

VAMPYRIC MYTHS AND CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM :

The Love Story of Bram Stoker's "Dracula"

Jeffrey R. Romanyshyn

« *For beauty is nothing but the beginning
of terror we are still just able to bear* »

Rainer Maria Rilke {*The Duino Elegies*}

In this paper, I will present my reflections and thoughts on the myth of Dracula in particular, and the vampyre in general, as a love story and show the deeply rooted links between the two myths and Christianity, as refracted through the prism of Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992).

One of the most well known aspects of a vampyre is that it must feed upon the blood of the living; Dracula must drink to survive, (akin to people drinking the blood of Christ--the blood of divine life). However, I do not believe that this act of survival should be the basis by which the myth of Dracula is labeled as horrific and evil. From a mythical perspective, Dracula was simply, to borrow the life sentiment of Joseph Campbell (1964), "following his bliss". The story

is a love story, a romantic myth which has deep connections to Christianity. Coppola presents it precisely this way. The following are a few examples showing the parallels between the Dracula myth and Christianity.

Christ dies for the sins of humanity and rises from his own death so that humanity may achieve life after death. Dracula dies for the sin of his bride's (Elisabeta's) suicide and rises from his own death so that their souls may again be linked in soul-love one day.

In the Catholic mass, worshippers continually feast upon the blood and body of Christ in order to maintain their mortal link with the immortal life of the divine. Dracula feasts upon the blood and body of mortal life and incarnates immortality within himself; he becomes his own god.

The eternal love relationship between Dracula and Elisabeta is the archetypal sacred marriage--a bond that cannot be severed by death or time--just like the marriage between Christ and the Church.

The film's prologue is narrated by actor Anthony Hopkins, who portrays Professor Abraham van Helsing:

The year: 1462. Constantinople had fallen. Muslim Turks swept into Europe with a vast superior force, striking at Rumania, threatening all of Christendom. From Transylvania arose a Rumanian knight of the sacred "Order of the Dragon", known as Dracula. On the eve of the battle, his bride, Elizabetha, whom he prized above all things on Earth, knew he must face an insurmountable force, from which he might never return. (Coppola, 1992)

Dracula is victorious against the Turks. However, seeking a measure of revenge, the Turks shoot an arrow into his castle, carrying false

news of his death. Elisabeta, overcome with grief, hurls herself into the river from atop the castle ramparts.

The prologue establishes Dracula as a Christian knight, defending God's church and the light of Christendom from pagan, heathen forces of darkness. It is a fascinating combination of mythic-religious symbols residing on the extreme eastern edge of 15th century Christian civilization. The sacred, blessed "Order of the Dragon" is a very pre-Christian symbol of feminine strength and magic connected with the earth, whose story is beautifully presented by John Boorman in his 1981 film "Excalibur". Dracula, an earthly rooted warrior, swinging a sword in his left hand with murderous intent, and cradling a crucifix in his right, faithfully devoted to an airy, non-earth residing God.

The link between the name Dracula and the dragon is interesting. Jung (1956) said that the dragon represents both "the negative mother-imag" and "the devouring mother." There are several symbolic relationships between Dracula and the female realm, which Barbara Birge (1994) shows:

Blood, the currency of vampyres, is the stuff of menstruation and childbirth. Nighttime, when vampyres thrive, is governed by the 28-day cycle of the moon, which corresponds to women's menstrual cycle. Furthermore, vampyres are closely connected to the earth; they return to the grave by day and always need access to soil from their homeland (Dracula brought crates filled with dirt from Transylvania to England). The common view of the earth as female is well known, with earth regarded as the mother of us all. (Birge, 1994, p. 27)

Since Dracula served the Order of the Dragon, there exists another relationship to the mother-image. In the film, Dracula tells Jonathan, a law clerk who is assisting him with real estate purchases in London, that "...the Order of the Dracul, the Dragon, [was] an ancient society

pledging my forefathers to defend the church against all enemies of Christ" (Coppola, 1992).

Given its name, however, it seems possible that the Order of the Dragon was connected, if unconsciously, to archaic matriarchal cultures that apparently thrived in Neolithic Europe. Such a possibility makes an interesting case for Dracula's split from the patriarchal Church. If the Order of the Dragon had matriarchal roots, its marriage to the Church may have been tenuous at best.

