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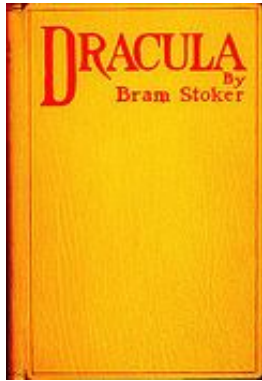
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Dracula in Criticism



[Dracula](#) has attracted the attention of a [remarkable breadth](#) of critical and theoretical approaches over the past 50 years. These range from the most orthodox of 1970s Freudian interpretations to the acerbic historicist rejections of psychoanalysis characteristic of the 1990s, and encompass the intellectual shifts that have blurred the boundaries between feminism and [gender studies](#), and between literary criticism and [cultural studies](#). As a practice, *Dracula* criticism is intensely self-referential. It is arguably as preoccupied with earlier critical commentary upon the novel as it is with the actual content of *Dracula* itself. There is no linear [pattern](#) of evolution or development in criticism of Stoker's novel, where, for example, cultural materialism might be seen to succeed psychoanalysis, or feminism to yield to a broader approach through gender studies. Like the vampire, *Dracula* criticism defies time and chronology: it is simultaneously anachronistic and contemporary, in the sense that new interpretations of Stoker's novel tend to explicitly parallel, supplement or commentate upon their predecessors while never enforcing a satisfactory closure upon the influence of those earlier critics.

As evidence for this, one need only consider two statements made almost 40 years apart, by Maurice Richardson in 'The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories' (1959) and Robert Mighall in 'Sex, History and the Vampire' (1998), respectively. Writing at the very beginning of *Dracula* criticism, Richardson contends that the novel *must* be read 'From a Freudian standpoint' because 'from no other does the story make any sense'. The vampire, and thus the novel, in other words, represent nothing more than the coded expression of a repressed, unspeakable sexuality. Mighall, no doubt mindful of rhetorical closures such as this, is fully prepared to concede that 'Modern criticism' insists upon the presence of 'some "deeper" sexual secret' behind the 'supernatural phenomena' of *Dracula*. That "'deeper" sexual secret', though, is for Mighall *not* Victorian but wholly [twentieth century](#): the preoccupations of post-Freudian criticism, in other words, are being read in the place of anything that the vampire *might* have meant to a Victorian reader. Perversely, while it seeks to dispel the currency of psychoanalytical or sexual interpretations of *Dracula*, Mighall's own rhetoric perpetuates their influence. Simply by naming critics committed to exposing the alleged, coded sexuality vested in the Count, Mighall ironically lends them a semblance of authority, intruding their supposedly anachronistic presence into his critical present, and perpetuating their place in the canon of *Dracula* criticism. Arguably, a reader in the twenty-first century is as likely to find Richardson and his psychoanalytical successors within a recent critical [study](#) of *Dracula* as he or she is to encounter Mighall and his contemporaries.

The enduring intensity of this critical cross-referencing is largely a consequence of the manner in which the early criticism of *Dracula* deployed the novel's incidents and components. More recent critics are for the most part careful to locate *Dracula* within historical, cultural, generic or documented biographical contexts. The earliest critics of the novel, however, frequently took its incidents and perceived symbolism almost in isolation, [reading them often simplistically as, for the most part, timeless, self-sufficient and obvious signifiers of a](#)

repressed sexuality. The result was an undue reliance not merely upon sexuality as the apparent 'key' to *Dracula*, but also a critical concentration upon a relatively limited number of evocative scenes within the novel. These scenes – and, often, the sexual interpretations and the critics first associated with them – have subsequently come to be deployed as evidence even where sexuality is not the critical focus.



To recall but one, very obvious, example, the evocative substance that is blood in *Dracula* has attracted a phenomenal range of symbolic interpretations. Many of these, of course, are avowedly sexual. Maurice Richardson, for example, is an orthodox Freudian in his suggestion that blood is an unconscious symbolic substitute for semen in *Dracula*, where Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle's suggestion, in *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978), that the fluid subliminally recalls menstrual discharge may be seen as a logical development from the phallogentrism of early psychoanalysis. The influence of Richardson is, not surprisingly, evident in C. F. Bentley's influential 1972 study 'The Monster in the Bedroom: Sexual Symbolism in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*', even though that work's [theoretical](#) orientation veers away from the psychoanalytical dogmatism of 'The Psychoanalysis of Ghost Stories'. However, even where the literal – rather than symbolic – implications of blood form the focus of analysis, sexual symbolism and critics of sexuality appear to be necessarily invoked as a reference point. In a 1989 article otherwise concerned with the physiological processes of blood transfusion, for example, David Hume Flood seems compelled to acknowledge Bentley. Again, in *Beyond Dracula: Bram Stoker's Fiction and Its Cultural Context* (2000), William Hughes acknowledges the sexual interpretations advanced by several other critics in a reading of how blood may function as a signifier of lineage, family and race. Neither of these works is preoccupied with sexuality. Thus, as Christopher Craft observes, 'Modern critical accounts of *Dracula* . . . almost universally agree that vampirism both expresses and distorts an originally sexual energy', so that, in the words of Jennifer Wicke, 'It is not possible to write about *Dracula* without raising the sexual issue.'

All of these critical studies, to a greater or lesser degree, deploy a common range of incidents as evidence, as indeed do many others less concerned with the symbolics of blood. There is a tendency in *Dracula* criticism, in other words, to reinterpret the same material from the novel rather than to develop new focuses for criticism – and *Dracula* criticism will be richer when critics consider at length and without prejudice the minor characters and less-explored scenarios of Stoker's work. For the moment, the only satisfactory way to adequately demonstrate the variety and breadth of [critical commentary](#) upon *Dracula* is to take the scenes customarily regarded as being central to criticism and view them in all their critical plurality. These central scenes are, in order of their appearance in the novel: the depiction of face of Count Dracula, as observed by Jonathan Harker (chapter 2); the attempted 'seduction' of Harker by the three female vampires (chapter 3); the staking and 'death' of Lucy Westenra (chapter 16); the Count's attack upon Mina Harker (chapter 21); and – more disparate, in that it is scattered across the extent of the novel – the cohesion of the coalition against Count Dracula. Though often cited and quoted, these scenes do not exist in isolation. Rather, in criticism they have become the central reference points for other events intimately related to their implications, perceived symbolism and narrative consequences. Thus, Jonathan Harker's account of Count Dracula's face is intimate to Mina Harker's 'scientific' reading of the vampire's character in chapter 25, just as Lucy's trance existence, before and after her conversion to vampirism, is relevant to the Count's attack upon Mina. These four specific scenes, and the concept of the alliance against the vampire, are, as it were, the staples of *Dracula*'s critical repertoire – and the pre-existing foundations upon which new interpretations have so often been raised.

- The extract above was taken from our Reader's Guide to [Bram Stoker's Dracula](#) by William Hughes. As it's Bram Stoker's 165th birthday today we've made the entire book available to read online (for free) for one day only! You can read it by [clicking on this link](#). We are also going to be giving away a copy via our twitter account - [follow us to take part](#).

Jenny Tighe



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