes clearer. By the time Bram Stoker publishes *Dracula* in 1897, it is enough for Fredrich Kittler, in "Dracula's Legacy," to read the figure of the vampire as the victim contrary to most readers' immediate inclinations. A closer look at the text itself shows evidence of this thread; even Mina fails to see Dracula as the monster he is, choosing instead to justify his actions: "The Count is a criminal and of criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him, and qua criminal he is of an imperfectly formed mind" (Stoker 293). By removing agency, Mina removes blame, citing quasi-scientific logic in the form of Nordau's study of nervous deterioration in *Degeneration* and Cesare Lombroso's phrenology in *Criminal Man*. This reference to phrenology is particularly interesting in that it creates a literal image of criminality and monstrosity, in this case a sort of medical diagram in which the source of illness can be drawn in a generalized manner—to explain, to inform, to diagnose, and to educate not necessarily to treat. No longer does the description of one's frightening facial features only serve as a form of foreshadowing or figurative language, but it serves as a literal symptom. It is in itself a revelation, rather than a hint at something to come. Like a patient who has just learned of his chronic illness, Dracula is pitied as the reference to Lombroso allows "[e]xaggerated orbital angle of the frontal bone" to become cause and excuse for being "devoid

of affection for [one's] family," as well as "kicking [a] poor old man" (Lombroso and Lombroso 68).

With respect to this phrenological image of monstrosity, the image of the skull becomes an eerily similar manifestation of the figures which are scattered across Baudelaire's poetry, not only in appearance, but also in significance. Suddenly, the skeleton and the corpse which mediate between the spiritual and the corporeal, the heavenly and the earthly, become a tie between the internal and the external, the body and the persona. The disease of the mind becomes evident in the flesh and bones. As though referencing the development of physiological explanations for the psychological, Baudelaire writes "Dream visions haunt your eyes, and I discern, / Reflected in the shadings of your skin" (Baudelaire and Culler 25). His description of gray or yellow skin elucidates an image of a corpse meant to reflect the deranged, demented inner world that this "Sick[,] ... wretched muse" inhabits (Baudelaire and Culler 25). However, it is unclear whether it is the illness of the mind that has contaminated the body or vice versa. In fact, by the last line of the stanza, the reader can no longer determine whether the "[m]adness and horror, cold and taciturn" are features describing the deadly imaginings or the corpse-like skin—the mind, the body, and the creations of the two merge into an indistinguishable mess (Baudelaire and Culler 25).

It is perhaps in Baudelaire's writing on the American poet, Edgar Allen Poe, that the tie to phrenology becomes even more evident. Though it is unclear at first whether he had phrenology in mind, the similarity of ideas is profound. Baudelaire opens up by describing the poet as "a poor wretch whose brow was tattooed with the following rare and curious device: *Never had a chance!* He was thus wearing upon his face the badge of his life, like a book its title, and the subsequent examination proved that this strange motto was only too -cruelly truthful ...

'jynx' written in mysterious letters on the tortured lines of [his forehead]" (69). Baudelaire nods to the physical marks of fate and suffering, but also artistic sensibility. He ties a tortured mind to a deformed head and odd facial features which can be 'read' as clearly as words on a page. Though this reference to phrenology may seem coincidental at first, it becomes even more explicit later on as we are told "Poe had a vast, dominating brow, in which certain protuberances betrayed the prodigious faculties which it is their function to represent—construction, comparison, causality—and in which was calmly enthroned the proud sense of ideality, the aesthetic sense *par excellence*" (Baudelaire 86). It is as though Baudelaire is comparing a portrait of Poe alongside a phrenological diagram, listing the areas for which Poe's skull appeared unusual, careful to note their respective purposes. He continues to acknowledge these abnormalities—"Nevertheless in spite of these gifts, or possibly even because of these extravagant endowments, Poe's head wasn't perhaps seen at its best in profile. As in all things which are excessive in one direction, this very abundance could result in a deficiency, this usurpation in an impoverishment"—ultimately crediting them for his extraordinary talent (86). In this way, Baudelaire brings together two worlds as he often does, the physical symptoms of darkness and peculiar sensibilities in the image of the artist as well as the criminal—both shunned by society, misunderstood, victimized. Each might be understood as perpetually stuck in a wrong time and place, and they indeed are. For "there can be no proper place for the poet [or the criminal] either in a democratic or an aristocratic society, no more in a republic than in an absolute or tempered monarchy" (Baudelaire 70). It seems that the only environment in which either figure can thrive is anarchy, wherein the rest of society would undoubtedly disintegrate. Thus, the criminal and the artist are eternally clashing with popular culture and society, doomed to fail in at least some sense of the word, to end up imprisoned.

