

Modernity and Anxiety in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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The immense popularity of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, sustained since the novel first appeared in 1897 and reinvigorated by each additional film, stage, or literary adaptation, is perhaps not an entirely surprising phenomenon. *Dracula* is, at its very core, a deeply engaging novel that is still able to startle and concern contemporary readers even at the distance of more than a century. The impressive status that the text has earned in Anglo-American literary culture as the prime artifact of the horror genre is at least partially dependent on Stoker's masterful storytelling. Yet the sheer entertainment value of Stoker's now-infamous vampire novel is likely not the only reason that *Dracula* continues to be studied as a central work of British literary fiction and routinely subjected to intense literary criticism that seeks to examine the novel's treatment of mass culture, mental health, Freudian/Jungian subtextuality, female sexuality, reverse colonization, and modernity. That is, *Dracula* (like the Count himself) possesses deeper secrets and hidden complexities that challenge readers to enter into the dark and profoundly sinister world of the novel prepared for the unexpected.

As is common with the production of literary analysis, the style and form of academic criticism written on *Dracula* have changed dramatically in the century since the text first appeared. This essay will examine some of the most recent developments in the critical interpretation of *Dracula* (scant critical attention was paid to the novel prior to the 1970s) and begin to probe some of the directions for future study of the novel. Why has *Dracula* survived as the embodiment of our notion of the vampire while other works of vampire fiction have faded away and become forgotten? For what reasons has the novel become a significant cultural force, one that single-handedly constructed our contemporary cultural knowledge of vampire folklore? These questions are

best answered through an analysis of not only *what* happens in Stoker's tale but also *why* and *how* it happens.

Dracula appeared during a transitional period in the history of British literacy. The introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1870, which had made education available to all British children, meant that, by the time Stoker's vampire novel appeared, a greater percentage of the British population were literate than ever before. We should underestimate neither the impact that this new mass readership had on the late Victorian publishing industry nor the cultural significance of the rise of "popular" genre fiction designed for Britain's newly empowered reading public. *Dracula* is, in many ways, exemplary of late Victorian styles of popular fiction, and, as critics have frequently noted, Stoker's text owes much to the popular fiction that appeared in Britain in the final decades of the nineteenth century. We might firstly recognize the influence of the gothic horror genre upon *Dracula* and, more specifically, vampire fiction such as John Polidori's "The Vampyre" (1819) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871), both of which have been shown to be vital sources for Stoker's later work. Stoker masterfully builds gothic suspense from the very first pages of the text and, although we might anticipate the final outcome of the novel even before we begin reading (that is, the triumph of good over evil coupled with a restoration of order), Stoker teases and taunts us with unexpected surprises. Less clear are the influences of the popular styles of travel narrative and sensation fiction upon Stoker's text. The opening four chapters, which constitute the first Transylvania sequence, paint a picture of Eastern Europe as a deeply mysterious world filled with folklore and superstitions offered to the reader through the narrative voice of Jonathan Harker. Jonathan takes on the role of travel writer, and his record of his initial adventure in Transylvania serves as a vital tool in the campaign against the invading Count. *Dracula* also contains essential elements of the late Victorian sensation genre. As Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film adaptation of the book, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, may encourage us to remember, *Dracula* is a deeply sensual work of fiction. While

rarely overtly sexual (Jonathan's encounter with the three female vampires is among the most explicit scenes in the text, and, even there, the sexual lust is embedded in the stylized drama of the scene and the murderous intentions of the vampire women), the text places much significance upon the flirtatiousness of Lucy and the virtuousness of Mina, and the dissimilar fates of these two characters may encourage us to see an attempt on Stoker's part to craft a seemingly "moral" novel in the sensational vein. We might observe, then, that *Dracula* is very much a product of the literary milieu in which it appeared.

