

DRACULA

THE GOTHIC CLASSIC



DRACULA
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CLASSIC

BRAM STOKER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR CURT HERR
SERIES EDITOR TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

DRACULA

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The Gothic Classic

BRAM STOKER

With an Introduction by
DR. CURT HERR

Series Editor
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



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DRACULA

TO
MY DEAR FRIEND
HOMMY-BEG*

*Nickname of Stoker's friend Thomas Henry Hall Caine (1853–1931). “Hommy” is vernacular Manx for Tommy. Caine's grandmother was a Manx woman.

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them.

AN INTRODUCTION

BY DR. CURT HERR

Dracula is one of the great Victorian novels. It has spawned hundreds of screen and stage adaptations, provided a foundation for the horror genre and is the most famous work in the “vampire fiction” subgenre.

But Bram Stoker’s iconic work was not born in a vacuum. In this Introduction, I will try to paint a picture of the world that Stoker inhabited and the literary universe which the book grew out of. Each generation seems to find new interpretations of *Dracula*, and I argue that its theme of invaded intimacy and the reversal of gender norms is very relevant for our times.

I have also added factual and literary footnotes to the text itself where I think they may provide insight.

BRAM STOKER’S WORLD: SCIENCE AND SPIRIT

Late Victorian England prided itself on its rationality and scientific advances.

Yet this was also the golden age of Spiritualism, in which the Victorian version of ghost hunting became almost an official religion. At the same time as the middle and upper classes were

benefitting from advances in medical science and marvels of engineering, there was a parallel imagined world of monsters, ghosts and vampires.

From the attics to the crypts, the forests to the sprawling cities, monsters lurked in the shadows, creating a rich tapestry of terrifying tales. The nineteenth century produced iconic literary monsters such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *Varney the Vampire* (1845), *Sweeney Todd* (1846), *Dr. Jekyll* (1886), *Svengali* (1894) and *Dracula* (1897).

"Penny Dreadfuls" (cheaply produced, serialized works of fiction) explored taboo topics including incest, insanity, cannibalism and murder, captivating audiences across all social classes. Christmas editions of popular magazines featured chilling ghost stories, offering a thrilling escape from the apparently ordered and rational Victorian world. Even Charles Dickens wrote the classic morality tale/ghost story *A Christmas Carol* as a holiday tale, complete with rattling chains, ghostly visitations and time travel.

This widespread fascination with supernatural tales suggests that many Victorians sought the exhilaration of momentarily losing control. The more rational their culture became, the more they seemed to need an outlet in the otherworldly, subhuman and unnatural. Indeed, the Victorian infatuation with the fantastic and the macabre advanced in step with rapid changes in technology, and the emerging horror literature sought to make sense of it all. Almost magically, in the 1840s, messages were being sent through electric telegraphs, and thirty years later, with the invention of the telephone, the human voice was being sent through wires.

At the same time these astonishing advances were being made, a serial killer prowled the streets of London, hacking up prostitutes, piquing Victorian fascination with the grotesque and the murderous. The development of railroads allowed news and people to

travel faster than ever before, yet it wasn't just messages in print that gained speed. Popular séances and celebrity spiritualists aided in communication between the living and the dead. While life-saving vaccinations were being administered, literary vampires consumed the very vaccinated blood that kept society safe and healthy.

The golden age of spiritualism reached a peak in the 1870s, when Bram Stoker was in his twenties. Psychics and mediums seemed to appear on every street corner, and membership in neighbourhood spiritualist societies was highly sought after. Organisations such as the Charing Cross Spirit-Power Circle, the East London Association of Spiritualists and the Christian Spiritual Enquirers rapidly spread throughout England. The Victorians' obsession with séances, the monstrous and hidden horrors extended for decades, influencing popular culture in stage shows, literature and popular Spiritualist newspapers such as the *British Spiritual Telegraph*, *Spiritual Magazine*, and the widely acclaimed *Medium and Daybreak*.

