

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the ugliest of them all?”

The Elderly as “Other” in Countess Dracula (1971)

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Throughout the history of cinema, depictions of female characters have varied sharply with the characters' age. Lead roles for women in film have, with some limited exceptions, celebrated the youth, positivity, and enthusiasm of the stereotypical female ingénue. Aging female characters have, in contrast, been depicted in largely negative terms, as figures toward whom the audience is expected to be unsympathetic, or even fearful. The age dichotomy is particularly striking in horror films, where younger women are almost invariably cast as sympathetic victims or resourceful heroines, and images of older women as nurturing grandmothers or wise mentors are less common than they are outside the genre. Elderly female characters in horror films are, overwhelmingly, reflections of archetypal figures such as the Hag or the Witch. From the old woman in the bath who propels Danny Torrance into a catatonic state in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) to the terrifying character of Sylvia Ganush in *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), the elderly woman has served only to instill a sense of fear and dread into cinema audiences. Such depictions frame aging women as what Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed identify as “the Other.” The fear and anxiety surrounding the aging process are examples of abjection, defined by both authors as a means of separating “the human from the non-human.”¹ Abjection is a state in which the self can experience repulsion from the bodily experience. Kristeva and Creed each use the example of a person viewing a corpse to illustrate their theory. The corpse serves as a reminder of the inevitability of death, and links can be made between this experience and the aging process. While aging is a natural part of our everyday lives, women are encouraged—and often feel pressured—to strive for perfection by preserving their youthful appearance.

Hammer Studio's *Countess Dracula* (1971) explores these conflicts as it engages with the title character's endless search for, and obsession with, youth. Starring Ingrid Pitt as the widowed Countess Elisabeth Nadasdy, it uses beauty as the central theme of its plot, following her character as she accidentally finds a way to reverse the aging process, and then goes to horrific extremes to transform herself from a wizened, elderly woman to one who is vivacious, young, and therefore powerful.

Chasing Youth

The film opens with the Countess newly widowed and contemplating the terms of her late husband's will, which leaves half his estate to their daughter Ilona. Angry, she argues with her chambermaid Teri over the temperature of her bathwater, and then—after ordering the girl to peel her a peach—lashes out at her when she drops a piece of the peel on the floor. The Countess' blow causes Teri to gash her own cheek with the knife, and her blood splatters the Countess' face. She wipes it away, but is astonished to discover, the next morning, that the skin touched by it is once again taut and youthful. Grasping the possibilities opened up by this discovery, the Countess sets out to obtain more blood by any means necessary. She kills Teri and, after bathing in the girl's blood, transforms herself into a radiant young woman. When she takes only Julie, the castle nurse, and Captain Dobi, the castle steward who is also her longtime secret lover, into her confidence, and they reluctantly agree to help her maintain the illusion.



The Countess (Ingrid Pitt), transformed from old age to youth after bathing in the blood of virgins in *Countess Dracula* (1971).

Ilona—absent from the castle for 13 years during her education in Vienna—is scheduled to return the next morning, now a young woman of 19. The Countess, infatuated with her newfound youthfulness and unwilling to be upstaged by her own daughter, devises an audacious plan. She arranges for Ilona to be abducted from her carriage before reaching the castle, and to be held prisoner in the remote cottage of the castle's mute gamekeeper. When dinnertime arrives, the Countess makes a grand entrance, presenting *herself* as Ilona and

attracting the attention of a handsome young army officer, Lieutenant Imre Toth, whose father served alongside the Count years before. The Countess' ruse, initially successful, soon turns complicated. She spends two nights in Imre's bed, but on the second morning finds that she has reverted to her true, elderly state. She flees from him, desperate for more blood to restore her youth, and Julie obliges by bringing her a Gypsy dancer from a travelling circus performing in the nearby village. Youthful again, the Countess resumes her pursuit of Imre, and a pattern is established in which Julie supplies the Countess with a steady stream of fresh victims. Imre and "Ilona" fall deeper in love, and begin to contemplate marriage, even as an increasingly jealous Captain Dobi tries to drive them apart in order to have the Countess for himself.

Even as her wedding day approaches, however, the Countess' situation grows increasingly unstable. The rejuvenation treatments become less effective over time, and maintaining her youth demands the butchery of a steady stream of young women, which Count Dobi procures for her from among the castle's large staff of servants. The castle librarian, Grand Master Fabio, begins to suspect the truth, and Dobi has him killed,

leading the Chief Bailiff to seal the castle and send its servant girls away until the serial murderer who preys on them can be apprehended. Cut off from her usual source of victims, the Countess begs Dobi to find her a girl, which he does—bringing her the real Ilona, who has broken out of the gamekeeper’s cottage and escaped into the countryside. Having accepted the smitten Imre’s proposal of marriage, the Countess plans to murder Ilona—both for her blood, and for the opportunity to permanently assume her identity.

