

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