A number of female spiritualists became celebrities. Figures such as Victoria Woodhull (who also ran for the presidency of the United States in 1872, despite not having the right to vote), medium Cora Scott and the Fox sisters gained widespread recognition on both sides of the Atlantic. Their abilities as powerful mediums reportedly allowed some to produce spectral hands and faces and speak to the departed. Ghostly rappings and tappings haunted the Fox sisters' home and performance spaces.

As a young man during this era, Stoker was surely aware of the supernatural's popularity — for it was all around him. A keen observer of his culture and fascinated by the high creative arts, he also displayed the grounded logic of a business manager. It is this combination of logic vs. the fantastic, reason vs. the supernatural that would result in his famous creation, *Dracula*.



Bram Stoker, 1906
Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

STOKER: EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Abraham Stoker was born on 8 November 1847, in the Dublin suburb of Clontarf. From infancy, he was very ill and was not expected to survive his childhood. This unnamed illness rendered him bedridden until he was finally able to attend school at seven years old. Entertained by his mother's Irish folk tales and horror stories and homeschooled by the local Reverend William Woods, Abraham made an astonishing, albeit unexplained, full recovery. He carried the experiences of childhood illness through his life, and they feature heavily in many of his novels and short stories. Mysterious microorganisms and pathogens, and entrapped and isolated individuals who struggle to walk and are unable to heal or save themselves, haunt his prose. Sickbeds and mysterious illnesses are major plot points in his early short story, *The Chain of Destiny*, and his most popular novels, *The Lady of the Shroud* and *Dracula*.

As he grew into his teens and early adulthood, Stoker became surprisingly healthy and robust. In 1864, when he was 17, he

entered Trinity College, Dublin, and became a popular athlete and dedicated student. He graduated with honours in science, but his heart was in letters. Infatuated with the American poet Walt Whitman, Stoker described himself in an 1872 fan letter* to Whitman:

“[I] have been a champion at our athletic sports and have won about a dozen cups. I have also been president of our college philosophical society and an art and theatrical critic of a daily paper. I am 6’2” high and 12 stone weight naked and used to be 41 or 42 inches around the chest. I am ugly but strong and determined, and have a large bump over my eyebrows. I have a heavy jaw and a big mouth and thick lips, sensitive nostrils, a snubnose and straight hair. I am equal in temper and cool in disposition and have a large amount of self-control and am naturally secretive to the world. I take delight in letting people I don’t like – people of mean or cruel or sneaking or cowardly disposition – see the worst side of me. I have a large number of acquaintances and some five or six friends – all of which latter body care much for me. Now I have told you all I know about myself. I know you from your works and your photograph and if I know anything about you I think you would like to know of the personal appearance of your correspondents.”

This excerpt reveals Stoker’s confidence in his physical, moral and intellectual powers. He describes what he sees as his physical flaws and his personality traits with frank and intimate details. It’s the voice of a secure young man, not a sickly child.

Following university, Stoker worked in the Irish Civil Service and wrote short stories in his spare time, some of which were published. In 1878, when he was 31, Stoker became the well-paid business manager for London’s Lyceum Theatre, owned by the

*Full text of the letters between them: <https://lettersofnote.com/2013/11/11/you-are-a-true-man/>

famous Shakespearean actor Sir Henry Irving (whom some believe is the inspiration for Dracula himself). Stoker was thrust into an exciting world of actors and impresarios. He arranged touring productions through Britain and Canada and made several tours through the United States.

Adding to this career success, Stoker wed Florence Balcombe, whom he had known from Dublin University; Oscar Wilde had been one of her suitors. The couple settled in Chelsea, a neighbourhood popular with theatrical and literary types. The couple soon had a child, Henry (who preferred to be called Noel) and enjoyed a life surrounded by writers, artists, poets and philosophers. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a neighbour, as was the painter James McNeill Whistler.

