

Monster Track: Catholicism, Dracula, and the Forces of Darkness

Lindsay Baldwin Porter, Hendrix College



Catholicism and folk superstition are portrayed quite ambivalently in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.¹ Both are effective weapons against evil, but at the same time both are coupled in a sense with that evil. Protestant Christianity lies at the center of the expected worldview of the reader, although it makes few explicit appearances in the novel. All the main characters with the exception of Van Helsing are presumed to be Protestant, as evidenced by their unfamiliarity with the Catholic burial rite that Van Helsing reads over Lucy's body (231). When he is offered a crucifix, the hero Jonathan explicitly indicates early in the book that he is "an English Churchman... taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous" (9). Of course, as the plot progresses the characters come to believe in and rely on the Catholic rituals as effective in fighting vampires, but I do not believe that they accept Catholicism as their new faith. The Catholic rituals are ever linked to superstition and the dark world that Dracula inhabits; they are necessary and expedient, but still distasteful to use, as is seen when the men are "appalled" at Van Helsing's use of the "to him most sacred" Host to block Lucy's entrance to her lair (225).

Folk belief - equated with superstition in the reader's mind - and Catholicism are often used in tandem to fight the vampires, as when Van Helsing gives Lucy both a crucifix and garlic flowers to safeguard her from her nightly intruder (143 and 180). It is interesting to note that the sole Catholic in the group is a foreigner who is constantly demarcated from the rest of them as "not English" by his comic misuse of the English language (144,180, etc). This is a quality Van Helsing has in common with the other main foreigner in the novel, Dracula, who worries about being identified as a stranger in London by his speech (25). Dracula has good cause to worry; even after the heroes have come to accept and believe in the efficacy of the folk superstitions that they must use to fight Dracula, they still regard the beliefs of the natives of Transylvania with the patronizing gaze of the colonialist. This is apparent in Mina's "affectionate"

¹ Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003.

characterization of the local people as “*very, very* superstitious” (382). Superstition, Catholicism, and Dracula all belong to the dark, un-English world that the characters are forced to enter, and so Dracula poses a threat to the Protestantism that supposedly stands at the center of the reader's worldview.

**© All rights retained by the original authors, and the Board of Editors of GOLEM.
For permissions, contact the Senior and Founding Editor.**