

SALEM LITERATURE

Masterplots, Fourth Edition

Dracula

FIRST PUBLISHED: 1897

TYPE OF WORK: Novel

TYPE OF PLOT: Horror

TIME OF PLOT: Late nineteenth century

LOCALE: Transylvania and England

AUTHOR Bram Stoker

FULL NAME Abraham Stoker, Jr.

BORN November 8, 1847; Dublin, Ireland

DIED April 20, 1912; London, England

THE STORY:

Jonathan Harker, an English solicitor, is apprehensive on his way to Castle **Dracula** in the province of Transylvania (in what is now Romania). His nervousness grows when he observes the curious, fearful attitude of the peasants and the coachman after they learn of his destination. He is on his way to transact business with Count **Dracula**, and his mission necessitates remaining at the castle for several days.

Upon his arrival at the castle, Harker finds comfortable accommodations awaiting him. Count **Dracula** is a charming host, although his peculiarly bloodless physical appearance is somewhat disagreeable to Harker's English eyes. Almost immediately, Harker is impressed with the strange life of the castle. He and the Count discuss their business at night, as the Count is never available during the daytime. Although the food is excellent, Harker never sees a servant about the place. While exploring the castle, he finds that it is situated high at the top of a mountain with no accessible exit other than the main doorway, which is kept locked. He realizes with a shock that he is a prisoner of Count **Dracula**.

Various harrowing experiences ensue. When Harker secretly explores one of the rooms in the castle, three phantom women materialize and attack him, attempting to bite his throat. Then the Count appears and drives them off, whispering fiercely that Harker belongs to him. Later, Harker thinks he sees a huge bat descending the castle walls, but the creature turns out to be Count **Dracula**. In the morning, trying frantically to escape, Harker stumbles into an old chapel where a number of coffinlike boxes of earth are stored. He opens one and sees the Count lying there, apparently dead. In the evening, when the Count appears as usual, Harker demands that he be released. The Count obligingly opens the castle door. A pack of wolves surrounds the entrance. The Count laughs maliciously. The next day Harker, weak and sick from a strange wound in his throat, sees a pack cart loaded with the mysterious boxes drive from the castle. **Dracula** has departed and Harker is alone, a prisoner with no visible means of escape.

Meanwhile, in England, Harker's fiancé, Mina Murray, goes to visit her beautiful and charming friend, Lucy Westenra. Lucy is planning to marry Arthur Holmwood, a young nobleman. One evening, early in Mina's visit, a storm blows up and a strange ship is driven aground. The only living creature aboard is a gray wolflike dog, which escapes into the countryside. Soon afterward, Lucy's happiness begins to fade because of a growing tendency to sleepwalk. One night, Mina follows her friend during one of these spells and discovers Lucy in a churchyard. A tall, thin man bending over Lucy disappears at Mina's approach. Lucy can remember nothing of the experience when she awakens, but her physical condition seems much weakened. Finally, she grows so ill that Mina is forced to call upon Dr. Seward, Lucy's former suitor. Lucy begins to improve under his care,

and when Mina receives a report from Budapest that her missing fiancé has been found and needs care, she feels free to end her visit.

When Lucy's condition suddenly grows worse, Dr. Seward asks his old friend Dr. Van Helsing, a specialist from Amsterdam, for his professional opinion. Examining Lucy thoroughly, Van Helsing pauses over two tiny throat wounds that she is unable to explain. Van Helsing is concerned over Lucy's condition, which points to unusual loss of blood without signs of anemia or hemorrhage. She is given blood transfusions at intervals, and someone sits up with her at night. She improves but expresses a fear of going to sleep because her dreams are so horrible.

One morning, Dr. Seward falls asleep outside her door. When he and Van Helsing enter her room, they find Lucy ashen white and weaker than ever. Van Helsing quickly performs another transfusion and she rallies, but not as satisfactorily as before. Van Helsing then secures some garlic flowers and tells Lucy to keep them around her neck at night. When the two doctors call the next morning, they discover that Lucy's mother removed the flowers because she feared their odor might bother her daughter. Frantically, Van Helsing rushes to Lucy's room and finds her in a coma. Again he administers a transfusion, and again her condition improves. She says that with the garlic flowers close by she is not afraid of nightly flapping noises at her window. Van Helsing sits with her every night until he thinks her well enough to leave. After cautioning her to sleep with the garlic flowers about her neck at all times, he returns to Amsterdam.

