

WHITMAN'S INFLUENCE ON STOKER'S *DRACULA*

Though Whitman has been called one of the two greatest influences on Bram Stoker's life,¹ and with the increased critical exposure given Stoker over the past decade, it is surprising that a connection between Whitman and Stoker's *Dracula* has yet to be made.² But the relation between Stoker and Whitman has always been a critical blind spot, routinely given passing mention in studies of both writers. Even such specific studies as Harold Blodgett's *Walt Whitman in England*, in which Stoker is barely mentioned and even confused as an actor at one point, and Douglas Grant's *Walt Whitman and His English Admirers*, in which Stoker is not even mentioned, miss the potential significance of the relationship. Two factors probably contribute most to our lack of knowledge in this area. First, there is the relatively minor status of Stoker's work which is just beginning to be studied seriously. Second, because what criticism we have of *Dracula* has focused mostly on Oedipal patterns, carefully scrutinizing submerged Victorian impulses that critics have found a psychological cornucopia in Stoker, the deeply metaphysical themes of the novel have been largely overlooked.³ It is in this metaphysical aspect of *Dracula*, together with Whitman's earthier themes of Eros and Thanatos, that the poet's influence on Stoker is most obviously manifested. To establish the possibility of the literary kinship of Whitman and *Dracula* I will examine Stoker's displacement in *Dracula* of an image from "Song of Myself."

While Whitman's influence on Stoker is finally literary, it also has roots in Stoker's personal admiration for the poet and their subsequent personal relationship. Stoker's life as a "Walt Whitmanite" began at Trinity College, Dublin, where, along with a small circle of Whitman followers, he voraciously read, defended, and discussed the poet, even proselyting in his behalf.⁴ After a lively debate in which he defended Whitman against one of his many detractors, he sent Whitman two near-worshipful letters in which he announced his transcendental devotion, declaring Whitman to be a veritable "wife to his soul."⁵ Perhaps Stoker's admiration is most clearly expressed in the stylistic emulation of his 1872 letter:

But be assured of this, Walt Whitman—that a man of less than half your own age, reared a conservative in a conservative country, and who has always heard your name cried down by the great mass of people who mention it, here felt his heart leap towards you across the Atlantic and his soul swelling at the words or rather the thoughts.⁶

He concludes his energetic and confessional letter by thanking Whitman "for all the love and sympathy you have given me in common with my kind."⁷ Whitman wrote him an immediate reply that encouraged his young disciple, leading Stoker to pay Whitman three visits in Camden between 1884 and 1887. Stoker describes these visits in detail in his *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* while giving an account of his other benevolent activities in Whitman's behalf: his attempts to convince Whitman to publish an expurgated and thus profitable edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and to arrange to have Whitman's bust sculpted by Augustus St. Gaudens.⁸ Stoker's enthusiastic interest in Whitman demonstrates his life-long devotion to one he had called "Master."⁹ Reading *Dracula* in the context of Stoker's admiration for the poet suggests the truth of Whitman's comment to Traubel upon rereading Stoker's letters after thirteen years: "I value his good will highly: he seems to have remained of the same mind, mainly, in substance, as at first."¹⁰

That Stoker's mind remained the same over the years is evident in both the language structures and appearance he creates for Dracula. In the novel, which Stoker began working on in 1890 (only three years after last seeing Whitman), Dracula is the only character who speaks with a sense of rhythm, parallelism, and balance that is characteristic of Whitman. Dracula's use of synonymous and antithetic parallelism and medial reiteration flow easily from Stoker's pen, mastered as they were in his letters to the poet in his college days.¹¹ In addition to this verbal legacy he bequeaths to Dracula, Whitman also seems to be at least partially the physical model for the vampire. Though Dracula does not sport a beard or slouch hat, Stoker often uses similar language when describing Whitman and the vampire, noting that both have long white hair, a heavy moustache, great height and strength, and a leonine bearing. Though not conclusive, the parallels are striking.¹²

The verbal and visual resemblances between the poet "who walks in the steps of the Master"¹³ and the monstrous, inverted Christ who must beware of the crucifix raise questions concerning Stoker's motive in reconciling such obvious opposites. The clue to an answer might lie in two areas: 1) Stoker's notorious and subconscious Oedipal obsession, and 2) the thematic importance of death in Whitman's poetry.