Yet *Dracula* reaches toward the modernist style of the early twentieth century in many critical ways. It can be viewed as an early example of the "modern" novel for its style, its interest in new technology, and its depictions of newly professional women and domestic architectural space. Perhaps the most immediately striking feature of the text, and one that is suggestive of a modernist interest in the fragmentation of narrative and linear time, is its scrapbook format. Offered initially to the reader as a collection of journals, letters, and newspaper clippings from a wide range of sources, the text is only later revealed to be the file of evidence transcribed and compiled by Mina; that is, the text references its own status as a text. The preliminary note alerting readers that "these papers have been placed in sequence [and] all needless matters have been eliminated," we might later surmise, was included by the character Mina during her devoted chronicling that is shown later in the novel. Dracula, when he burns one of the two copies of Mina's manuscript, is aware how crucial the knowledge in this text could be in the campaign against him, and each of the major characters is shown to be actively aware of how important the act of documentation is. Lucy's early belief that "I must imitate Mina, and keep writing things down," is mirrored in the journal entries of each of the main characters, and they all seem keenly aware of the grave importance of documenting the strange events they encounter (Stoker 119). As Van Helsing tells Dr. Seward, "knowledge is stronger than memory"; one can see the insistence throughout the text of the fundamental value of recorded,

empirical knowledge in the fight against the mysterious unknown (Stoker 130).

Like that legal style of argumentation that Mina adopts in “Mina Harker’s Memorandum” immediately after the October 30th journal entry, the style of Mina’s opening note makes the text seem as if it has been prepared as part of a legal case, and already we are encouraged to read this story as an entirely true account of extraordinary events. Although she began her career as a schoolteacher, Mina’s recent training in stenography and typing influenced the tone of both this introductory note and “Mina Harker’s Memorandum.” Indeed, each of the characters in the novel has his or her own motivation or training that enables or encourages the long journal entries and letters that eventually will make up the text of the novel: Jonathan, as a budding lawyer with an interest in travel literature, is keen to record all minutiae of his travels to Transylvania; Lucy, as a friendly young woman boosted by three proposals on the same day, is eager to write long, gossipy letters to her friend; Dr. Seward, accustomed to recording long patient records on his phonograph, approaches his journal with a deeply rational and scientific attention to detail. While *Dracula* in one sense is an unconventional novel that moves away from traditional narrative styles in order to recount an episodic story through disparate textual documents, Stoker’s work also confirms the significance and value of text. One can observe how the text enacts this assertion by taking the form of the very document that becomes necessary in planning the campaign against Dracula.

Perhaps more ought to be said about the actual format of these journal entries transcribed by Mina and how the technology used by these characters to record their thoughts is further suggestive of *Dracula*’s clear location in the era of early modernist literature. Jennifer Wicke’s seminal article, “Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media,” has powerfully demonstrated the significance of the host of technological devices used in recording the individual narratives that make up the text of *Dracula*—Mina’s typewriter, Dr. Seward’s phonograph, the

telegraph, and even the stenographic shorthand used by both Jonathan and Mina—and the implications these technologies have for the text’s apparent modernity. Although Wicke acknowledges “the banal terrors of modern life” suggested in the novel by Mina’s new role as a secretary, her article demonstrates the importance of mass (reproducible) media in the world of the story and the way in which the new communication technology of typewriters and phonographs prove to be the best weapon against the archaic Dracula (Wicke 468). Quincey Morris’s Winchester rifle, a gun synonymous with the “Wild West” era and America’s westward expansion during the second half of the nineteenth century, becomes another critical technological tool in the fight against Count Dracula. Although we may be quick to forget this as twenty-first-century readers, *Dracula* is filled with the technological inventions of the late nineteenth century, many of which would later dramatically change Western culture. *Dracula*, then, documents the rise and implementation of modern technological advancement.

Aside from this certain interest in modern technology, *Dracula* also demonstrates a clear interest in the rise of mass culture that characterized the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. *Dracula* would have appeared to its first generation of readers as an extremely timely novel, and just like the Winchester rifle and typewriter, the implements of modern life such as Bradshaw’s guide to train times, Kodak cameras, and common directories of people and businesses in London would have been immediately recognizable to early readers. While Dracula can transform into mist and summon bloodthirsty wolves, these powers prove to be poorly matched against the new technologies and conveniences of everyday life in England.