Lucy's mother continues to sleep with her daughter. One night, the two ladies are awakened by a huge wolf that crashes through the window. Mrs. Westenra falls dead of a heart attack, and Lucy faints, the wreath of garlic flowers slipping from her neck. Seward and Van Helsing, who has returned to England, discover her half dead in the morning. They know she is dying and call Arthur. As Arthur attempts to kiss her, Lucy's teeth seem about to fasten onto his throat. Van Helsing draws him away. When Lucy dies, Van Helsing puts a tiny gold crucifix over her mouth, but an attendant steals it from her body.

Soon after Lucy's death, several children of the neighborhood are discovered far from their homes, their throats marked by small wounds. Their only explanation is that they followed a pretty lady. When Harker returns to England, Van Helsing goes to see him and Mina. After talking with Harker, Van Helsing reveals to Dr. Seward his belief that Lucy fell victim to a vampire, one of those strange creatures who can live for centuries on the blood of their victims and breed their kind by attacking the innocent and making them vampires in turn. According to Van Helsing, the only way to save Lucy's soul is to drive a stake through the heart of her corpse, cut off her head, and stuff her mouth with garlic flowers. Dr. Seward protests violently. The next midnight Arthur, Dr. Seward, and Helsing visit Lucy's tomb and find it empty, but after Lucy returns the next morning, they do as Van Helsing suggested with Lucy's corpse.

With Mina's help, Seward and Van Helsing thereupon track down **Dracula** in London, hoping to find him before he victimizes anyone else. They decide their best chance lies in removing the boxes of sterilized earth he brought with him from Transylvania, in which he hides during the daytime. They finally trap **Dracula**, but he escapes. Before fleeing England, however, **Dracula** attacks Mina and promises that he will exact his revenge through her. Van Helsing puts Mina into a trance and learns that **Dracula** is at sea and that it will be necessary to follow him to his castle. Wolves gather about them in that desolate country. Van Helsing draws a circle in the snow with a crucifix, and the travelers rest safely within the magic enclosure. The next morning, they overtake a cart carrying a black box. Van Helsing and the others overcome the drivers of the cart and pry open the lid of **Dracula's** coffin. As the sun begins to set, they drive a stake through the heart of the corpse. The vampire is no more and Mina is free.

CRITICAL EVALUATION:

With his horror novel *Dracula*, Bram Stoker created a work that became something of a symbol for twentieth century society and that, perhaps unlike any other, spawned a range of publications, plays, and motion pictures. The image of the vampire, of course, dates back several thousand years, but Stoker recast the legend in a conventionally Western tradition and provided it with an aura of dark Romanticism reminiscent of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and of the voluptuous whisperings of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's

Carmilla (1871). Stoker's novel combined the basic ingredients of the classical horror story with the author's personal experiences and inspiration.

The main character in ***Dracula*** is based on the historical figure of Vlad Tepes the Impaler, a fifteenth century Walachian prince who ruled Transylvania and Walachia (now Romania) and earned a bloody reputation by spearing domestic criminals and foreign invaders on wooden sticks. He assumed the name ***Dracula***, variously interpreted as "son of the dragon" and "son of the devil," as a further reminder of his powers.