In our most comprehensive critical study of Stoker, Phyllis A. Roth discusses two important and related aspects of his fiction: the Oedipal character configurations and his subsequent blurring and confusing of his characters' identities, revealing ambiguous feelings toward them. An example includes the prevalent father figure in his fiction, wherein

ambivalence toward the father figure is realized by its splitting into good father/bad father figures, with the young hero . . . realizing both his desire to be protected by the good father and his desire to destroy the bad.¹⁴

Another reader specifies this split in *Dracula*, noting that there

is a good deal of Henry Irving, as Stoker's "bad father," in *Dracula*, as there is something of Stoker's good father, Abraham Stoker, in Abraham Van Helsing.¹⁵

What previous critics have failed to note is that Whitman, along with Stoker's natural father and Irving, must be considered another ingredient in Stoker's Oedipal puzzle. In fact, Stoker once called Whitman in a letter a potential "father . . . to his soul."¹⁶ But this Oedipal hypothesis, suggesting that he had mixed subconscious feelings for Whitman, is consistent with what Roth calls the ambiguity which he felt towards the identities of his characters. It would seem that Stoker's literary ambiguity toward characters in an Oedipal configuration is related to Freud's concept of the traditional Oedipal pattern of *ambivalence*, the love-hate feelings of the son towards the father as sexual rival.¹⁷ As Roth points out, the final scenes in *Dracula* demonstrate Stoker's ambivalence about the vampire:

Mina makes quite explicit that we are to experience pity as well as horror in contemplation of the count, saying "That poor soul who has wrought all this misery is the saddest case of all. Just think what will be his joy when he, too, is destroyed in his worsser part that his better part may have spiritual immortality. You must be pitiful to him, too . . ." (Chapter 23). Moreover, since Mina is explicitly comparing both herself and Lucy to Dracula in this passage, the reflection of

the human in the vampire is quite apparent, engaging our sympathies with villain as well as hero, two halves of the one self.¹⁸

Coupled with Stoker's ambiguity towards his characters, and his "fascination with boundaries . . . between one identity and another,"¹⁹ his equation of Whitman and Dracula, as good and evil fathers whose blurred boundaries are punctuated by their similar physical characteristics, is the kind of inverted Oedipal parallelism that is characteristic of the novelist.

Thus, though Whitman seems to be a wholly positive father figure for Stoker on the one hand, undoubtedly Stoker was also affected by the pervasive death imagery throughout Whitman's poetry, making a connecting link between the undead vampire and the Whitman who could describe himself as a shroud who could "wrap a body and lie in the coffin,"²⁰ the Whitman in "Scented Herbage" who imagined "tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death" (l. 3), the Whitman in "Out of the Cradle" chanting "Death, death, death, death, death" (l. 173). In fact this theme is so prevalent in Whitman studies that it hardly needs reiteration here. D. H. Lawrence called "Walt's great poems . . . really huge fat tomb-plants, great rank graveyard growths."²¹ And even grass, which is linked with Whitman's concepts of life and cosmic harmony, E. H. Miller reminds us, is also "associated with . . . the grave."²² Floyd Stovall sees death and immortality as the major themes in the poems from 1866 until the end of Whitman's life,²³ and further suggests that death for the later Whitman was a "fulfillment."²⁴ Thus the merging impulse in Whitman always led inevitably to the democracy of death, "the great benefactor, as a supreme salvation, since it promises a reunion with the beloved mother earth, sea, and maybe the universe."²⁵

It seems highly probable that Stoker, as an ardent reader of Whitman, would have grasped that side of the poetry. In fact the major effect that Stoker tells Whitman his poetry has on him is the creation of an ideal world—the kind Whitman imagined in death: ". . . but sometimes a word or a phrase of yours takes me away from the world around me and places me in an ideal land. . . ."²⁶ Therefore, it is not merely the Whitman of the sunshiny U.S.A. that appeals to Stoker, but the darkly mystic Whitman conjuring up unreal worlds.