What purpose, then, does this clear interest in mass culture serve in the novel? Most crucially, it serves to set the very old Dracula apart from his modern pursuers: Jonathan’s shorthand journal and letter to Mina are indecipherable to the Count, and although Dracula hoards train tables at his castle, it is ultimately shown to be Mina who is so accustomed to this necessity of modern life that she has a habit of memo-

rizing train times. Much emphasis is placed on Dracula's status as a foreign invader—one who is, despite his years of study of English culture, still ultimately a stranger in a strange land once he arrives in England—and the novel foregrounds dialects and accents to demonstrate this point. Dracula's perfect German is contrasted with his deeply idiosyncratic English; the heavy Yorkshire dialect of the old man at Whitby becomes almost indecipherable to Mina and, by extension, to us as readers; Dr. Van Helsing's charming malapropisms reemphasize his status as a curious international expert. Count Dracula is aware that he will need to improve his spoken English if he intends to blend into London society, and since he cannot transform his spoken language as easily as he can transform his person, he requires a native English speaker, in the form of Jonathan, to tutor him in conversational English. The Count's primary sources of knowledge about the English language—the books and periodicals on England that he treasures—have provided him only with the general mechanics of the language, and, without the technological aid of the phonograph that later proves to be of central importance to the campaign of the Crew of Light, Dracula must keep Jonathan at the castle for as long as possible in order to practice and perfect his spoken English: "I fear that I am but a little way on the road I would travel," he tells Jonathan on his first night, "I know the grammar and the words, but yet I know not how to speak them" (Stoker 27). Jonathan is ultimately held captive and engaged in long conversations that last most of the night. It is only after Dracula has perfected his spoken English that he is finished with Jonathan and is prepared to begin his invasion of England.

There is something deeply sinister about the way in which Dracula has orchestrated, over the course of many years, his invasion of London society, and this well-planned attack is analogous—in historical context and thematic implication, at least—to the invasions of England depicted by H. Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells. There was, in fact, a great interest in invasion stories around the turn of the twentieth century, and, as several critics have pointed out, these in-

vasion texts are frequently indicative of a much broader social anxiety in the late Victorian period. As Stephen D. Arata has pointed out in his influential essay “*Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” it is essential to remember the political context in which *Dracula* appeared. By 1897, the British Empire was entering into the early stages of the decline that would be fully realized during the first decades of the twentieth century, and already the British public was beginning to experience an anxiety about the stability of Britain’s long-standing role as the single major world power. Works such as Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four* (1890) questioned what would happen if England were to become the site of an invasion by India (the linchpin of Britain’s imperial power at the time), and although Transylvania was not part of the British Empire, several significant factors about *Dracula*’s homeland further develop this theme of reverse colonization. As Arata vitally points out, contemporary British readers would have recognized Transylvania as the site of much “political turbulence and racial strife” (122). The motif of invading conquerors is introduced into the text early when *Dracula* recounts to Jonathan Harker the history of Transylvania and his noble family and, as Arata has observed, the Count is shown as an emblem of a “nobleman as warrior” but also, because of his Szekely history, a “conqueror and invader” (123).

To continue to probe this reading of *Dracula* as a colonizer of England, one should consider Patrick Brantlinger’s concept of the “imperial gothic,” a subgenre of fiction identified by Brantlinger that engages specifically with the arrival of occult forces in England. In the imperial gothic style, characters venture to unknown parts of India, Africa, and (in the case of *Dracula*) Eastern Europe and are then followed back to London by some supernatural power. As Brantlinger notes, novels in the imperial gothic vein combine “individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demons; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world” (230). We can recognize the instances of “individual regression” in the novel—Mina’s temporary and Lucy’s com-

plete conversion to vampirism—as well as the emphasis placed on the loss of opportunities for masculine adventure—the American adventurer Quincey Morris serves to show how sheltered and protected the lives of Jonathan Harker and the Hon. Arthur Holmwood have become—but perhaps the most important aspect of the imperial gothic within the novel is the text’s emphasis on social, geographical, and personal invasion. The strong academic interest in postcolonial literary criticism has made both the reverse colonization anxiety present in the novel as well as the work’s position in the imperial gothic subgenre prime topics of critical conversation and debate.