Loyal to Ilona, who she raised from birth to age six, Julie turns against her mistress and makes plans to smuggle the girl to safety. She enlists the aid of Imre—to whom Captain Dobi, stung by the Countess’ rejection of him, has spitefully revealed her true identity and appearance—and they free Ilona on the morning of the wedding. The plan initially goes smoothly, but Ilona impulsively turns back to catch a glimpse of her unnaturally youthful mother at the altar. At that moment, in the midst of the ceremony, the latest rejuvenation treatment wears off, and the Countess reverts to her true, elderly appearance. She lunges at her daughter with a knife in her hand, determined to draw the blood that will make her young again. Imre jumps between them and, to her horror, the Countess slays him instead of Ilona. The final scene shows her being hauled away to prison, derided by the townspeople as “Countess Dracula.”

The Anxiety of Aging

When we are first introduced to the Countess, she is dressed in black mourning clothes with a high collar and large black hat, her body secreted under layers of fabric and her face covered by a veil. The audience’s view of her is thus obscured; close-up shots provide glimpses, but we cannot clearly see her face. In the next scene, her veil has been removed and her pale wrinkled skin, covered in the stereotypical signs of aging, is revealed.

The same scene establishes that the Countess’ interest has been piqued by Imre, who is named as a beneficiary in the will. The film thus sets up the pursuit of a handsome and desirable young man by a sexually aggressive, but much older, woman: a trope with a history reaching back to Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath’s Tale.” The Wife of Bath, in telling her version of the story, presents the old woman’s desire as absurd, and her pursuit of a much younger man as farcical. She does so, however, in the service of a moral story about women’s deepest desire being sovereignty over their husbands. *Countess Dracula*, on the other hand, presents the title character’s desire as grotesque, her pursuit of Imre as horrifying, and her story as bereft of any redeeming moral.

The Countess, like the old woman in Chaucer’s tale, is subject to rejection and humiliation, but she also suffers from physical decline, becoming more haggard and fragile as the story unfolds. Once she has discovered the secret of regeneration, the physical borders separating self and “Other” begin to break down and her sense of identity becomes increasingly unstable. In her attempt to arrest the natural processes of degeneration and decay, the film suggests, she has created new forms of instability and disorder in their place. As her transformations from old age to youth grow more frequent, she becomes progressively more grotesque each time she returns to her natural state. In turn, her anxiety and desperation build as the story progresses. The slightest possibility that she might return to her true, aged form becomes abhorrent to her.

This anxiety is depicted in two scenes that involve the Countess sleeping. In the

first, she has a nightmare in which she has returned to her elderly appearance. She wakes with a start, throwing her hands up to her face in order to check that it is still youthful. Only after reassuring herself that her appearance is unchanged does she settle back to sleep, confident that it was just a dream. At the same moment, the film cuts to a scene of Imre in bed with Zizi, a prostitute from the local tavern who he brings back to his chambers in the castle after a night of drinking, encouraged by the jealous Captain Dobi. This juxtaposition serves to validate the Countess' fears that, if she loses her youthful beauty, she will be rejected by Imre and her position in his life will be usurped by another woman.

The Countess' anxiety is deepened by her growing awareness that the rejuvenating effects of the blood are not only temporary, but come at a steadily escalating price. With each transformation, her face becomes more lined and drawn, her drooping skin more exaggerated, and her moles more prevalent. Warts and other marks frequently appear after her transformations, often in the center of her face, between her eyebrows, and around her mouth. Her original, aged state thus becomes—like the portrait that Oscar Wilde's character Dorian Gray keeps hidden in his attic—a mirror of her soul, its increasingly horrific appearance a reflection of the murderous deeds she has committed. The more decrepit her aged self becomes, the deeper she is pushed into the realm of the abject, intensifying her self-revulsion and redoubling her determination to keep old age at bay.



Covered with warts and wrinkles, the Countess (Ingrid Pitt) becomes abject as the effects of the virginal blood dissipate in *Countess Dracula*.

into horror as she transforms back to her original state. The audience does not see the transformation, but the priest's horrified reaction to the sight of her face reveals everything they need to know.