But the death theme in Whitman has another important dimension that Stoker seems to have gleaned, one that further links Whitman with the sensuous vampire. In "Scented Herbage of My Breast" the poet suggests his connection between death and love:

Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful except
death and love?)

...

(I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes death most,) . . . (ll. 11,15)

Horace M. Kallen reminds us of Whitman's declaration that "to enjoy it [life] . . . is to die living and live dying, by loving."²⁷ In a comparison between Wagner and Whitman Leo Spitzer suggests that they have the "same feeling for the voluptuousness of death and the death-like quality of love."²⁸

It is this theme of mystic union related to sexuality that caused Stoker to consciously or unconsciously displace the following lines from "Song of Myself," linking

Whitman's message of sexual/spiritual union to the unholy theme of undeath in *Dracula*.

I mind how we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over
upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my bare-striped heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet. . . . (ll. 87-90)

Of primary importance in this image is the union of souls that the sexual imagery suggests. In the language of a sexual encounter, Whitman describes his "Me myself" awakening to the influences of the oversoul while loafing on the grass. And in addition to the sexual imagery is Whitman's role as a metaphoric extension of the bosom of nature upon which he himself lies and sucks metaphysical nourishment. The transparency of the summer, a nod to Emerson, indicates his growing ability to see beyond the surface of nature, leading him immediately to a sense of connectedness with all things:

And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers. . . . and
the women my sisters and lovers. . . . (ll. 93-94)

In *Dracula* the same elements become nightmarishly inverted: the transcendental ecstasy in Whitman becomes the union of a repulsive physical and spiritual rape. In the scene Dracula himself introduces the transcendental theme:

"You have aided in thwarting me; now you shall come to my call. When my brain says "Come!" to you, you shall cross land or sea to do my bidding; and to that end this!" With that he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight, and with the other seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some of the. . . . (pp. 295-296)

The result of the mutual blood-letting, in which, as in Whitman, mouth joins breast, is a telepathic, spiritual union between Dracula and his victim, Mina Harker. In this scene, unlike Whitman's which leads the persona to a cleansing and beatific union with God, Mina "began to rub her lips as though to cleanse them from pollution," exclaiming "Oh my God! my God! what have I done" (p. 296). Mina's disgust, in Freudian terms, grows out of her repressed sexual desires for the father which is associated with the mouth, which Freud found most adults considered a source of perverted sexual activity repressed from childhood fantasies.²⁹ Thus with his emphasis on the breast and mouth Stoker seems to have turned Whitman's transcendental "spot in time" into a chaos of Oedipal fantasies, including sexual desires for the mother figure (the role Mina fills in the novel), and ambivalence towards the father. These fantasies give Stoker's horror legitimacy, playing upon our "disgust that adults feel upon contemplating Oedipal wishes," childhood fantasies that have become adult nightmares.³⁰ Stoker's mirror-like inversion of Whitman's epiphanous image

does not prove that Stoker consciously or unconsciously used it for his source. Though on balance such poetic and psychological genealogies are slippery at best (and obviously, Whitman is no vampire and Dracula no poet), together with our knowledge of Stoker's admiration for the poet and the seeming influence Whitman had on the way Stoker characterizes Dracula's language and appearance, such correspondences would seem to warrant further and more detailed consideration.

That Whitman's stylistic influence reaches beyond poetic circles suggests something of the ever widening and surprising breadth of the poet's literary ubiquity. Though it is always difficult to determine literary influence conclusively, judging from the textual and biographical evidence, Whitman's not so "faint indirections" concerning his love of "delicious death" together with what Stoker perceived to be Whitman's larger than life presence seems to have struck an undying note in Stoker's breast, finally emerging in the unlikely context of his horror masterpiece. For critics, such discoveries rekindle Whitman's tantalizing challenge at the end of "Song of Myself":

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (ll. 1345-1346)

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NOTES

1 *The Bram Stoker Bedside Companion*, ed. Charles Osborne (New York: Tappan Publishing Co., 1973).

