

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 25

Dracula by Bram Stoker: A Discussion- I

Hello Students!

Today I am going to discuss a very interesting novel titled *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Well, this novel creates a history due to its characteristic thematic interpretation, even the historical background. *Dracula* is a gothic novel by Bram Stoker published in 1897. It was the most popular literary work derived from vampire, legends and became the basis for an entire genre of literature and film. So, there is a film based on *Dracula* as well. The novel belongs firmly within the 19th century Gothic fictions flourishing in Western Europe. The combination of old-fashioned romance with its penchant for the mysterious and supernatural with the realistic portrayal of events that defined English literature in the 18th and 19th centuries created the gothic genre within whose backdrop Stoker conceived *Dracula*.

Stoker was influenced by the popular vampire stories of his time and this is very important to know. But the novel also reflected his attitude towards or awareness of contemporary issues occupying Victorian England. *Dracula* was written at a time when stories about the supernatural flourished in Britain. For a long time, stories about the supernatural were confined to children's stories, with serious literature devoted entirely to a realistic portrayal of the world. The Vampire's Lord Ruthven was a horrific creature that inspired several vampires' stories by Victorian authors such as the anonymously written *Varney the Vampire* or *The Fist of Blood* in 1847 and Sheridan Lee Fanu's *Carmilla* in 1872.

It is from Polidori's Ruthven that Stoker conceived the idea of making his own vampire attractive and mesmerizing rather than a repellent monster as was common within previous vampire stories. In *Varney the Vampire*, Stoker incorporated the religious overtones. The black and clammy aesthetics associated with the undead and the significance of the stake among others. The long association between vampires and Transylvania originated from

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and this was in turn furnished by Stoker's research into the customs, traditions and superstitions of the Transylvanian people. By 1764, Horace Walpole succeeded in reintroducing the supernatural into serious literature with *The Castle of Otranto* which featured elements like haunted castles, hidden dungeons, and scary monsters that would later characterize the Gothic genre. This paved the way for the flourishing of English Gothic literature in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first appearance of the vampire in English literature was in John Polidori's *The Vampire*, which was published in 1819.

Bram Stoker was born on November 8, 1847 at Clontarf, country Dublin, Ireland. He died on April 20, 1912, London, England. Stoker could not stand or walk until he was seven years old due to the prolonged illness. This is very important to know because this physical ailment of his, you know, reflects throughout his writing. He went on to become an outstanding athlete and football player at Trinity College between 1864-70 in Dublin, where he earned a degree in Mathematics. After ten years in the civil service at Dublin Castle, during which he was also an unpaid drama critic for the Dublin Evening Mail, he acquainted with his idol actor, Sir Henry Irwin. From 1878 until Irwin's death, 27 years later, Stoker was his manager, writing as many as fifty letters a day for him and accompanying him on his American tours.

After Irving's death, Stoker published *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906), a biography of Irving that includes a great deal of biographical detail about Stoker himself. Stoker's first book, *The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions* in Ireland, a handbook in legal administration, was published in 1879. Turning to fiction, later in life, he published his first novel, *The Snake's Pass*, a romantic thriller about set in bleak Western Ireland in 1890.

Stoker took the last breath, as we discussed earlier, in 1912. We should also know the cause of his death because the cause of his death is disputed. Two years later, in 1914, his widow, Florence Stoker, published *Dracula's Guest* as part of a posthumous collection of short stories. Most contemporary scholars believe that editors had exercised it from the original *Dracula* manuscript. Significant adaptations of *Dracula* have permeated various forms of media. Bela Lugosi's portrayal in the iconic 1931 film *Dracula*, directed by Tod Browning, set the standard for the cinematic representation of the character.

Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* brought a visually stunning and more faithful adaptation to the screen. Beyond film, *Dracula* has inspired numerous TV series, plays and reinterpretations, cementing its status as a timeless and influential work

in the horror genre. In 2009, Dacre Stoker, (great-grand-nephew of the author) and Ian Holt produced *Dracula: The Undead*, a sequel that is based on the novelist's own notes and existence from the originals. The sequel, which shuns the epistolary style of the first *Dracula* for traditional third-person narrative, is a thriller set in London in 1912 and it features Bram Stoker as a character.