Where, then, we might wonder, is critical analysis of *Dracula* headed in the future? There is growing academic interest in the representation of interior architectural space in modern British fiction, and as critics continue to demonstrate the dramatic role of architecture in literature from this period, we are encouraged to reexamine Stoker’s representation of space. *Dracula* is a novel deeply concerned with houses and, more specifically, the way in which characters use architectural space to dominate (in the case of Dracula and the un-dead Lucy) or to liberate (in the case of the Crew of Light); the acquisition of property is the means by which Dracula is able to enter into London society, and much of the challenge presented to the Crew of Light is the locating of the homes that Dracula has purchased throughout metropolitan and suburban London. Although the motif of architectural space in *Dracula* is perhaps not as pronounced as the motif of mass culture or anxiety about reverse colonization, the ways in which Stoker uses domestic architecture throughout the novel to provide further comment on Dracula’s invasion of London is actually indicative of a deeply modernist understanding of architectural space as a central component of identity. While a case could be made that Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is one of the earliest literary representations of interior architectural space, Warren Hunting Smith argued in his analysis *Architecture in English Fiction* (1934) that the widespread literary representation of interior architectural space first

appeared in British literature during the nineteenth century and was initially used—in the fiction of Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens, among others—primarily for “structural,” “decorative,” or “emotional” effects (1–2). What Stoker introduces in *Dracula*—and what becomes a key literary technique for later British modernists such as E. M. Forster, George Bernard Shaw, and Virginia Woolf—is the use of architectural space as both metaphor and symbol. We should perhaps be alerted to the critical thematic role that architectural space will later play when the novel opens with an account of the finalization of the purchase of Dracula’s first London home; indeed, this interest in architectural space is sustained through to the conclusion of the text.

It is crucial that, although Dracula is portrayed as a conquering invader within the text, he is still bound by many of the physical restrictions imposed by architectural space, and the vampires in the novel seek to invade and dominate architectural spaces just as they invade and dominate their victims. Dracula’s curious greeting to Jonathan at the door of his Transylvania castle provides an early suggestion of one of his primary weaknesses as a vampire: “Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will. . . . Welcome to my house. Come freely. Go safely; and leave something of the happiness you bring!” (Stoker 22). Although Jonathan, as a mortal, does not require an explicit invitation to enter a home, Dracula, it is later revealed, must be invited to enter a home before he is able to move freely in and out. But here this rule is reversed: Jonathan does not require an official welcome (although he receives one), but he is then held captive in the castle and comes to realize that “the castle is a veritable prison, and I am a prisoner” (33). Not only does this strange greeting emphasize Dracula’s idiosyncratic English; it also brings into the novel the motif of the permeability of thresholds and passages.

Jonathan, in his role as a journal writer, is a keen observer of architectural space and pays much attention in his long journal entries to the peculiarities of Dracula’s castle. Though there is something mysterious

about the castle, much of which is off-limits to Jonathan, it should be noted that Dracula's powers cannot actually alter the physical restraints of architectural space. After being left on the front doorstep by the mysterious carriage driver, whom he later suspects to be the Count in one of his several disguises, Jonathan notes that "through these frowning walls and dark window openings it was not likely that my voice could penetrate," and, even while standing outside, Jonathan already has a sense of the imposing nature of the castle and its prison-like quality (21). While he is concerned here about getting *into* the castle, this fear is later reversed and he becomes afraid of not being able to *get out* of and away from the castle. In his journal he later comments on the "odd deficiencies in the house," which are indicative of the many years that Dracula has been in residence there completely alone (26). Despite its age and apparent state of disuse, there have still been several alterations made to the castle in recent years. Jonathan finds his living quarters in the castle to be comfortable and (aside from the significant lack of a bathroom mirror) to provide him with reasonably suitable amenities. Jonathan's later recognition that the locks, which keep him out of most of the castle, are "comparatively new" provides further evidence that the castle has not fallen into a complete state of disrepair and, even more important, further emphasizes the novel's interest in the permeability of thresholds (42). Although locks can prevent Jonathan from moving through the castle, these basic restraints provide no resistance to Dracula or the three vampire women. Yet the primary difficulty in Jonathan's opening of the front door is not a lock or a supernatural enchantment but merely its weight, which can be shifted only by the powerful Dracula. Jonathan is shocked when he discovers Dracula climbing headfirst down the castle wall, suggesting that Dracula's strength and batlike prowess allow him to negotiate architectural space differently.

Now that we have examined some of the ways in which the motif of architectural space is introduced to the reader in the early portions of the novel, we can begin to dissect the connections between architec-

tural space and Dracula's plans to infiltrate England. When Jonathan begins to describe Carfax, Dracula's estate at Purfleet, the description is not of a particularly appealing place: it is a "straggling" house, added to over many years; it retains many qualities of a medieval fortress; the grounds are heavily shaded by a large number of trees; and one of the only surrounding buildings is a mental institution (Stoker 30). This description does not paint the picture of a desirable house, but Dracula is pleased with the find and is pleased that there is a "chapel of old times" (30).