2 During the past thirty-eight years there have been (as far as a quick count in *Victorian Studies* would yield) twenty-six items of criticism on Stoker: two between 1945 and 1971 and twenty-four between 1972 and 1983.

3 Critics that have emphasized Oedipal and sexual concerns in Stoker and *Dracula* include C. F. Bentley ("The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Literature and Psychology*, 22, no. 1 [1972]); Joseph S. Bierman ("Dracula: Prolonged Childhood Illness and the Oral Triad," *American Imago*, 29 [1972]); Stephanie Demetrakopoulos ("Feminism, Sex Role Exchanges, and Other Subliminal Fantasies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Frontiers*, 3 [1977]); Carrol L. Fry ("Fictional Conventions and Sexuality in *Dracula*," *Victorian Newsletter*, 42 [Fall 1972]); Judith Weissman ("Women and Vampires: *Dracula* as a Victorian Novel," *Midwest Quarterly*, 18 [1977]); and Phyllis A. Roth (*Bram Stoker*, Boston: Twayne, 1982).

4 Much of the information we have concerning the relationship between Stoker and Whitman is found in Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* vol. 4, ed. Sculley Bradley (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1959) in which he includes Stoker's letters of 1872 and 1876 with Whitman's reply letter, and in Stoker's chapter on Whitman in his *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1906).

5 Traubel, p. 185.

6 Traubel, pp. 184-185.

7 Traubel, p. 185.

8 *Reminiscences*, pp. 108–109. The sculptor was very enthusiastic about the project, as was Whitman, but schedules were slow in meshing and Whitman had died before St. Gaudens was free to do the work.

9 Traubel, p. 182.

10 Traubel, p. 179.

11 In his chapter on literary technique in *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), Gay Wilson Allen lists several of Whitman's rhetorical patterns—including synonymous and antithetic parallelism, and medial reiteration. In the following speech of Dracula's we can detect these rhetorical strategies as well as a bravado characteristic of Whitman:

Here I am noble; I am *boyar*; the common people know me, and I am master. But a stranger in a strange land, he is no one; men know him not—and to know not is to care not for. I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pause in his speaking if he hear my words. . . . (p. 21)

This and other references parenthetically cited in the text are keyed to *Dracula* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897).

12 These descriptions of Whitman can be found in *Reminiscences* on pages 92, 99, 101, and 102. The corresponding references to Dracula are found on pages 16, 18, and 314 of the novel. Stoker's 1872 letter to Whitman suggests that his descriptions are anything but accidental. After giving a very detailed visual description of himself, Stoker explains to the poet that "if I know anything about you I think you would like to know of the personal appearance of your correspondents. You are I know a keen physiognomist. I am a believer of the science myself and am in an humble way a practicer of it" (Traubel, pp. 183–184).

13 *Reminiscences*, p. 101.

14 Roth, p. 31.

15 George Stade is here quoting Orson Wells in his introduction to *Dracula* (New York: Bantam, 1981), xii.

16 Traubel, p. 185.

17 Raymond E. Fancher, *Psychoanalytic Psychology: The Development of Freud's Thought* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 143.

18 Roth, p. 126.

19 Roth, p. 128.

20 "The Sleepers" in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 427, l. 66. Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically in the text.

21 D. H. Lawrence, "Walt Whitman," in *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 13.

22 Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 172.

23 Floyd Stovall, "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry," *American Literature*, 4 (1932), 15.

24 Stovall, p. 11.

- 25 Gustav Bychowski, "Walt Whitman—A Study in Sublimation," *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*, 3 (1951), 226.
- 26 Traubel, p. 184.
- 27 Horace M. Kallen, "Of Love, Death and Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Review*, 15 (1969), 180.
- 28 Leo Spitzer, "Explication de Texte Applied to Walt Whitman's Poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,'" in *Essays in English and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 32–33.
- 29 Fancher, p. 144.
- 30 Fancher, p. 144.