The final scene reinforces Gary Smith's argument that the film works on the "grimmiest" of levels, acting as a cautionary tale about women's anxiety over aging and the resulting obsession with youth² The Countess takes these tendencies to monstrous extremes; she becomes more desperate, and "descends deeper into madness," as the effects of the blood ritual become progressively weaker, more costly, and ultimately unsustainable. *Countess Dracula* thus embraces the recurring horror-genre trope of the aging

Her body's inability to remain youthful without regular blood treatments means that the possibility of reversion is ever-present. The Countess is continually vulnerable, therefore, to the collapse—at any time, and without warning—of her carefully constructed illusions, and the new life she has founded on them. She is terrified by the possibility that she will be seen in her true form and so lose Imre's love. The inevitable moment of collapse occurs, tellingly, in the final scene, when the Countess is on the verge of attaining her goal by marrying Imre. As the wedding reaches its conclusion, her happiness dissolves

woman as not merely grotesque, but monstrous and ultimately—in her “unnatural” desire to hold onto youth at all costs—evil.

The Countess Reflected

Images of the Countess in mirrors and other reflective surfaces are a recurring motif throughout the film, but only in scenes where she can see herself. In one instance, she is awakened by the sound of a wolf outside her open window. She gets up from her bed and goes to close the window, only to see her “true” elderly self, reflected in the window pane. The camera creates a range of close-up shots that distort her appearance, exaggerating the shape of her face and stretching out her features within the frame. In another scene, after professing to Imre that she is in love with him, she again sees herself reflected in a mirror as an elderly woman. The cumulative effect of these images is to emphasize her grotesque appearance and encourage the audience to react to her elderly face with disgust. It is important to note that when the Countess views her reflection in her unnatural, blood-enhanced state, it is *only* the reflection that changes, her physical self is still transformed, youthful and beautiful.

This trope of mirrors revealing the truth about characters has been used throughout fairy tales and other fantastic fiction. In the tale of Snow White, for example, the Wicked Queen asks if she is the fairest in the land, and the mirror’s response that she is no longer the fairest—underscored by her knowledge that the mirror is unable to lie—sets the story in motion. The link between the Countess’ increasingly grotesque face and her ever-lengthening series of crimes suggest that the mirrors and mirror-like surfaces in *Countess Dracula* play a similar role, reminding her of her corrupt spirit as well as her age-ravaged body, and underscoring the depths to which she has sunk to satisfy her vanity. Like Dorian Gray’s portrait, they remind her of a reality that she can barely bring herself to acknowledge, speaking the truth so forcefully that she often averts her eyes from them before she can glimpse it. The distortions that she glimpses in mirrors are, moreover, not random. Reflections lengthen her chin to a point, alter her other features, and emphasize her increasingly numerous warts and boils. These distortions do not just twist her beauty into wizened ugliness, but also transform her into the stereotypical image of the Witch: “speaking truth” not only by revealing her real physical self—old, ugly and undesirable—but also by revealing the darkness that has overtaken her soul.

The Countess and Abjection

The Countess’ fear of aging stems not just from her determination to remain desirable—able to compete with younger women like Ilona for the attentions of men like Imre—but from aging’s association with decay, abjection, and death. Monstrous in her selfishness, she condemns others to (unnatural) death in order to postpone her own (natural) one. The threat of death is ever-present in *Countess Dracula*, and corpses—the ultimate symbol of abjection³—are ubiquitous throughout the film. The story begins with the death of one of the Countess’ own peasants, who clings to the side of her open carriage as it passes through his village, pleading for her aid. The Countess remains silent and unresponsive behind her veil, even as one of her courtiers smashes the man’s fingers—

causing him to fall and be crushed to death by the wheels of the carriage. The Countess and her entourage drive on, leaving the man's distraught family standing over his motionless body at the wayside. The subsequent murders, though equally callous, are more deliberate and self-centered: part of the Countess' increasingly desperate campaign to gather the blood she needs to sustain her youthful looks.

The next corpse shown on screen is that of the belly dancer, which is found in the woods by two young boys. She is stripped to the waist and very pale, as if to emphasize her lack of blood. There is nothing to link the death to the Countess, however, as the discovery is made outside of the castle walls. The third corpse is that of Zizi, the prostitute employed by Captain Dobi to seduce Imre away from the Countess. Having watched the initial phase of his plan succeed, and knowing that the Countess is desperate for her next "offering," Dobi takes Zizi from the unconscious Imre's bed to the Countess' chambers. His plan, however, quickly goes awry. Zizi is killed (off-screen), her wrist slit, and her blood drained into a large metal bowl for the Countess' use, but it has no rejuvenating effect. Primly informed by Grand Master Fabio, the castle's resident scholar, that only the blood of virgins will do, the enraged Countess berates Dobi for his failure in bringing her "a common whore."