Yet there was a dark side to London. Jack the Ripper was spreading terror, and Joseph Merrick, the “Elephant Man,” was shocking the masses. Both (albeit for vastly different reasons) aroused horror, disgust and a deep fascination with the flipside of Victorian values and aesthetics. It would have been impossible for Stoker to be ignorant of these two men, whose lives and actions made headlines. Indeed, the themes they inspired would infect Stoker’s writing for decades.

BEFORE *DRACULA*: THE BEGINNING OF GOTHIC LITERARY OBSESSIONS

Many scholars believe the Gothic novel began in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s nightmarish fantasy, *The Castle of Otranto*. This novel captivated readers with its tale of ghosts, giants, familial curses, haunted paintings, secret passages and forbidden lusts. These were the staple ingredients for every Gothic novel to follow.

The genre exploded over the next century. Countless novels, Penny Dreadfuls and blue books popped up like fast-growing vines feeding on the undercurrent of London’s working-class neighbourhoods. Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), and George Brewer’s *The Witch of*

Ravensworth (1808) set the stage for many Victorian tales of horror that hoped to mimic these early successes.

These works contain an abundance of gothic tropes, including ruined castles filled with rotting corpses and evil monasteries hiding sexually perverse monks and sadistic nuns. Tales of trapped heroines and trapdoors held readers spellbound. The newly literate working classes of early nineteenth-century England discovered the thrilling escape that horror literature could offer, and publishers were ready to fulfil this demand. For those who could not afford to purchase the novels, subscription-based lending libraries became popular. For 4 pounds and 4 pence a year, subscribers were entitled to 12 to 24 sets of books. For the poorer still, a new industry developed around the Penny Dreadful. Printed on cheap paper in newspaper or booklet format, these weekly tales of blood and horror costing mere pennies became instantly accessible to an audience with minimal reading skills. Even better, they were convenient, being sold alongside newspapers on nearly every corner. Penny Dreadful writers wrote single-issue stories or lengthy serials. Publishers pirated and plagiarised any popular tale or novel that featured gore, murder, sex and cannibalism.

In 1845, a hack writer with the uncanny ability to write and publish dozens of serials *simultaneously* with several publishers struck literary gold. It would earn his publisher a small fortune and enable him to save a small inheritance for his children — a rare feat in the Penny Dreadful industry. James Malcolm Rymer (1814–1884) began a new serialised horror tale that resurrected the vampire from the grave of overlooked monsters. *Varney the Vampire, or The Feast of Blood*, debuted in August 1845 and ran for an astonishing 237 chapters. Its initial three chapters were so vivid and intricately described that Rymer earned a steady income by continuing the serialised tale for the next two years. (At the same time, Rymer was also writing the serial *The String of Pearls*, which would become known as the sadistic barber tale *Sweeney Todd*).

It is worth understanding how Rymer's creation provided a template for, or differed from, Stoker's later vampire. *Varney* is a

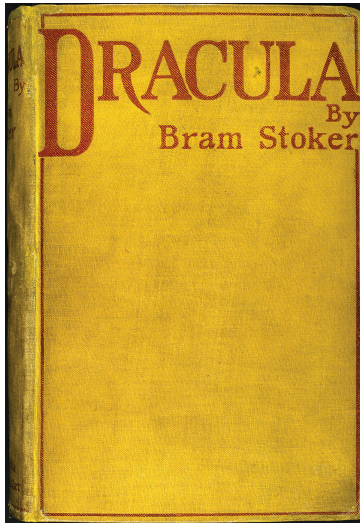
repulsive figure, resembling a revolting corpse who has clawed his way above the ground from a mud-soaked grave. His unkempt appearance, damp and rotting clothes and horrifically bad breath shocked readers. Unlike the elegantly upper-class Lord Ruthven and the suave intelligence of Dracula, Varney possesses rodent-like features and an emaciated, filthy body. Long, grotesque fingernails hang from his nearly fleshless fingers and his fangs are described as 'otter-like'. His pallid, bloodless skin and unsettling appearance are only alleviated by predatory feeding. Yet Varney's thirst for blood is nothing like the dashing vampires that Hollywood would later portray. He is a monstrous, disturbing predator. And while Stoker's vampire would feed with highly charged, erotic overtones and his teeth penetrate with precision, leaving merely two small pin pricks on the neck and very little left-over blood, Varney fed like a feral rat. He sloppily rips and tears flesh, leaving a terrible mess of shattered windows, broken crockery and flattened shrubbery in his wake.