Stoker's masterpiece, the novel *Dracula*, was written chiefly in the form of diaries and journals, kept by the principal characters, Jonathan Harker, who made the first contact with the vampire Count Dracula, Wilhelmina Mina Harker, Mina Moore, Jonathan's eventual wife, Dr. John Jack Stewart, a psychiatrist and sanatorium administrator, and Lucy Westenra, Mina's friend and a victim of Dracula, who herself becomes a vampire. The story is that of a Transylvanian vampire who, using supernatural powers, makes his way to England and there victimizes innocent people to gain the blood on which he survives. Led by Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, Seward's mentor and an expert on obscure diseases, Harker and his friends, after many hair-raising adventures, are at least able to overpower and destroy Dracula. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* can be situated within the historical context of Britain's imperialism and imperialist sentiments, with Britishers feeling a sense of racial superiority which has heightened the distinction between the superior's clean British person or his close European neighbors and that of the other, the people within the fringes of the British Empire of inferior stock, estranged predilections and whoever will inspire fear of racial contamination.

Historically, *Dracula* reflects the anxieties of late 19th century Victorian society, addressing issues of sexuality, immigration and the fear of the unknown. The novel's investigation of the undead and the supernatural serves as a metaphor for societal fears. In contemporary context, *Dracula* remains a cornerstone of vampire lore and has inspired countless adaptations reflecting its ongoing influence on popular culture. Analysts have found that this fear of racial contamination was a chief motivation in Stoker's *Dracula*. With the character Count Dracula's arrival in England, the threat of turning regular British men into vampires and upturning the social order and regular conceptions of morality and decency being representative of Victorian anxiety which Stoker taps into. Having garnered materials for the book from his research about Transylvanian geography, customs and superstitions, coupled with access to earlier Gothic vampire tales from which he conceived Count Dracula, Bram Stoker began work on the novel at a date that analysts have not been able to find consensus on.

Dracula is not really a novel at all. It doesn't present itself as the work of a single author or narrator. Instead, *Dracula* consists of series of diary entries, letters, telegrams, memoranda, and occasional newspaper clippings assembled and typed up by Mina Harker with help from Seward, Van Helsing, Jonathan Harker, Quincy Morris and Arthur Lord Godalming. In a sense then, Mina is the author of the book. She knits together these various accounts. This creates an intriguing metanarrative effect. The characters in the novel are reading the novel as we, the reader, are making our way through it. The novel is essentially a detective story as the group finds out the nature of Dracula's violent activities and attempts to track him down and destroy him. The accounts knit together by Mina show how the group goes about catching the Count.

Jonathan Harker's journal tells of his arrival to Transylvania, location of Castle Dracula. His eventual imprisonment there. His attempts to ward off Dracula and the three sisters and his eventual escape to Budapest. Letters between Lucy and Mina track primarily the slow illness overtaking Lucy which results in her becoming vampire. Seward's diary contains information about the patient, Renfield, an accomplice and acolyte of Dracula's who refers to him as 'Lord and Master'. Mina's journal details Mina's own illness and refers to her hypnotic visions which serve as a conscious link between the Count and Mina. Van Helsing notes down several events toward the end of the novel including the final pursuit of Dracula. Newspaper reports of supernatural events fill out the uncanniness of the narrative from perspectives beyond those of Mina and the rest of the group. These accounts serve a central purpose in *Dracula* journals, diaries, and other first-person accounts lend credence to events that if they were narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, might seem too fantastical for the reader to accept. When the novel's characters make sense of the events they have seen and relay these events to others via their own writing and messaging, though it puts the characters and the readers in the same position.

Van Helsing therefore comments in a quotation referenced by Harker in the novel's closing note that because these are all accounts and not objectively validated by other person, one still must at the end of *Dracula* take the character's word for what has happened. Despite this almost obsessive reliance on the truthfulness of the information being reported, what we have here is, nevertheless, subject to embellishment and fantasy. It is up to the reader to judge if and when such fantasy has been inserted into the narrative.