We next see Zizi's body after Imre discovers the Countess in the act of bathing in her blood. Angered by her discovery, she throws open a cupboard door, revealing the prostitute's corpse, naked and pale. In life, Zizi's exposed flesh served as a reminder of the youthful qualities the Countess herself no longer naturally possessed: firm body, unblemished face, and unwrinkled skin. In death, however, her nakedness makes her pitiable—deprived of the vibrant life that she exhibited in the tavern, and in Imre's bed—rather than desirable. Nakedness also underscores Zizi's now-bject nature. Where Imre (and, the film implies, numerous other men) once sought eagerly to uncover it, cultural convention now demands that it be covered, lest the sight of a corpse disturb those still living by reminding them of their own mortality. The Countess, obsessively aware of *her* own mortality, and rendered indifferent to the abject by her constant association with blood and corpses, has no time for such niceties. In death as in life, Zizi is, for her, a thing to be used.

The presence of Zizi's corpse within the Countess' chambers thus becomes, for her, not a horrifying intrusion but an opportunity. When Imre—aware of, and repulsed by, her secret after Dobi's intervention—threatens to break off the marriage he impulsively proposed, she reminds him that *he* was the last person with whom Zizi was seen alive, and that the girl shared his bed on the night she was killed. If he tries to leave her, the Countess explains, she will make certain that he is blamed for her murder, and (presumably) those of the other servant girls. The furtiveness the Countess exhibits earlier in the story—ordering Dobi to smuggle the body of the Gypsy dancer out of the castle and dispose of it in the woods—has given way to boldness. Now confident in her own power over the situation, and inured to the presence of the abject, she is comfortable secreting the corpse in her own rooms within the palace, undisturbed by either disgust or the threat of discovery. The boundaries between the ordinary and the abject have, in the Countess' world, completely collapsed at this point, just as her true, aged self has—in her mind—become one with the abject. Determined to create distance between herself and the abjection she sees within her, she embraces abjection in the day-to-day physical world, unaware (or perhaps uncaring) that doing so renders her monstrous in the eyes of others.

The final corpse revealed in the film is that of the Countess' first victim: her chambermaid, Teri. She is discovered amongst a mound of corpses of nameless young women in the castle's wine cellar, each of them—like those discovered earlier—naked and drained of blood. The only corpse to escape this treatment is that of Grand Master Fabio, who the Countess eliminates in order to keep her actions a secret. His middle-aged male body, useless to her, is discovered fully clothed, hanging in his own library.

Although abjection is primarily discussed in terms of physical objects, such as corpses, Creed notes that it can also occur when “individuals fail to respect the law,” or when a protagonist becomes “a hypocrite, traitor or liar.”⁴ The use of deception and manipulation in *Countess Dracula*, therefore, can be as potent a form of abjection as the victim's corpse. Throughout the film, the Countess deceives a variety of characters in order to keep her blood rituals a secret. She uses her transformed young body to entice and bewitch those around her into colluding with her and her evil plans. In her youthful state, her beauty enables her to prey on Captain Dobi's desire, harbored for the past 20 years, by persuading him to conspire with her and aid her plot. He helps to supply her with a steady stream of fresh, virginal young women to help to satisfy her constant need for blood, and is instrumental in organizing—at her orders—the abduction of her own daughter. He believes that by facilitating the Countess' plan he will win her favor, but the opposite is true. After Captain Dobi realizes that the Countess has cheated him, and her real goal is to woo Imre, he goes to her rooms and finds her in her chamber in her elderly state. In his anger, he mocks her, conveying his disgust at the sight of her old and withered body. She begs for his affection, but he spurns her, declaring that he does not want to make love to her, “like two old fools fumbling at each other.”

The Countess revels in the fact that, after her transformation back to a youthful woman, she can pass herself off as her own daughter, threatening to erase Ilona's identity, and even her very existence in the process. Her actions and her ultimate goal—to seduce and eventually marry Imre—suggest that she is driven by her lust for power and her obsession with retaining control of her world. The antithesis of the culturally approved process of “aging gracefully,” these qualities are traditionally considered unseemly, even grotesque, when displayed by the elderly. The absence of motherly instincts toward her daughter underscore her selfish nature and monstrous ego. Ilona figures in the film *only* as a pawn in the Countess' scheme, and—though she is discussed by many different characters—does not appear until after the Countess' discovery of the ability to reverse her aging process.