Yet Rymer's Varney the Vampire is a complex figure — a mix of a forlorn romantic yearning for acceptance, a pervasive sense of self-hatred and ruthless, bloodthirsty predation. He stands out as the earliest literary vampire to possess *conflicting* emotions of desire and hunger, guilt and culpability. These character traits reveal psychological depth. Rymer's vampire is a symbol of a society grappling with conflicting urges of social acceptance and deeply buried desires — as we would see in *Dracula*.

According to Barbara Gates (*Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories*), Victorian society concealed a profound sense of "alienation and estrangement, with people who avoided acknowledging their inner demons eagerly seeking tales of external monsters." Varney embodied both the voracious aristocrat and the hunted victim burdened with a dreadful secret: vampiric blood thirst. Sir Francis Varney embarks on an existential quest for purpose in the dimly lit streets of London. He is a meticulously crafted symbol of the cultural conflicts, fears, desires and eroticism of his time. Varney's nocturnal visit to Flora Butterworth's bedroom shattered the barriers of Victorian repression and respectability, leaving an

indelible mark on numerous authors, filmmakers, researchers and scholars for years to come. While there is no actual evidence that Bram Stoker read *Varney the Vampire*, there can be little doubt that its tropes and imagery were a strong background influence, as they would be on all Gothic-vampire writers.

As the Victorian era progressed, the lurid prose of the Penny Dreadful shifted into what would become known as Sensation Fiction, the publishing powerhouse of the 1860s. The novels of this subgenre featured the same content as Penny Dreadfuls (insanity, murder, mystery and horror) but were created by writers with more leisurely time to write, making them capable of complex, intricately developed plots and more deeply effective character development. The bestsellers of the nineteenth century were the sensation novels *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Henry (Ellen) Wood's *East Lynne* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Gothic literature was growing up, and this more advanced type of novel paved the way for *Dracula*.



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1919 edition, William Rider & Sons, London. Cover illustration by
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***DRACULA*: INVADED INTIMACY**

One of the many powerful and thrilling aspects of Stoker's *Dracula* is its ability to be both grand and epic in scope, yet minutely intimate and personal. It reaches back to the origins of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel while adding the lurid details of the mid-Victorian Penny Dreadful and the highly developed plots of the sensation novel. It sweeps across continents and cultures, blends modern technology with old-world folk tales and customs, yet remains grounded in late nineteenth-century points of view and prejudices. *Dracula* is also exceedingly personal in feel, incorporating intimate letters, diary entries and first-hand accounts of the events. Each character's "voice" is paramount and is heard through these accounts (except, ironically, the title character,

Dracula). These voices and their experiences reveal a treasure chest of Victorian anxieties and moral ambiguities.

The opening chapters, some of the most terrifying in nineteenth-century literature, are comprised of Jonathan Harker's travel diary. As he moves from London to Transylvania, he reveals himself to be an excellent observer of the local customs and unique landmarks of his journey. While in Buda-Pesth, he notes to himself to get his betrothed the recipe for the national dish, paprika hendl, and complains that the further away from England he travels, the less punctual the trains are. A keen reader can spot something problematic in Jonathan's thoughts: under his good-natured British cheer there is the troubling tone of the patronising colonial gent. He baulks at the local customs and finds the vernacular religious traditions to be quaint and backward. This flaw comes close to destroying his life.