Stoker's book deals with a number of more universal themes as well, including the loneliness of death, the endless allure of erotic love, and an unnerving invocation of insanity. The author, a dreamy visionary with seemingly two sides to his nature, transfers aspects of the hate-love relationship of the vampire state to personal relationships between his characters. That lends a sexually charged underpinning to much of the narrative and creates some of the most gruesome and powerful scenes in the history of the horror novel. Stoker not only employed a series of firsthand accounts (such as diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, and other documents) to tell the story—thus returning to the epistolary technique introduced some years earlier by Wilkie Collins—he also fused several different viewpoints in the narrative. In part because he had little time at his disposal and had to write rapidly, and in part because of the Victorian cultural milieu, he lent a somewhat trite sentimentality to many sections of the book. Fortunately, however, the first few chapters of ***Dracula*** create a charged atmosphere of suspense that sustains the reader's interest throughout. Stoker also took great care to interlace the narrative elements of the plot; every detail counts and hardly anything is superfluous. Although he relies heavily on direct testimonials, this device also possesses the virtue of imparting an immediate and believable effect. At the time the book was published, reviewers could well still have classified ***Dracula*** as a traditional gothic horror story because of ingredients such as ships lost at sea, mysterious castles, and vaults resounding with the patter of rats' feet. What is unusual about this novel is the way Stoker treats his themes, the ambiguities in which he cloaks his vampire, and his use of forceful symbolism. ***Dracula*** has a mysterious and sinister atmosphere heightened by the narrative momentum of the vampire's actions. Stoker offers his readers neither unnameable horror nor the kind of a rationalistic approach that might keep them from succumbing to the supernatural; rather, he concocts a suave combination of the two laced with subtle undertones of cold fear. Nevertheless, he clearly knows how to resort to nightmare horror when the occasion calls for it. Like a true horror writer, he paints with bold and deliberate strokes and as a result creates remarkable and brilliant images. For most of his life, he was deeply involved in theatrical management, and very likely his intimacy with the stage was at least partially responsible for his style. The "big" scenes are elaborate, and there is a dramatic flair to almost every incident. Although Stoker had not originally thought of converting his book into a drama—the only play version given during his lifetime was done for copyright purposes—the blatant melodrama of many of the scenes cries out for stage realization. Most of ***Dracula***'s speeches to Harker, for example, are brilliantly dynamic (and have actually been put to good effect by many a filmmaker). Just as effective are the tableaux framed in time, for example the moment when a small band awaits the coming of the Count in Piccadilly or watches ***Dracula***'s coffin being driven to his castle. The suspense created by these moments in slow motion is quickly relieved by the almost lightning sequence of events that tends to follow.

Stoker was never taken quite seriously as a novelist, at least not during his lifetime. Perhaps the main accusation against him was that of being a second-rate writer who churned out books and did not seem interested in refining his style. It is nevertheless his achievement that his readers are able to visualize every one of his terrifying details clearly. His blood allegory gathers to itself a host of meanings and a chilling atmosphere in which the most ordinary circumstances begin slipping into the realm of nightmare. It is precisely this ever-mounting anticipation, reeking with primordial awakenings, that creates the special style of ***Dracula***. Here the reader is no longer dealing with a receptacle for ingenious devices of terror but with a battleground for searing issues of the body and the soul.

FURTHER READING

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Bram Stoker's "Dracula."* Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. Collection of critical essays, including discussions of the depiction of gender and sexuality in the novel, ***Dracula*** and the late Victorian degeneracy crisis, and the novel's rhetoric of reform.

- Glendening, John. *The Evolutionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Novels: An Entangled Bank*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007. Examines how Stoker and other late-Victorian novelists dealt with contemporary theories of evolution. The chapter on **Dracula** focuses on evolution and primitivism in the novel.
- Hughes, William. *Bram Stoker: Dracula*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Surveys the critical response to the novel from its initial publication to the present day. Focuses on critiques that examine the themes of psychoanalysis and psychobiography; medicine, mind, and body; gender studies; postcolonialism; and Irish studies.
- Leatherdale, Clive. *Dracula, the Novel and the Legend: A Study of Bram Stoker's Gothic Masterpiece*. Wellingborough, England: Aquarian Press, 1985. An excellent critical study, which interprets various aspects of **Dracula**, including sexual symbolism, religious themes, occult and literary myth, and political and social allegory.
- Murray, Paul. *From the Shadow of "Dracula": A Life of Bram Stoker*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2004. Places **Dracula** within the context of Stoker's life and his entire canon of fiction.
- Roth, Phyllis A. *Bram Stoker*. Boston: Twayne, 1982. An introductory overview of Stoker's life and works. Contains an extensive chapter on **Dracula**.
- Senf, Carol A., ed. *The Critical Response to Bram Stoker*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994. An anthology of some of the more interesting critiques of **Dracula** from a scholarly point of view.
- Stoker, Bram. *The Essential "Dracula."* Edited by Leonard Woolf and revised in collaboration with Roxana Stuart. Rev. ed. New York: Plume, 1993. Includes the original complete text of **Dracula** with notes, an introductory essay, a selected filmography of major vampire films, commentary by leading horror writers, and new illustrations by Christopher Bing. Features an extensive bibliography.
- _____. *The New Annotated Dracula*. Edited by Leslie S. Klinger. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. Klinger treats **Dracula** as a work of nonfiction, elucidating its plot and historical context and providing numerous annotations. Includes several appendixes, including a **Dracula** family tree, the novel's film and stage adaptations, and **Dracula**'s reception in academia.

"Critical Evaluation" by Kathryn Dorothy Marocchino

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