Saints and Sinners

Oscar Wilde creates an even more elaborate image of criminality, also implicating art, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He adds a dynamic and temporal dimension to phrenology and criminal nature as well as a theological one through the introduction of Dorian Gray's impressionable portrait, which transforms as a function of the real Dorian's inner being. Yet, even prior to that, the relationship between physical structure and personal sensibility is drawn by Lord Henry, who explains that "Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrid. Look at the successful men in any of the learned professions. How perfectly hideous they are!" (Wilde). It seems clear that the artist, the criminal, and the genius suffer from abnormal physiology. The fact that Lord Henry is the one to point this out is not surprising—as a sort of dandy, he utters aesthetic nonsense, false wisdom, and quotable rubbish. Though he might come off as knowledgeable, articulate, or well-versed in many a field, any thorough analysis of the content of his speech exposes an arid emptiness masked by elaborate decoration. Keeping this in mind, his comments, which seem almost phrenological, gain much more context—phrenology in itself being a pseudo-science whose complexity provides it unwarranted credibility.

However, his comments may also be seen from a religious perspective. Though the realm of phrenology itself is not far off from the occult, Wilde constantly goes out of his way to comment on Christianity. Following his explanation of intellect's impact on appearance, Lord Henry is quick to note: "[Successful men are hideous] Except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don't think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful" (Wilde). Religion and devoutness is tied to its own sort of ugliness as well as beauty,

with the important distinction of being timeless—three characteristics that haunt Dorian throughout the rest of the novel. Though religion maintains its aesthetic appeal, like a painting typically does, it is empty on the inside and this lack of substance is what renders its degeneration impossible. And yet the aesthetic allure alone is enough to capture many, such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, who cites similar characteristics among the reasons for his character Durtal's (and likely his own) turn to Christianity in *Lá-Bas*: “though religion was without foundation it was also without limit ... Durtal was attracted to the Church by its inanimate and ecstatic art, the splendor of its legends, and the radiant naïveté of the histories of its saints” (Huysmans and Hale). The Church preserves art, history, and people alike, but the connections go even further. The aforementioned imagery wherein features of a thinker become emphasized, ruining the appearance, may be seen in religious artwork: iconography of saints and Christ exaggerates features, depicts them in unnatural proportions for the sake of symbolism and meaning, placing emphasis on the structure of the head through halos, crowns (of gold or of thorns), and even veils. The extravagance of the Church's aesthetic may be considered in many ways to be decadent—teeming with ornate embellishments, gilded ornaments, and excessive details often with more lurid images of death, skulls, violence, supernatural beings, and satanic figures than even the works of Félicien Rops. The Gospels' references to Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion, careful to note its meaning as “Place of a skull,” for the hill's skull-like shape, makes it seem like an imaginary setting out of Rops's artwork (New King James Version; “Golgotha”). But it is the very decadence already present within the Church's aesthetic that inspires Rops, hence his fascination with Christian imagery, frequently depicted in his pieces—one of which is titled *The Satanic. Calvary*, ‘Calvary’ being another name for Golgotha. The odd union of decadence and sacredness within the Church might be best exemplified by the fact that

amongst the blood, tears, and pain depicted in portrayals of the crucifixion, Christ is almost always captured with a defined set of abdominal muscles.