The entries in Jonathan's diary are personal observations never intended to be read or discussed out loud. Because there is no audience, Jonathan is not trying to impress a listener. Like all of the letters and journal entries in the novel, we are reading uninterrupted and unedited ideas — highly intimate and private notions that were never intended to be made public. To the Victorian reader, this is scandalous. The private being made public?! And yet, readers ate up every word.

Not only is the novel's epistolary format founded upon this idea of invaded intimacy, but so too are the physical structures in the story. Readers are frequently taken into spaces that Victorians rarely explored in nineteenth-century literature: bedrooms and boudoirs, madhouses and mausoleums. These spaces were taboo, for they revealed the secret world of intimacy, sex and death — spaces far too personal and gruesome to be fit for public consumption. For example, after being in Dracula's castle for a little over a week, Jonathan is told by Dracula to avoid roaming the endless corridors in the castle:

"Let me advise you, my dear young friend — nay, let me warn you with all seriousness, that should you leave these rooms you will not by any chance go to sleep in any other part of the castle. It is old, and has many memories, and there are bad dreams for those who sleep unwisely. Be warned! Should sleep now or ever overcome you, or be like to do, then haste to your own chamber or to these rooms, for your rest will then be safe. But if you not be careful in this respect, then' — He finished his speech in a gruesome way, for he motioned with his hands as if he were washing them. I quite understood; my only doubt was as to whether any dream could be more terrible than the unnatural, horrible net of gloom and mystery which seemed closing round me."

These are threatening instructions from a host. However, Jonathan is a terrible house guest. His ego and belief in his westerner's privilege to roam freely enable him to ignore his host's request. He does exactly what the Count asks him not to do: explore the ruined sections of the castle and close his eyes in any room other than his own. Thus, Jonathan becomes the unintentional aggressive invader in Dracula's intimate spaces, putting his own life at risk.

In his diary entry dated 15 May, Jonathan notes the deeply unnatural ways of his host, including a food-free, nocturnal existence and an astonishing, lizard-like way of scaling down the castle's exterior walls rather than simply using the front door. Planning his escape, Jonathan searches the castle for a way out — as any trapped person would. He pushes open rotting wooden doors that have not been moved in centuries and forces his way into the forbidden hallways and wings of the castle. He is desperate, and attempting to escape is the natural choice.

However, Bram Stoker does something remarkable and unexpected here. He reverses gender expectations. When Jonathan discovers a large ladies' boudoir, he decides to relax and hang out for a while. After all, its massive windows offer a great view of the

Carpathian Mountains, and the lovely (albeit dusty) writing desk offers him a chance to catch up on his diary entries. Let that sink in. Jonathan knows he is trapped, knows his life could be at stake, and yet rather than continuing his search for a way out of the Count's trap, he chooses to relax and write his journal. But why? To make a break for freedom seems like a no-brainer for any contemporary fan of horror movies. Instead, he writes, "Here I am, sitting at a little oak table where, in old times, possibly some fair haired lady sat to pen, with much thought and many blushes, her ill-spelt love-letter."

This is a fascinating passage for many reasons. Firstly, Jonathan-the-trapped becomes Jonathan-the-luxuriat. He chooses to sit, relax and write while imagining himself in the position of the passive female writing to her lover. He romanticises the surroundings, creates two distant lovers and equates his personal journal with the woman's poorly spelled love letter. His patronising attitude towards the women he emulates is clear when he assumes they cannot spell. While positioning Jonathan's imagination in the faraway and distant past, Stoker also seeks to make his character seem 'modern'. Jonathan writes that he is notating his diary in shorthand. "It is nineteenth-century up-to-date with a vengeance," he writes. "And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere 'modernity' can not kill." Here, through Jonathan, Stoker is informing the observant reader that his novel will pit ancient beliefs regarding the supernatural against modernity — an intriguing task.