Once the narrative moves to England, this narrative interest in moving within and between architectural spaces becomes intensified. On the night of Lucy's first escape from the house in Whitby, Mina worriedly notices, "the door was shut, but not locked, as I had left it" (100). Again, because Dracula has yet to be formally invited into the house, he is not able to make his entrance and therefore requires Lucy to come outside to meet him. She, as a mortal, is able to cross the threshold with no difficulty, but, also as a mortal, she is impeded by locks, causing her to unhook the lock on her way out. The significance of the unlocked door is later emphasized when Mina, after returning with Lucy from the cliffs, locks the door and ties the key to her wrist; although Mina is still unaware of the Count's existence, Dracula is unable to get in and, now with the locked door, Lucy is unable to get out. The novel is built around images of breaking in or out of buildings, and this, like Jonathan's attempted escape from Dracula's castle, is one clear example.

While Jonathan Harker, Dr. Van Helsing, Dr. Seward, and the others might be unable to enter or leave a home because of locks or heavy doors, the vampires (Dracula and, later, the un-dead Lucy) can be similarly locked in or out of a home. The negotiation of architectural space thus becomes a central motif in the novel—and, indeed, a pivotal aspect of the novel's rising action and final, if not unexpectedly sudden, conclusion. If Dracula cannot be stopped by locks, he can be stopped by other things, and that is exactly what Dr. Van Helsing plans when he has the garlic flowers delivered from the Netherlands. By rubbing the

flowers around the windows and doors of Lucy's room, he is blocking Dracula's entrance as effectively as the heavy door blocked Jonathan's exit in Transylvania. However, that proves to be only a temporary cure: the effectiveness of the flowers does not last, and Dracula is later able to approach Lucy after the garland of flowers has been removed by her hysterical mother.

The boxes of sacred earth that Dracula brings from Transylvania might be seen as another type of home—the tomb home of the Un-Dead—and after her death, the Westenra tomb becomes another home for Lucy. Although it may seem that the long scenes of the Crew of Light observing the “bloofer lady” Lucy in the middle portion of the novel are used primarily to build dramatic tension, it is important to notice how Van Helsing is testing his hypotheses and verifying the true weaknesses of the vampires. Van Helsing first proves to Dr. Seward the meaning of Lucy's un-dead condition by demonstrating to him that at night she leaves her coffin, the coffin that Van Helsing is able to open only with a saw. He then later tests Lucy's powers by filling in all of the cracks of the tomb with a paste made from communion wafers. As expected, Lucy requires at least a small crack in a structure to be able to move into it, and barred by the holy wafers Lucy is unable to enter her tomb. Lucy and other vampires, then, cannot merely pass through walls, but require at least some small opening to make their entrance. For as much power as Dracula and his minions seem to have, they are still bound by at least some of the physical restrictions imposed by architectural space. Once the Crew of Light locate Dracula's homes in Piccadilly, Mile End, and Bermondsey and (for Dracula's purposes at least) destroy the boxes of sacred earth, Dracula is forced to make a speedy retreat to Transylvania in his one remaining portable tomb. Although he first attempted to infiltrate English society by acquiring London property and perfecting his spoken English with the aid of the clerk who arranged the purchase, Dracula's plan is ultimately foiled.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been the single most important influence on twentieth-century representations of vampires. Indeed, the as-

sociation of vampires with Transylvania, which began with Stoker, has now become part of the customary mythology of the vampire figure in fiction. Although *Dracula* would have seemed like an extremely contemporary book to initial readers because of its connection to late Victorian popular fiction, its interest in mass media and new technology, and its association with the invasion genre of fiction that bespoke the cultural concerns surrounding the decline of the British Empire around the turn of the twentieth century, the book continues to frighten and inspire readers in the twenty-first century. Part of the appeal surrounding *Dracula* is its thematic and narrative complexity, which makes the text seem, upon first contact, a simple horror story but then allows it to open up, under closer examination, into a wider-ranging commentary on Victorian society. That Count Dracula is, in part, defeated by the tools of modernity—the technology and the keen interest in self-reflection expressed by all of the main characters—suggests that vampires can be defeated by moving into the present.

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