Still, the main relation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to physical image and metaphysical being comes in the form of Basil's painting of Dorian. Upon realizing his own beauty for the first time, Dorian becomes envious of his portrait, specifically the fact that he will age and wither, becoming more and more inferior when compared to the static likeness he faces. "Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now!" Dorian prays, and just like that his wish is granted (Wilde). The painting becomes "a guide to him through life, ... what holiness is to some, and conscience [is] to others, and the fear of God to us all[,] ... a visible symbol of the degradation of sin[,] ... an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls" (Wilde). A close look at the text reveals persistent religious undertones, pushing the reader to connect theology and art with the characters and their unusual relationships to morality. Just as man is described as a form in the image and likeness of God in *Genesis*, one which becomes corrupted and drifts from its original, Dorian's painting is a deteriorating copy of himself. And yet his painting has an element of Godliness in itself; it seems to carry his sins the same way Christ did on the cross, an incarnation of the same likeness taking on the pain of his actions and allowing him to maintain his perfect form. He is transformed into a celestial being with no hint of mutability, and yet he continues to move further and further from righteousness. Dorian embodies hypocrisy, maintaining his beauty at the cost of emptying his soul. After accepting that his actions towards Sibyl were indeed cruel, we begin to see his misaligned values:

he went over to the table and wrote a passionate letter to the girl he had loved, imploring her forgiveness, and accusing himself of madness. He covered page after page with wild

words of sorrow, and wilder words of pain. There is a luxury in self-reproach. When we blame ourselves we feel that no one else has a right to blame us. It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution. When Dorian had finished the letter, he felt that he had been forgiven. (Wilde)

His attempts at combatting this spiritual decay are merely meant to save face, to avoid his own feeling of inward ugliness rather than a reaction to guilt. His portrait reveals just that towards the end of the novel, when Dorian checks to see if there has been any improvement following his decision not to defile a young girl. Dorian expects to see this ‘good deed,’ really no more than avoiding a bad one, reflected in the painting. Instead, the portrait’s terrible features are enhanced, with an added look of deceit. After stabbing the painting in frustration, the spell is broken: Dorian falls dead, old and withered, while the painting returns to its original state.

In the end, Dorian Gray and his relation to his own portrait serves to bring the image of the saint and the sinner closer together than one might expect, not only aesthetically. It highlights the dangers of idolatry and its presence within the Church. Dorian’s downfall begins with a prayer to his present and ideal self, as seen by Basil, shown to him by Lord Henry, and captured in the cursed painting. In many ways, this prayer can be considered an intercession, kneeling in front of an icon and pleading for mercy, salvation, and eternal life. The fatal flaw is that Dorian prays to the image itself rather than using it as a medium through which to access God. Not only does Dorian fall into the sin of idolatry, but also of pride, idolizing his own self above all else. This issue of intercession would have been one extremely prevalent in Wilde’s world. As an Irishman living in England, the theological debates among Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans on the topic would have been particularly close to home. His novel presents this fine line: on one

side the saint as a mediator for good, on the other as a disguised form of blasphemy. In Dorian's case, as the saint and the sinner simultaneously, it becomes all the more personal.

And yet the issue seems personal for the author as well. From the beginning, Wilde implicates himself. In "The Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde recognizes that "To reveal art and conceal the artist to art's aim[;] ... The highest and the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography". His character, Basil seems to echo these same thoughts in the first chapter of the novel, admitting that "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion ... I am afraid that I have shown in [this painting] the secret of my own soul" (Wilde). There is a clear push to consider the characters' relations to the author himself. Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian Gray all seem to be three-sides of the same coin (if three-sided coins existed), different aspects of Wilde's personality, at odds with each other, constantly pushing and pulling. The tension seems especially to affect Dorian, leading to an image of Basil and Lord Henry as the metaphorical angel and devil respectively on each of his shoulders. Whereas Basil attempts to keep Lord Henry from corrupting his beloved Dorian, Lord Henry manages to ruin Dorian indirectly. He is sly and suggestive, never forcing Dorian to do wrong, merely putting thoughts into his head, as the Devil is said to work. Even at the end of the novel, once Dorian's demise has spiraled out of control, making him responsible for several deaths indirectly and directly, Lord Henry is there to comfort him:

you are the same ... At present you are a perfect type. Don't make yourself incomplete. You are quite flawless now. You need not shake your head: you know you are. Besides, Dorian, don't deceive yourself. Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and

passion has its dreams. ... [A] chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it ... [—] it is on things like these that our lives depend. Browning writes about that somewhere. (Wilde)