Dracula contains a study of the meaning of sanity and insanity or wellness and illness. The treatment for both insanity and illness in the novel is confinement, which recurs throughout. Practically, every character in the group questions his or her wellness or sanity at some

point. Jonathan Harker, on his trip to Dracula's castle, is confined within the castle as a prisoner of Dracula's. Harker plans to meet with Count Dracula, a client of his firm, in order to finalize a property transaction. When he arrives in Transylvania, the locals react with terror after he discloses his destination, Castle Dracula. Though this unsettles him slightly, he continues onward. The ominous howling of wolves' rings through the air when he arrives at the castle. When Harker meets Dracula, he acknowledges that the man is pale, gaunt and strange. Harker becomes further concerned that when after Harker cuts himself while shaving, Dracula lunges at his throat. Soon after, Harker is seduced by three female vampires from whom he barely escapes. He then learns Dracula's secret that he is a vampire and survives by drinking human blood. Harker believes he is going insane there and he has visions of Dracula turning into a bat and of the ghastly three sisters. When Harker escapes, he is treated for a nervous illness before Van Helsing verifies his account and tells him that indeed vampires are real.

Lucy is afflicted with bouts of sleepwalking, one of which takes her out in the moors of England where she is first attacked by Dracula. Lucy is then confined to her room by Dr. Seward who eventually calls in Van Helsing to help with her case. After her first death, Lucy is confined to a tomb and her soul is only set free when Arthur drives a stake through her heart. Mina's blood connection to Dracula causes her to have hypnotic vision of Dracula's whereabouts. Van Helsing desire, first, that Mina also be confined during her illness but Mina is later brought along on a group's mission to Transylvania as Mina can provide important information for the tracking of the Count. Other characters have a smaller bout of illness and of madness. Van Helsing and Seward both worry that they too are mad though they believe they are men of science, tracking Dracula according to the laws for hunting vampires. Renfield, an insane man confined under Seward's care, attempts to be Dracula's apprentice and at times appears quite lucid in his desire to consume the blood of living organisms.

The theme in the novel is manifold. First, the theme draws out late Victorian cultural attitudes toward illness and madness. That is, any socially aberrant behavior is mad and women are more prone to this behavior than men. Both illness and madness require that the patient be removed from society. Dracula is compared often to a poison or to vermin. He is an illness, a social virus that must be isolated and destroyed. The novel also considers the interactions of Christian belief, superstitions or occult practices and rational science. The tracking of Dracula requires methodical investigations in each of these films and the

films themselves by the end of the novel appear very much interrelated, even entirely entangled. Most of the characters in the group profess its serious and proper christian belief.

The Harker are observant protestants and god-fearing people. Their love is made by permanent in the eyes of God through other speedy marriage Arthur has a special Christian scruple about the discretion of Lucy's body in order to save her from her undead status. He eventually equates and aids her in her true killing, thus releasing her soul. Dr. Seward professes a similar orthodox understanding of God's goodness and all characters typically end their conversation by saying that their group's success is in God's hand.

However, superstition and occult practices become interwoven with these Christian beliefs. Harker sees in Transylvania that many of the peasant folk have special charms to ward off the evil eye. All the preparations designed to ward off vampires' garlic, the wooden stake decapitation, come from Transylvania superstition dating back to the Middle Ages. The group's effort to fight Dracula draw on these superstitions, which prove real in as much as they work eventually to kill the Count.

The novel draws out a tension, therefore, between rational scientific thought and irrational belief that was very much a part of Victorian society in England. These religious attitudes, Christian and occult, are married to a procedural, rational, scientific frame of mind most unified in Van Helsing, the universal man of learning. Van Helsing is an ardent, believing Christian, but also a man who collects with great rigor superstitious practices from Central Europe. Van Helsing and Seward also have an intimate knowledge of medicine and biology. All this knowledge centred on Van Helsing is brought to bear in the capture of Dracula.

Van Helsing, as a man of science, religion and collector and believer in superstition, is therefore the cure for a problem Stoker identifies in Victorian society. A belief among many Victorians that rational scientific knowledge might not be sufficient to overcome the dangers of superstition, those areas of human life not immediately explained by science. Dracula is not only a devil walking the earth. He is not only a mythical monster foretold in romanian legends and he is not explained fully with a stable scientific hypothesis. Dracula is, instead, a human embodiment of the very human beastliness that Victorian feared and hoped to destroy. And only a combination of religious, ritualistic and scientific modes allows the group to track and kill Dracula.