Furthermore, an uneasy alliance may have been concealed by an exaggerated show of loyalty--as seen in Dracula's zealous defense of the Church and outrageous butchery in battle. Ironically, this very overcompensation may have provoked the Muslims [Turks] into sending the note that led to Elisabeta's tragic death. We can even interpret her suicide as symbolizing the death of the female principle under a patriarchal order. (Birge, 1994, p. 27)

From a Jungian perspective, the physical conflict between Dracula's forces and the Turks is a metaphor for Dracula's inner turmoil. We see the seeds of a battle between the self and the shadow already planted, sowed, watered, awaiting their moment of conflict: Dracula, embracing (perhaps tenuously) the divinely inspired light of self and defending such enlightenment (perhaps maniacally) from the shadow spawned forces of evil and darkness. In such a battle, where one fights with oneself, a dramatic shift in psyche is bound to occur. Upon learning of his beloved Elisabeta's suicide, and the result that her soul is damned under the eyes of God, Dracula utters a soul cry heard from the highest heavens to the lowest nether worlds: "Is this my reward for defending God's church?!" (Coppola, 1992)

He makes an excellent point. He defends his view of 15th century Christendom, only to suffer the loss of love due to inflexible dogma concerning the afterlife.

There is an incredible relationship between Sacred Psychology and the myth of Dracula. Jean Houston (1987) describes Sacred Psychology as "...the process and practice of soul making [which] is not necessarily a happy thing. Soul making begins with the wounding of psyche by the Larger Story." Dracula's wound is a sacred wound, inflicted by his anguish over Elisabeta's death and the Church's inflexible afterlife dogma. It represents one of the most fascinating metaphors of the sacrifices one makes for his/her beloved: He renounces God, declares he will rise from his own death, (a Christ metaphor) and avenge Elisabeta's with all the powers of darkness. He thrusts his sword into the center of the stone cross sitting atop the altar. Blood begins flowing freely from the cross, out of the eyes of stone carved praying angels, and out of the tops of burning candles. A golden chalice (Holy Grail symbol) rests at the base of the cross and fills with blood. Dracula lifts it to his lips and drinks with the declaration "The blood is the life and it shall be mine!" (Copolla, 1992)

Houston's (1987) words outline the shift in psyche Dracula experiences where he casts aside the Self for the Shadow, and engages in soul making because his psyche story of love is wounded by the "Larger Story" of the Church.

Wounding involves a painful excursion into pathos, wherein the anguish is enormous and the suffering cracks the boundaries of what you thought you could bear. And yet, the wounding pathos of your own local story may contain the seeds of healing and transformation. In the Greek tragedies, the gods force themselves into human consciousness at the time of pathos. It is only at this time of wounding that the protagonist grows into a larger sense of what life is all about and is able to act accordingly. The wounding becomes sacred when we are willing to release our old stories and to become the vehicles through which the new story may emerge into time (Houston, 1987, p. 105).

The "wounding pathos of [Dracula's] local story" did indeed "contain the seeds of healing and transformation." He was wounded by the loss of mortal love, so the only source of healing was a reunion with that same love; since Elisabeta's soul was damned under the eyes of God, there would be no afterlife reunion. God forced himself into Dracula's consciousness and ignited the pathos, which opened Dracula's eyes to the "Larger Story" and allowed him to "act accordingly." His wound became sacred when he released his old mortal story, renounced God, and became the vessel which carried his new story into time.

What is his motive in abandoning God? Reading the myth as a love story suggests a soul motive.

The love metaphor and the psychic shift actually go hand in hand like two lovers. Dracula feels betrayed by a God he fought for and, as I said before, his point seems valid. In his denouncement of God, he is reaffirming for eternity his love for Elisabeta. He sacrifices his divinely inspired enlightened self and embraces the "eternal life" of the shadow. He casts aside paradise and chooses love. What deeper sacrifice can one make for another? Indeed, Dracula's denouncement is more than a sacrifice--it is a declaration of hope for the future. Elisabeta's soul was damned. Thus, his "seeds of healing and transformation" had not taken root in the afterlife, they were embedded in the earth. His motive for walking the valley of the shadow is so that he will one day reunite with his beloved on earth. He rips the immortal love-seed out of the light of heaven and buries it in the darkness of the earth, to be nourished by his desire.

Carl Jung describes the dark characteristics which constitute the shadow when he says "they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality. Emotion, incidentally, is not an activity of the individual but

something that happens [to the individual] (Jung, 1959, p. 8). All these characteristics are embodied within Dracula.