Lord Henry seems to nag at Basil's moral being, chiseling away in a manner that seems harmless and innocent, even ignorant at times. He employs books to evidence his nonsensical opinions, in this case Browning, but more notably introducing Dorian to the infamous 'yellow book' that is Huysmans's *Against Nature*. This appeal to knowledge represents the move away from religion towards more scientific approaches as technology and society progress into the 20th century. If Lord Henry is considered to be Satan in this case, Basil might be thought of as the Holy Spirit, trying to point Dorian in the right direction. Once Dorian murders Basil, there is no hope, no chance at repentance and redemption. As Lord Henry suggests, Dorian finally loses all agency, his one chance at having free-will or even the illusion of choice in his own fate. This all ends in Dorian's death, which might be considered suicide in a sense, the ultimate sin. But even then, it is unclear if suicide is a final exercise of self-determination or a biologically inevitable end—and it all began with Basil's own painting of what he saw as a saint.

Bodily Fluids

Among the decadent writings of the late 19th century, there seems to be an obsession with blood—lurid images of gore that cross the boundary of what might be considered normal. What is within the confines of one's own skin is brought out from the shadows and laid bare for all to see, to stare, unable to look away despite the discomfort of viewing something that should never be exposed. The detailed and vivid descriptions which are scattered among the art of the time carry an eerily voyeuristic air, simultaneously beautiful and livid, marked by thoughtful

metaphors and prosodic prose. And yet, despite the criticism which this bloodthirstiness garners, the artists and their works seem to revel in the fact that “perhaps [critics] would have blushed even more” had they understood the meaning of such art (Zola and Buss 3). It seems that the goal was more than just to get underneath the skin or into the bedroom, but to get into the ugliest and scariest portion of any human as many of these writers would have their readers believe: the brain and the nerves. But alleged intentions are not always true.

Above all, blood seems to function as a mark of relationships. It is an intimate symbol that carries life, pain, emotion, and identity. It ties the worlds of medicine, religion, and art, with much of their nuance, partly through the flexibility of its interpretation. Christine Rose writes about “bodies that become intelligible through their fluids to challenge pervasive Western conceptions of individuals as discrete and autonomous” (iii). She defines fluids as “juicy materials that tell us about medicine, kinship, gender, disease, nationality, race, and sex” (iii). Though blood is perhaps the most referenced of such fluids, often a metaphor for association, it also acts as a metonym, standing in for a wide assortment of bodily fluids that can be given, taken, and shared. This map of directed connections creates a hierarchical network that has many purposes: to trace the spread of disease, to pass on contagious illnesses, and to record social, economic, racial, national, and sexual histories.

Bloodlines, Germlines, and Sex-Lines

This is especially evident in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, where the thirst for blood is often recognized as a parallel for uninhibited sexuality. In Jonathon Harker’s first encounter with female vampires, what stands out is the suggestive imagery of the pre-feasting ritual which occurs:

The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. 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 to fasten on my throat. (Stoker 32)

The scene of action itself seems to leave out information in order to create space for misinterpretation. Stoker emphasizes that “Lower and lower went her head,” such that the addition of how she “seemed to fasten on my throat” comes off as an afterthought—by the time the reader reaches the end of the sentence, the prolonged holding out on the idea of lowering has pushed one to conjure up images far below the neck (Stoker 32). In fact, the use of the word ‘fasten’ in itself only adds to the reader’s initial thoughts of pants or a belt (Stoker 32). The noises which come after are even more evocative, as “she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and I 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 super sensitive skin of my throat” (Stoker 32). Again, the diction, highlighting ‘churning’ sounds, ‘tickling,’ and ‘super sensitive skin’ seems out of place for a life-threatening situation, no matter how appealing the captor. Here, blood serves as the object around which Stoker can draw out gender roles, the relationship between Jonathon Harker and the female vampires, Western men and Eastern women. The scene expresses conflicting notions of submission and power in the case of the females. Whereas their position on their knees seems somewhat compromising it is turned into a position of control. The women’s sexuality is unleashed and Jonathon is left at their mercy,