The Countess' relationship to Ilona adds another dimension to the use of abjection in the film. Creed's interpretation of the abject frames the mother's body as “a site of conflicting desires,”⁵ and Kristeva argues that in order to authenticate her daughter's existence, a mother will seek to keep a tight hold over her child. Abjection becomes a “precondition of narcissism.”⁶ That which threatens the traditional borders between mother and child is considered abject as it threatens stability and order, yet a Mother' refusal to let go of her child also creates an environment which becomes corrupted and symbolically unclean. At the beginning of the film, Ilona has been in Vienna, isolated from the castle, for most of her life. In Kristeva's view, she has physically broken away from the grasp of her mother, and so, is free. With the Count now absent in death, the Countess is able to control her, yet simultaneously facilitates her being “lost” as she organizes Ilona's abduction. and imprisonment. When at last Ilona does attain her freedom, she is almost immediately made a captive again, this time in the castle (where she awaits her fate as the

Countess' intended next victim). This final act of desperation—the ultimate expression of her determination to preserve her youth at any cost—represents the bottom of the Countess' long downward spiral into evil.

Blood Rituals

Elisabeth Bathory, the real-life figure on whom *Countess Dracula* was based, was said to have killed over 600 women in order to bathe in their blood.⁷ She was eventually convicted of killing 80 women, leaving hundreds more victims unaccounted for. The implications of the film's title aside, the Countess' vampirism thus hovers between the literal and the symbolic. Traditional vampires nourish and sustain their bodies through the physical acts of biting victims and drinking their blood. She drains the blood of her victims in order to sustain herself and renew her aging body, and, though blood may not *literally* give her life, it unquestionably gives her the ability to live life on the terms that she wishes. While the Countess obtains her victims' blood by slicing their wrists rather than biting their necks, her character still falls firmly within this vampiric tradition. The film's promotional lobby cards played up the Countess' insatiable desire for blood, proclaiming: "BLOOD. The more she drinks, the prettier she gets. The prettier she gets, the thirstier she gets."

The use of the Countess' blood rituals further heightens the horrors of the body, and of the process of aging. As in other aspects of her life, the Countess draws closer to objects from which others recoil in horror. She murders several women in cold blood. Her sexual desires, and openness in pursuing them, are heightened to the point of being socially unacceptable for a woman of her station. The discovery of Zizi's lifeless corpse shocks Imre, and the Countess takes pleasure in his shock, mocking his naiveté. The unsustainability of her hunger, and its effects on her actions, set her apart from traditional vampires whose need for blood is constant, but stable. Provided they are able to satisfy their thirst for blood, traditional vampires enjoy immortality, eternal youth (in many versions of the lore) and thus a sense of stability. The Countess, however, knows no such comfort. The temporality of the rejuvenation process, and the diminishing time that the blood rituals allow her to spend in her youthful state, make her life inherently *unstable*. Rather than being rendered immortal by the consumption of her victims' blood, she uses it in an increasingly desperate attempt to buy a temporary respite from her inescapable mortality—a mortality that of which she is reminded by every glance at her reflection.

Kristeva emphasizes the notion that abjection can be relative, and this is reflected in the characters of Julie, Dobi and Imre. Neither Julie nor Dobi, who spend their days in the Countess' service and are committed to meeting her needs, is visibly disquieted by the Countess' incessant need for blood. Exposure to the abject has, for them, become normalized—a routine part of day-to-day life—ceasing to produce the conventional horrified reaction. Imre, an outsider from another part of the realm, comes to the castle with his morality and innocence intact. The Countess' blood rituals are as strange to him as they are to the audience, and his immersion in the abject produces the traditional responses: revulsion and recoil. The turning point for Imre comes when Captain Dobi forces him to enter the Countess' rooms and see his fiancé in "all her glory"—an act calculated to reveal her secret and thus drive Imre away. Faced with the naked Countess

covered in the blood of one of her victims, the young man responds with horror. The encounter, and his reaction, also underscores the extent to which the Countess’ behavior has collapsed the distance between true self and Other. Caught unaware and surprised by her lover—naked, vulnerable and saturated in blood—she becomes instantly, crushingly aware of her own abjection, for reasons that have little to do with her aged appearance.