It is important to remember that myth, like poetry, cuts quickly to the essence and tends to contain a great deal of information in symbolic form. Myth also exists beyond the parameters of local space and time. Each figure and situation in the myth is archetypal. Thus a soldier becomes the Warrior, the one who yearns is the Lover, the one who seeks, the Hero (Houston, 1987, p. 108).

Declaring you will rise from your own death and accomplishing such a feat are two different things. Though Dracula fiercely believes the soul of Elisabeta will re-incarnate in another, he has no idea when or where. To survive for centuries, he taps primal archetypal strengths in his denouncement of God, and embodies the immortal attributes of the Heroic-Warrior-Lover.

The film progresses to the point where Dracula indeed finds his true love reborn, in the form of Mina, soon to be wed to Jonathan. Upon seeing her picture Dracula asks him: "Do you believe in destiny? That the powers of time can be altered through a single purpose?" (Coppola, 1992) Then, without waiting for a reply, states: "The luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds true love."

Recognizing that his over four century journey has entered its final stage, Dracula sails for London, leaving Jonathan in Transylvania at the mercy of three succubuses, vampyric women. Dracula transforms himself into a young Prince Vlad, woos Mina, and nearly wins her complete love and affection. However, Jonathan escapes the clutches of the vampyric women, makes it to a convent in Rumania, and writes for her to join him there immediately to be married. She goes with a heavy heart because she truly loves Dracula. In his utter despair and anger, he feasts on Mina's young friend Lucy and condemns her to the vampyric eternal life.

It is through Lucy's transformation that Dr. Abraham van Helsing appears, the metaphysician-philosopher who "knows more about obscure diseases than any man in the world" (Coppola, 1992). He is called in because the doctor attending to Lucy, a former student of Van Helsing's, is unable to make a diagnosis, (because he is only "seeing" from the technological-medical perspective). Van Helsing correctly deduces that "We are not fighting some disease here...Vampyres do exist."

In a strange way, there is a variable of love present between Van Helsing and Dracula: an admiration from afar, an infatuation, perhaps even a type of worship. Van Helsing is ecstatic when he discovers that they are dueling Dracula, "...the undead! The foe I have pursued all my life!" (Coppola, 1992)

Near the end of the film, Van Helsing, Jonathan, and their allies are pursuing Dracula as he races for his castle. Mina, meanwhile, gave herself to Dracula in an expression of her love for him. Van Helsing notes "The vampyre has baptized her in his own blood." (A dip in a font of blood instead of holy water). (Coppola, 1992). Mina asks him "You admire him [Dracula], don't you?" Van Helsing admits he does and says "His mind was great and powerful; his heart was strong enough to survive the grave; all the more reason to seek him out and destroy him utterly!" (Sounds like a description of the death and life of Jesus Christ).

Van Helsing's words seem to suggest a love/hate relationship one can have with an object of worship they have pursued their entire lives, a mirror for the experience one can have with Christianity. Van Helsing greatly admires Dracula's strengths and passion as portrayed in legend and pursues the myth in his desire to tap those strengths, to incarnate some of the immortal. This is what one experiences in the Christian mass: a forever reading of the story of Christ, followed by

the ingestion of the immortal body of Christ through Communion; a desire that is never satisfied and must be continually pursued, (the eternal hunger of a vampyre).

In a search for the ineffable quality of a myth, the transformative experience, one can suddenly and painfully be confronted with reality, the face of their idol of devotion, which scarcely, if ever, follows the lines of desire. Joseph Campbell (1964) says "Myths transform consciousness". When one touches that ineffable quality, a transformation of consciousness, a psychic shift, occurs because the experience is too sacred to be spoken; the larger story becomes apparent because one is feeling the myth, living it, not merely talking and thinking about it.

"My-" in "myth" is the Greek mu, which implies shutting the eyes and mouth. I understand this to mean that myth is the story we tell when our mouths are shut. It is a different kind of telling, perhaps the story we live as opposed to the story we say we are living (Moore, 1992, p. 58).

This is precisely what happens to Van Helsing: the earthly "undead" Dracula frightens him, shakes his Christian beliefs. Dracula is an externalization of the power of the shadow which exists in every human being; his behavior appears to mimic Satan's, a creature who was cast out of paradise into Hell and thus should not be able to exist on earth. The vampyre is used as a vessel of evil by the church, another scapegoat container for the shadow-side which Christian belief refuses to confront, preferring instead to cast it out, banish it, and eventually, hunt it down and eradicate it.

Jung (1959) describes how the archetype of the shadow and self is split in Christianity.