whether they choose to suck all the life out of him or leave something for Dracula and Mina. Blood seems nothing more than a stand in for other bodily fluids at this point. And yet, there is something about this danger which appeals to Jonathon, forcing him to admit his longing for the vampire's kiss. Given the position of women at the time, this might speak to their rising status within the workplace, gaining a role as secretaries and transcribers where they still submit to men. This fetishization of the capable, yet subordinate woman is one which continues until today, with the image of the secretary as seen here, but also other helping roles such as the nurse.

However, these Eastern female vampires are not among the Western women for whom this changing career trajectory was taking place. There is an obvious racialization of desires which makes itself evident in this case. Jonathon, in a foreign land, seems to walk into the trap of his own will. Having been warned not to fall asleep anywhere in the castle besides his room, Jonathon accepts and seeks the risk. His action is almost suicidal: "The Count's warning came into my mind, but I took pleasure in disobeying it ... I determined not to return to-night to the gloom-haunted rooms, but to sleep here, where, of old, ladies had sat and sung and lived sweet lives whilst their gentle breasts were sad for their menfolk" (Stoker 31). And yet it might also be seen as a journey to enlist the services of a prostitute, or three in this case. Blood begins to outline not just sexual history and racial divides, but Jonathon's search for 'healing' after being far from his fiancé and his world for a prolonged duration. On the other end of the spectrum, it also records the spread of illness, syphilis being perhaps the most infamous sexually transmitted disease of the time.

The depiction of this relationship between a Western man and Eastern women on foreign lands is drawn out in a completely different light than the exact opposite scenario wherein an Eastern man comes onto Western soil to make contact with Western women. Dracula appears as

a frightening invader when he comes into the rooms of Lucy and Mina. Though the two women submit in many of the same ways seen earlier, they lack any sense of power. Rather, they seem to be the ones in danger, waiting for a hero. Though the female vampires make violent acts appear sexual, the involvement of Western women turns sexual acts violent. When Mina ends up drinking Dracula's blood, it is quite forced. She explains, "With that he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast ... [he] seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow" (Stoker 247). Still, despite this force, the element of danger does not seem to come from Mina herself. Rather, Mina's description of the event, recorded as quotations within Dr. Seward's diary, seems heavily skewed by the commentary and the perspective of the men within the story. If anything, Mina's diction is quite understated, including some shared features with Jonathon Harker's writing on his own encounter with the vampire women. "I was bewildered, and strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him," Mina says (Stoker 246). Whereas Jonathon earlier admits that he should not write of his desire for the vampire's kiss lest Mina reads his journal, Mina is much less considerate of her husband's emotions. Though she may be remorseful, it is much more self-centered as she pleads, "oh, my God, my God, pity me! He placed his reeking lips upon my throat" (Stoker 246). At this point, Dr. Seward notes that "Her husband groaned again. She clasped his hand harder, and looked at him pityingly, as if he were the injured one, and went on" (Stoker 246). Though Mina seems to recognize Jonathon's distress, she does little to console him, continuing her story. Once again the Western men are portrayed as the weaker sex. Though it is Mina's blood which has been drawn, she has seemed to recover well, capable of speaking of her trauma unlike Jonathon, for whom even the attack on his wife leaves him in a weakened state.