This scene of abjection is intensified by the connection between these elements and the bleeding woman as motif. Bodily fluids such as menstrual blood leave the body and are no longer part of the “self.” Creed defines this abjection as the “gaping wound,” and links the anxiety induced by it to the male fear of castration.⁸ The bleeding-woman motif is a staple of horror cinema, most famously in *Carrie* (1976), where the literal blood-bath that triggers the title character’s transformation from a bullied teenager into a rampaging monster is linked both symbolically and literally to menstrual blood. Captain Dobi, like Carrie’s tormentors, carefully exploits his victim’s sense of vulnerability, violating the Countess’ sanctuary and positioning Imre to encounter her when she is at her most abject. The encounter—as Dobi intendeds—permanently destroys Imre’s love for the Countess. He can no longer see her as an object of desire—only as “the bleeding woman.” Once a vigorous suitor pursuing an attractive, desirable woman whom he actively sought to marry, Imre becomes a powerless male spectator who now sees his impending marriage to her not as a triumph, but as a trap.

The scene is also interesting because it includes repetitions of lines spoken, earlier in the film, between the Countess and Imre. When Imre meets the Countess for the first time in her true, elderly form, he asks for Ilona’s hand in marriage, unaware that the “Ilona” he met was the Countess herself in her youthful disguise. The proposal scene closes with the Countess uttering the words “my son,” which are repeated at the end of the discovery scene, with Imre now aware of the significance of the Countess’ blood rituals, but no longer able to escape under the threat of blackmail.⁹ The Countess repeats the words “my son” to him, but the words are now reframed by the new context and his knowledge of her abhorrent crimes. Imre is thus rendered symbolically impotent—his desire and his agency both withered.

Blood in horror film may be a physical sign of the abject but, as Kristeva argues, the function of sacred ritual is to allow the purification process to occur.¹⁰ Ritualistic behaviors are used to cleanse the soul by purging the abject from the physical realm. In the Christian ceremony of communion, for example, wine that represents the symbolic “blood of Christ” washes away sins of those who partake of it—a symbolic echo, for believers, of the way in which Christ’s literal shedding of blood at the Crucifixion redeemed believers from original sin. Christian hymns similarly use “washed in the blood of the Lamb” (that is, of Christ, “the Lamb of God”) as a metaphor for redemption.¹¹ The Countess enacts that metaphor in a horrifically literal way: bathing in blood of innocent, virginal young women. Far from participating in a selfless act of sacrifice like that symbolized by Christian blood rituals, however, her “redemption” is purely personal and entirely selfish—the ultimate act of taking, rather than giving. Even the goals that she sinks into abject evil in order to pursue are, in the context of Christianity’s traditional exaltation of the eternal and disdain for the temporal, base and trivial. She seeks not redemption and eternal life for her immortal soul, but perfection and eternal youth for her all-too-fragile body.

Conclusion

The final scene of the film shows the Countess behind prison bars. The people of the village taunt her with names like “devil woman” and “Countess Dracula,” deriding her as unworthy and unholy. This marks her as a classic example of the evil older woman in cinema, drawn into corruption and degradation by her own selfish needs and desires.

The Countess’ desperation is, indeed, fueled by her narcissistic tendencies. We are aware of her desire for Imre from the opening scene, and when she is granted, by accident, the means to fulfill those desires and return herself to a youthful and beautiful state, she seizes it enthusiastically. Pursuing her goal without regard for the consequences, she spirals downward into desperation and madness until the imprisonment and murder of her own daughter becomes, in her mind, not only conceivable but desirable.

The theme of vanity, and the demonization of women—especially older women—who are consumed by it plays a central role in many classic fairytales, such as the Brothers Grimm’s “Snow Drop” and Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Red Shoes.” Trying too hard to attain and maintain beauty is, in the moral universe of fairytales, tantamount to refusing to abide by the laws of Nature and therefore inherently evil. *Countess Dracula* transposes that idea into horror cinema, adding Hammer Studio’s trademark emphasis on blood, murder, and sexuality. Life and death are inevitable—aging will catch up with us all, eventually, no matter *how* far we are willing to go to in our vain attempts to escape it.

NOTES

1. Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine,” 69.
2. Smith, *Uneasy Dreams*, 56.
3. Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine,” 70.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 72.
6. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.
7. Smith, *Vampires Films of the 1970s*, 63.
8. *Ibid.*, 73.
9. If he breaks the engagement, the Countess coldly informs him, she will ensure that he is blamed for the murder of Zizi the prostitute, with whom he was seen drinking in the tavern the night she disappeared.
10. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.
11. The phrase is a reference to Revelation 7:14.

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