Romantic intrigue is so typical of Victorian novel is only a prologue. In this novel, to the actual drama of Lucy's life, the fact that she is bitten by a vampire and she becomes a

vampire herself. Thus, not only is Arthur robbed of his future wife, he must participate in her true killing. That is the freeing of a soul from the cycle of undeadness. Jonathan and Mina Harker, Lord Godalming and Lucy are the novel's two primary romantic pairs. Their love follows remarkably similar tracks, but the former survives and the latter sadly does not. An early romantic intrigue in the novel is Lucy's entertaining of three suitors, Dr. Seward, Arthur and Quincy. The novel illustrates a long meditation on proper socially sanctioned love and improper relations of lust and seduction. Much has been made of this aspect of the novel, particularly in 20th century criticism and with good reason.

It is impossible to separate the act of Dracula's forcible blood-sucking directed at unsuspecting women from the process of violent seduction and sexual assault. On the other hand, Mina and Jonathan have a love characterized by mutual help during times of illness. First, Mina cares for Jonathan after his nervous collapse prompted by his stay at and escape from, the castle Dracula. Jonathan fights bravely to kill Dracula to release him from his own undeadness in order also to free Mina from Dracula's spell.

Opposed then to these natural processes of romantic love are the processes of demonic possession and seduction. Harker is seduced by the three sisters at Dracula's castle, though he manages to avoid falling into their clutches. Dracula seduces both Lucy and Mina. In the former case, he suggestively penetrates Lucy's neck while Lucy, who had been sleepwalking, is sprawled over a moosey embankment outside. With Mina, Dracula is found forcing Mina to suck Dracula's own blood from a cut in his abdomen. This also highly sexually suggestive creates a bond between the two that can only be broken by Dracula's true death. Dracula contains a long meditation on proper, socially sanctioned love and improper relations of lust and seduction. Much has been made of this aspect of the novel, particularly in 20th century criticism, and with good reason, it is impossible to separate the act of Dracula's forcible bloodsucking directed at unsuspecting women from the process of violence, seduction and sexual assault.

All the above led into the final and perhaps most important theme of the novel, that of the relationship between life death and the state in between these two known by Van Helsing as 'undeadness'.

Dracula is a creature of undead. He sleeps during the day and leaves at night. He is of incredible strength when awake but must be invited into one's room in order to begin his seduction. The touchstone of Dracula's undeadness is his inability actually to die. His soul is trapped in a kind of prison and must be released by the cutting off of Dracula's head or

the driving of a wooden stake through his heart. In this sense, to kill Dracula is to allow him to leave, to free his soul from the prison of his body. Other characters in the novel, however, hover between these categories of living and dying. Harker soon upon leaving Dracula's castle nearly kills him and he spends many months regaining his full health only to find that Mina has been afflicted by Dracula's bite.

Mina then is hypnotized by Van Helsing later on to provide information on Dracula's whereabouts. This in-between hypnotic state is a kind of undeadness. Lucy's sleepwalking too is an in-between state. Not walking and not sleeping which allows Dracula to find her, bite her and eventually make her a vampire. Both Harker and Van Helsing appear to go gray and age as the book progresses. They endanger their lives and only once Dracula is fully killed, they regain their total health. Renfield is obsessed with the life-giving energies of the animals he eats, flies, spiders, birds, cats, and these animals must die to give him life. Renfield wishes to gain the special knowledge of undeadness from Dracula, but is eventually killed by his would-be master. Interestingly, undeadness seems to diametrically oppose the Christian notions of resurrection or life after death in the former. The soul is given immortal life in heaven, in nearness of God, once it has been released from the earthly body, which passes from living to dying.

But in the case of undeadness, the living body seems almost to die but maintains a kind of purgatorial state in which its fist on the blood of the living and the soul trapped inside cannot abide with God in heaven. The body becomes a parasite, aching out and existence stolen from the vital energy of others. The novel seems to argue that in order to continue the normal biotic processes of living and dying and the normal mortal Christian processes of death and resurrection, undeadness must be eliminated. Souls must be allowed to rise to heaven.

Thus, Mina rejoices even when Dracula, the villain of the novel, has his soul released from his terrible body. In this way even Dracula, the evil one is saved. Thus, at the end of the novel, the killing of Dracula allows Jonathan and Mina to live together as husband and wife and to start a family. This is considered the natural outcome of Christian marriage meanwhile the others of the group, those whose hearts were broken by Lucy find their own separate loves in time and marry as well.

Well, with this, I would like to conclude the present discussion on Dracula by Stoker. Let us meet in the next lecture where I could define the novel titled Dracula from the contextual, textual and intertextual perspective.

Thank you very much.