Fluid Dynamics

What is perhaps most interesting about the relations created by bodily fluids is not how they separate sexes or races; it is how they bring them together. The aforementioned examples may interchange blood for semen or even milk, as Dracula seems to nurse Mina, but these fluids act to bring on shared healing, shared pain, and shared identity—all revolving around the human body as the source of said pain, healing, and identity—at times creating more confusion than they do clarity. Much of this, even when expanding to cover racial and national divides, maintains a sexual core in so much as sex relates to reproduction and thus kinship. The common saying that a relative is ‘blood-related’ is one which inevitably appears in Stoker’s *Dracula*. But, even in other contexts, it begs the question of how exactly families ever share blood. Though they might maintain common traits and spawn from a single life source, it is often semen which is the seed of these so-called ‘bloodlines.’ It is in this realm that Dracula’s obsession with blood and semen is first introduced. Dracula’s passion in speaking of his people excites and intrigues Jonathon Harker, who tries to recall the Count’s speech, word for word. “We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship,” Dracula boasts (Stoker 24). He explains what each different race which has intermingled into his own blood has contributed to his powers, taking pride in having ‘been around,’ contrary to the commonly romanticized idea of being ‘purebred’ in Western society. This idea of being purebred is one which other decadent writing during the period seems to tackle through the idea of blood. Take Huysmans’s *Against Nature*, where Des Esseintes suffers from “the defects of an impoverished stock and the excess of lymph in the blood,” literally white stuff in his blood, making him sick and prone to nervous illnesses (Huysmans and McGuinness). This is largely due to his family’s turn to incest, a counterintuitive attempt at preserving a dying aristocracy among other things. However, for Dracula it is unclear whether he has inherited his

features from his diverse set of ancestors or if has found a way to pick them up of his own accord. As Jonathon notes, “In his speaking of things and people, and especially of battles, he spoke as if he had been present at them all” (Stoker 24). It may be that Dracula has literally consumed these bloodlines. Regardless, they give him new-found abilities as well as ties with foreign peoples that give him pride in those alien identities as though they were his own.

This mixture of identities transcends race and delves into the world of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. In these respects, Dracula seems quite fluid in his own right, easily switching among identities. While he goes after women like Lucy and Mina as a villainous Eastern man, he also displays homoerotic signs, particularly in his thirst for Jonathon’s ‘blood.’ Though the female vampires claim that the Count has “never loved,” Jonathon writes that “after looking at my face attentively [he] said in a soft whisper:—‘Yes, I too can love;’ ” (Stoker 33). This homoerotic behavior is seen in another light when Dracula opens up his chest for Mina to drink from. Suddenly, one questions Dracula’s own sex, imagining him as a woman sexually engaging with another woman. Unclear sex and sexual orientation seems to serve as another parallel to *Des Esseintes*, for whom “the degeneration of this ancient house had clearly followed a regular course, with the men becoming progressively less manly; and over the last two hundred years, as if to complete the ruinous process, the *Des Esseintes* had taken to intermarrying among themselves, thus using up what little vigour they had left” (Huysmans and McGuinness). Here, it seems that incest is only a symptom that has exasperated the family’s degeneration. The main cause appears to be decreased ‘manly’-ness, perhaps resulting in failure to connect and reproduce with females outside of the family, or even getting rid of the desire for females all-together by increasing homoerotic tendencies. As the men of the family become more like women, *Des Esseintes* himself ends up suffering from chlorosis, “anemia caused by iron deficiency,

especially in adolescent girls” (“chlorosis”). In both Dracula’s and Des Esseintes’s cases, the characters are part of a dying breed, blood being both the cause and the cure. But even then, the confusion compounds.

The idea of allowing Mina to drink his blood or milk creates a gap in age—Dracula is seen as a mother feeding a child. The Count’s own age is brought into question as it varies achronologically. Following his meals, he tends to appear young and rejuvenated, as though he is the child being nurtured or nursed, by feeding on others. With this in mind, Stoker’s inclusion of children in the story begins to make more sense, whether those that Lucy feeds on or the ones he shares with the female vampires. Not only do these young figures bring up the idea of nourishment based on age, but they also create a dialogue about pederasty and even relationships between children, depending on how old one considers the vampire at the time. *Death in Venice*, by Thomas Mann, has similar elements. Gustav van Aschenbach, an old, disciplined writer, descends into a sort of contained madness wherein he cures his boredom, the unbearable Ennui, with his infatuation for Tadzio, a young, sick boy in his early teens (Mann). In the process of telling the story of this love, Mann appeals to the philosophy of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*, namely the idea of pederasty as the ultimate form of love, wherein an old man attains sexual pleasure from a young boy, on the verge of puberty, in exchange for knowledge (Plato and Cobb). What we see in all these cases is the complexity of these relations. Regardless of size, age, or sex, all bodies have the capacity to heal, but healing comes with its own harm.