As Stoker continues Jonathan's experience in the massive ladies' boudoir, he explores the transgressive topic of sexualities and reverses Victorian gender norms with startling effect. Jonathan writes:

"When I had written in my diary and had fortunately replaced the book and pen in my pocket I felt sleepy. The Count's warning came into my mind, but I took a pleasure in disobeying it. The sense of sleep was upon me, and with it the obstinacy

which sleep brings as an outrider. The soft moonlight soothed, and the wide expanse without gave a sense of freedom which refreshed me. I determined not to return tonight to the gloom haunted rooms, but to sleep here, where of old ladies had sat and sung and lived sweet lives whilst their gentle breasts were sad for their menfolk away in the midst of remorseless wars. I drew a great couch out of its place near the corner, so that, as I lay, I could look at the lovely view to east and south, and unthinking of and uncaring for the dust, composed myself for sleep."

This is troubling for several reasons. First, Jonathan's British-colonial sense of privilege overrides his common sense. He takes pleasure in disobeying the Count's warnings and feels entitled to behave as he sees fit, no matter what the host asks or warns. Jonathan feels secure in his staunch Victorian beliefs — which are not necessarily the beliefs of Transylvania. Secondly, Stoker feminises Jonathan's behaviour. According to Victorian gender stereotypes, he should be actively exploring the castle, fighting the foe and escaping. Instead, Jonathan imagines the ancient female occupants of this space from centuries before him. He thinks of the women who sang and lived "sweet lives," whose "gentle breasts" ached for their men at war. Jonathan puts himself in the place of the women whom he describes with typical Victorian stereotypes, romanticising their passive and highly emotional lives — something he will soon embody.

Next, in an anti-typical heroic move, Jonathan rearranges the furniture! He moves a bed (couch) from the wall into the centre of the room so he can have an even better view of the mountains while he falls asleep. He literally puts the bed and himself centre stage in the imagined drama of these fictional women. Now *he* becomes the focal prop, a prop that, as the novel progresses, will be very much used.

Upon waking from his luxuriant nap, Jonathan is shocked to find three women standing at the foot of his bed. He notices they do

not cast a shadow, and “[a]ll three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time, some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.”

Stoker accentuates the ironic reversal of gender codes in this passage with stunning results. First, Jonathan is in the passive position, prone on the woman’s bed and sleepily observing them. He objectifies the women, reducing them to their teeth and their lips. And he sexualizes them, for he acknowledges his desire to be kissed. At the same time, he is highly aware that this desire is wicked and wrong — so he does nothing but wait for them to make the first move.

They speak: “He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all.” Their sexual appetites for sharing Jonathan’s ‘kisses’ explode the Victorian notions of a woman’s chastity. They become the sexual aggressors. “I lay quiet,” Jonathan states, “looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me...I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck, she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth...I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited — waited with beating heart.”

Jonathan is conflicted. He pretends to sleep, viewing the seducers under his fluttering eyelids — a very feminine description. Stoker reverses the tradition of the male gaze in this moment. The women become aggressive seducers, wicked and dominant, while they gaze upon Jonathan, who feigns sleep and innocence. He passively waits, both fearing the contact and longing for it “with a beating heart.”

While he invades the private spaces of the Count's castle, Jonathan's sense of intimacy and his own body are soon invaded as well. It is the male who will bleed on this marriage bed.

In sum, throughout *Dracula*, Stoker relies on the reader's sense of Victorian decorum and traditional gender roles. He shocks the reader by delivering the opposite of what they expect: sexually aggressive women and passive men, the glories of technological advance and its inability to protect us. As the novel progresses, Stoker continues this theme of invading intimate spaces. Even motherhood isn't safe in his world.

Perhaps what makes *Dracula* so remarkably influential is Stoker's ability to combine the modern day with ancient fears. The Victorians relied upon social rules to contain their world. Any reader of the Gothic knows that walls built to retain proper behaviour will soon come crashing down.

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