If we see the traditional figure of Christ as a parallel to the psychic manifestation of the self, then the Antichrist would correspond to the shadow of the self, namely the dark half of the human totality...light and shadow are evenly distributed in humanity's nature....The psychological concept of the self cannot omit the shadow that belongs to the light figure, for without it this figure lacks body and humanity....light and shadow form a paradoxical unity. In the Christian concept, the archetype is hopelessly split into two irreconcilable halves, leading ultimately to a metaphysical dualism--the final separation of the kingdom of heaven from the fiery world of the damned (Jung, 1959, p. 42).

Vampyres are a metaphor for the fall of Satan, though there exists a major distinction. Satan's ultimate goal was the overthrow of God and the seizure of heavenly power; as a consequence of his failed revolution, he was cast out of paradise into the abyss. Dracula, in his denouncement of God, willingly abandoned heaven. Thus, he is able to walk the earth as "undead"

The myth of Dracula which Van Helsing worshipped had two incarnations: 1) Dracula as a Christian soldier who faithfully served God, was sacredly wounded by the loss of his beloved on a dogmatic technicality, renounced God for love, and embraced the immortal qualities of the archetypes. 2) Dracula as the physical vampyre in reality who must feed on the blood of the living. It is this second incarnation which Van Helsing confronts in the world, and it is too radical a shift for his psyche to handle; he cannot feel the wound. His soul loves and desires to live the myth, to read the larger story, which his religious belief demands must be destroyed. He speaks this mythical-religious confusion when he says: "We all have become God's madmen" (Coppola, 1992).

The teachings of Christ and the lessons of belief taught by the church are embraced and worshipped by many as "the life". Very often, the

stark reality of a violent society shakes this bedrock of belief, forcing questions to the surface as Jean Houston explained, and shining light on this mythical-religious confusion. If one is brave enough to allow these questions passage into consciousness, then one will experience the ineffable quality of the myth of Christianity, a transformation of consciousness. One allows the experience of the everyday world to meld with the experience of myth. Such a melding allows for growth, an acceptance of myth's power in the everyday. Thomas Moore explains this melding.

We are always in myth, whether or not we appreciate that fact. If we are in it piously, prepared by art and religion to deal with the sacred, then life is given immense depth and we can engage the angels and devils who are always turning up unexpectedly. But if we are convinced of the secular philosophy of the day and ignore the necessary rituals of myth and the technologies of depth, then we suffer the incursions of the divine. Their breakthrough becomes our breakdown. The word "pathos" means either to feel the pathology of the divine breaking painfully into human life or to live the passion of the divine as it arrives. Passion is merely the aura of a god who has been given a place of entry (Thomas Moore, 1992, p. 60).

Van Helsing was a product of the secular-religious philosophy of 19th century Victorian England. He suffered the incursion of the immortal upon confronting Dracula, whose breakthrough into consciousness, into everyday awareness, was Van Helsing's breakdown. When confronted with the reality of Dracula, the philosophy of his time (his ego) overruled his love of the myth and would not permit a transformation of consciousness; he could not bring himself to live the myth, to feel the wound and see the larger story; in a sense he could not allow himself to be bitten and thus transformed. He denied passion, denied the vampyric divine aura a place of entry. Thus passion became pathology, birthed by the mythical-religious turmoil

in his psyche. Instead of feeling and welcoming his passion, Van Helsing's ego, when confronted with the "true" face of the myth his soul had desired and pursued, turned it into a pathology--a disfigured monster to be slain.

Soul making requires that you die to one story to be reborn to a larger one. A renaissance, a rebirth, occurs not just because there is a rising of ancient and archetypal symbols. A renaissance happens because the soul is breached. In this wounding, the psyche is opened up and new questions begin to be asked about who we are in our depths. A larger story is revealed by the wounding. When psychological energy is no longer bonded to social forms, then, uncensored, depth images and archetypes can have their day. Whether they serve to madden or illumine is up to us (Houston, 1987, p. 104).

When Van Helsing says "We have all become God's madmen" at the end of the film, his words articulate the shift from passion to pathology: killing instead of loving; focusing on the "evil" aspects of the vampyre and ignoring the redeeming quality of love, all in the name of God. The illuminating quality is transformed into a darkness to be banished. In Van Helsing's individual story, the vampyre image frightened and maddened him; in our larger cultural story, the vampyre archetype also frightens and maddens.