Divine Intervention

Stoker’s *Dracula* contains a somewhat different perspective of the Eastern man in the form of Professor Van Helsing, a foil for the Count who also seems experienced with blood, travel, and the supernatural. While Van Helsing is introduced as a knowledgeable scholar and

physician, his skill-set, particularly with respect to combatting the evils of the UnDead, paints him also as a priest and spiritual healer. He relies on the symbol of the crucifix as his weapon to fend off such forces. Even his use of blood to treat others mimics the Christian sacrament of Eucharist. Acting out marriage as well, Van Helsing orchestrates and referees the transfusion of blood and the communion of souls, granting or denying permission for sexual gratification. Like the ceremonial ‘You may now kiss the bride,’ Van Helsing blesses Arthur and Lucy: “The brave lover, I think, deserve another kiss, which he shall have presently” (Stoker 106). Though this might seem to be a stark contrast from Van Helsing’s denial of Arthur’s kiss later on when Lucy is fully a vampire, both scenarios leave no choice in the hand of Lucy herself. In one case, Van Helsing says that Arthur *will* kiss Lucy, ignoring any consent on her end, in the other, Van Helsing condones a brutal murder with forced penetration, Arthur literally ‘nailing’ her with a hammer and stake, that resembles both rape and crucifixion. After Arthur has had his turn, Van Helsing and Dr. Seward take their chance to fill Lucy’s mouth with garlic and ‘screw’ the coffin shut. But of course, the clearest example of questionable relationships comes in the form of blood transfusions from several men to sustain Lucy, seemingly merging their souls as in the sacrament of matrimony. Whereas Dracula’s acts of drawing blood are often described in great detail throughout the novel, Van Helsing’s blood draws are never described in enough detail to be ‘seen’ vividly by the reader. At all times Van Helsing works secretly, without outlining his thoughts or plans, hiding knowledge and details alike such that nobody else is really aware of what is going on before it happens. Van Helsing makes mistakes and tries to cover his own traces as in that case of the unintentional polygamous matrimony. Dr. Seward writes:

I could see Van Helsing's face grow white and purple by turns. Arthur was saying that he felt since then as if they two had been really married, and that she was his wife in the

sight of God. None of us said a word of the other operations, and none of us ever shall. ... The moment we were alone in the carriage [Van Helsing] gave way to a regular fit of hysterics. He has denied to me since that it was hysterics, and insisted that it was only his sense of humor asserting itself under very terrible conditions. He laughed till he cried, and I had to draw down the blinds lest any one should see us and misjudge. And then he cried, till he laughed again, and laughed and cried together, just as a woman does. I tried to be stern with him, as one is to a woman under the circumstances, but it had no effect.” (Stoker 149)

Another interesting observation in this passage is the question of changing gender among the two physicians, but what is clear here is the sexual deviance which has taken place. It is especially interesting in its context to blood and disease. Though blood transfusions were novel enough at the time of publication to be considered mysterious or related to the occult, the fact that none of the blood transplants from various donors was rejected by Lucy adds another spin to the piece, almost certainly unintentional. It gives even more credibility to Van Helsing’s mysterious abilities, capable of making everything miraculously work out in spite of the odds, even though such a relationship between a woman and many men would go against God’s will. It also speaks to Lucy’s acceptance of other men’s bodily fluids. At the start of the novel, she complains that she cannot marry three men, yet by the end, she has gotten her wish and more, having received blood from four; five if Dracula is counted.