Van Helsing's belief system was locked in the "either/or" perspective: Dracula was either a passionate hero to be admired and worshipped from afar, or a monster to be slain from up close. Van Helsing never embraced the "neither/nor" perspective: Dracula was neither a passionate hero desiring worship, nor a monster desiring to be hunted and slain, merely a man who was sacredly wounded and was searching for his "seeds of healing and transformation." After all, if Dracula's primary motive for embracing the vampyric existence was to feed upon the living until the end of time, he would never have been actively searching for healing and transformation for his sacred

wound. The stopgap measure of maintaining his immortality by drinking the lifeblood of others would have been enough. In Dracula's individual story, love, not lifeblood, ultimately guaranteed a blissful afterlife. To apply the life sentiment of Joseph Campbell (1964), Dracula was simply "following his bliss".

In the film's climactic conclusion, Dracula is physically wounded in conjunction with his sacred wound. Mina accompanies him to the same chapel where Elisabeta lay in damnation over four centuries previously, where Dracula's vampyric based love-quest began. We have come full circle. Dracula's image is a grotesque "undead" portrait, yet Mina tenderly kisses him and declares her undying love for him. In that instant, the light of God bathes Dracula and his face takes on its youthful appearance. He whispers "Give me peace" (Coppola, 1992). Mina grasps the blade protruding from his chest and drives it through his heart. Dracula's eyes focus on the ceiling. Mina kisses him--then cuts off his head, terminating his vampyric existence, giving him peace. His body and soul are now redeemed. Mina, who has taken on the appearance of Elisabeta, also gazes upward. We see a mural depicting Dracula and Elizabetha/Mina floating in heavenly, eternal bliss. Dracula's journey through darkness to redeem the soul of his beloved results in both their salvations.

Mina's words end the film beautifully and soulfully: "There, in the presence of God, I understood at last how my love could release us all from the powers of darkness. Our love is stronger than death" (Coppola, 1992).

The myth of Dracula in particular, and of the vampyre in general, has been cast in shadow for centuries. The ultimate source of the shadow is not the vampyre, not the incorrect belief that a vampyre is pure evil and lacks a lightness of being, but the Christian church, which at

least played the role of midwife in the vampyre's birth. The church has never consciously admitted that the mythic story of Satan's expulsion from Paradise is a psychological metaphor of the shadow side of God cast out of the divine self. However, somewhere along the way, Christian dogma decreed that Satan was not an adequate vessel to contain evil. It was necessary to create a container firmly rooted in the earth, one which existed between the human mortal and the divine immortal, yet had sinned and possessed no chance of redemption.

The vampyre in general was labeled as this earth rooted, beyond redemption vessel. The myth of Dracula differs because of his attempt to hold together the pure center of existence--LOVE. He suffers the never-ending battle between the light and dark forces of soul: birth, death, and rebirth; God and Satan; good and evil. Choose as you will from a host of metaphors. The ultimate reward? Eternal bliss.

Presently, modern society is caught up in this same web of self-denial, simply substitute technology for the church. People are frightened by the dark side of soul, and therefore avert their gaze from the mystical mysteries residing within it. Thus, they are prevented from glimpsing the dualism of beautiful terror, dark light and illuminating darkness.

« This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us : the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us. The fact that people have in this sense been cowardly has done infinite harm to life; the experiences that are called "apparition," the whole so-called "world of spirit," death, all these things that are so closely related to us, have through our daily defensiveness been so entirely eliminated from life that the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied. »

Rainer Maria Rilke {*The Duino Elegies*}

Works Cited

Birge, Barbara. "Bram Stoker's DRACULA: The Quest for Female Potency in Transgressive Relationships", *Psychological Perspectives*. 29. 22-36, 1994

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*. New York: Arkana, 1964.

Coppola, Francis, F. (Director). *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Columbia Motion Pictures Group, 1992

Highwater, Jamake. *The Language of Vision*. New York: Grove Press, 1994

Hillman, James. *Revisioning Psychology*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1975

Houston, Jean. *The Search for the Beloved: Journeys in Sacred Psychology*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P.Tarcher, 1987

Jung, C.G. *Symbols of Transformation, Vol. 5. The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956

Jung, C.G. *Aion, Vol. 9, Part II. The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959

Moore, Thomas. *Developing a mythic sensibility. Sphinx*. 4. 53-61, 1992

Moore, Thomas. *Myth: Fragments of a Life*. Unpublished lecture, Carpinteria, Ca, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 1994, September

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Duino Elegies*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1939