The spread of sexually transmitted infections, many of which can also be carried in the blood, not only relies on Dracula anymore, but also Van Helsing. This adds to the questioning of the institution of the Church in its relation to priesthood and sexuality. The analogy breaks down somewhat due to Van Helsing’s Eastern roots, given that the Eastern churches suffer much less

of the sexual scandals that plague the Catholic church (partially due to the fact that priests are not required to practice celibacy; Van Helsing is himself married in *Dracula*). Yet, if one is to consider the Church in general by its most popular denomination, Catholicism, the connections make more sense. The Church is drawn as a hypocritical institution which denies sexual impulses for the sake of it, a decadent act of repression if such a thing can exist, and gives into it when it so pleases—extramarital affairs, pedophilia, homosexuality, and the like. In *Decadence and Catholicism*, Ellis Hanson recognizes this:

Church rhetoric still leads a double life, though this duplicity has a habit of announcing itself. Some of these announcements appear to be unintentional. For example, there is not a single diocese in the United States that has not been rocked by a homosexuality or pederasty scandal among its pastoral ranks. Furthermore, given the statistics on AIDS in the priesthood, one would think it was an occupational hazard (25).

The trope of sin and illness becomes that much more tangible with the advent of AIDS and its understanding, especially with its added relationship to the gay community. It is easy to imagine that if the illness were known at the end of the 19th century, AIDS and HIV would be among the most common threads of decadent and degenerative writing, perhaps eclipsing the fascination with nervous illness.

Even prior to the advent of AIDS, the use of blood to exemplify the tyrannical control of sexuality present in the Church, with its healing and hurting powers, appears in texts besides just vampire novels. In *The Antichrist* for instance, though not a vampire novel, Nietzsche brings Christianity and the image of the vampire together explicitly. He writes that “The Christian and the anarchist: both are *décadents*; both are incapable of any act that is not disintegrating, poisonous, degenerating, blood-sucking; both have an instinct of mortal hatred of everything that

stands up, and is great, and has durability, and promises life a future ... Christianity was the vampire of the imperium Romanum” (Nietzsche and Mencken 169). One might dismiss these damning descriptions given Nietzsche’s infamous stance against the Church, ultimately claiming that “God is Dead,” but other writers who subscribed to Christianity for various reasons corroborate many of the same ideas, whether intentionally or not. Huysmans’s hagiography of Saint Lydwine is one such text. The piece takes an especially unusual and alarming interest in describing the grotesque and the gruesome, painting it in as much detail as possible such that it borders on voyeuristic sadomasochism in the same way that Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* may be seen as pornographic. If anything, the hagiography takes more liberty to express its sexual undertones luridly, perhaps under the impression that its religious context will give it a sacred aura that protects it from criticism. Huysmans documents the progression of God’s ‘love’ for Saint Lydwine as “He began to cultivate [Saint Lydwine], to root out all thoughts that could displease Him, to weed her soul, to rake it till the blood flowed ... He attacked her health ... so that He might better seize and mold the soul it contained” (1029). What begins as love or zeal quickly develops into a unholy lust for blood and suffering. As the descriptions of bodily fluids become more lurid, one finds it difficult to avoid thinking about Saint Lydwine as wet and thirsty for God. “Burning with fever, she was obsessed with unhealthy tastes and drank dirty or tepid water when she could get it ... Those who stood by wondered how such a quantity of blood could flow from a body so completely exhausted, and poor Lydwine tried to smile” (Huysmans 1031, 1034). Her dedication to Him is maddening and unhealthy, creating a relationship that appears not only abusive, but also shallow. “She was comfortable only when alone. Without insisting, without yet emphasizing His touch, without speaking His inner language, God had already drawn her to Himself, letting her vaguely know that she was His alone ... she understood that she must vow

her virginity to Christ” (Huysmans 1027). In this manner, she is told that she carries the burden of other Christians, doing God’s work and suffering his pain on behalf of others and on behalf of Christ himself, who cannot descend to Earth again. There is no treatment for her until death. And yet she shares this reality with all other Christians who wait on death with open arms to unite with their Creator, whose very death is the event of their biggest celebration. The chance to join the UnDead in being God’s is the ultimate form of healing and it must come at the cost of blood.

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