

Annie Nuzum

Professor Eric Eisner

ENGH 500

30 September 2024

Science, Faith, and Superstition in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

In *Dracula*, characters and their differing views on superstition, science, and religion echo a tension prevalent in the historical context in which the novel was written. In Victorian England, modernity began to take over and cast a skeptical light on traditional beliefs and ideology. Among the substantial scientific and technological developments of the time, “Darwin’s theory of natural selection contributed to a widespread crisis of faith in late nineteenth-century Britain” (Leatherdale 485). The literal truth of the Bible was challenged due to the advancement of the scientific community as well as a critical reexamination of the supernatural claims in the gospels, creating a shift away from archaic beliefs. Stoker uses characters with diverse views and backgrounds to highlight the clashes between scientific, modern methods, and traditional, religious, and superstitious beliefs in Victorian England, making it clear that relying on science and rational thought alone can have dire consequences.

Dr. John Seward and Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, although both men of science, represent conflicting viewpoints, highlighting the tension between science and traditional beliefs in Victorian England. Dr. Seward, stumped by Lucy Westenra’s confusing symptoms and unable to draw further conclusions given the lack of evidence, appeals to Van Helsing, someone he describes as “a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day; and he has, I believe, an absolutely open mind” (Stoker 114). That Van Helsing is a metaphysician during a time when “Charles Darwin complained about the hindrance to scientific

advance raised by metaphysics and theology” (Turner 357) emphasizes his multidimensional beliefs and openness to the mythical. Van Helsing’s methods and views would have been unpopular in the medical and scientific community at the time. Dr. Seward’s rigid reliance on rational explanations and empirical evidence leads to his blind spots throughout the novel, particularly where his patient, Renfield, as well as Lucy are concerned. In contrast, Van Helsing is open to believing in the supernatural, in that which cannot always be explained by science and rational thought. It is Van Helsing’s faith, both in the mythical, supernatural, and in God, that ultimately leads to overpowering and defeating Dracula.

Stoker shows Van Helsing and Dr. Seward’s contrasting views when Van Helsing attempts to draw linkages between the deaths of the children reported in the *Westminster Gazette* and Lucy. Dr. Seward, unable to put any pieces of the puzzle together, tells Van Helsing “I can hazard no opinion. I do not know what to think, and I have no data on which to found a conjecture” (Stoker 182). Van Helsing replies, “Do you mean to tell me, friend John, that you have no suspicion as to what poor Lucy died of; not after all the hints given, not only by events but by me?” (Stoker 182). To Van Helsing’s puzzlement, Dr. Seward does not give credence to mere hints or observations. It is evident that he relies only on hard scientific proof and does not keep an open mind as to anything supernatural or mythical. Van Helsing responds to Dr. Seward:

You are a clever man, friend John; you reason well, and your wit is bold; but you are too prejudiced. You do not let your eyes see nor your ears hear, and that which is outside your daily life is not of account to you. Do you not think that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are; that some people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men’s eyes, because they know—or think they know—some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is

the fault of science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain. (Stoker 182)

Van Helsing points out Dr. Seward's weakness in relying only on his reasoning and intellectual thought and appeals to him to consider beliefs and occurrences which may not be part of his daily scope as a medical doctor living in England. Through Van Helsing's character, Stoker denounces dependence on scientific and rational thought alone, making it clear that science cannot solve or explain everything.

After Van Helsing lists the myriad phenomena in nature and throughout history that are unexplained by science, Dr. Seward becomes overwhelmed, questions his sanity as he has a habit of doing when unable to explain something via scientific reasoning, and looks to Van Helsing helplessly, beseeching him to treat him as a student again so that he may become enlightened. He is absolutely lost without concrete proof. In creating Dr. Seward to be helpless, careless, and rational to a fault, Stoker elevates Van Helsing to, ironically, the voice of reason. Dr. Seward's deference to Van Helsing as a mentor and teacher indicates Stoker's intentionality that it is Van Helsing whom we must learn from if we are to prevail over Dracula. Van Helsing states:

My thesis is this: I want you to believe.

To believe in what?

To believe in things you cannot. Let me illustrate. I heard once of an American who so defined faith, 'that which enables us to believe things which we know to be untrue.'

(Stoker 184)

The multifaceted faith to which Van Helsing refers could be perceived as faith in the mythical, the supernatural, the occult, and faith in God. Van Helsing is asking Dr. Seward to open his mind and stop relying only on what he knows to be true, to go beyond scientific proofs and beliefs.

Illustrating the pitfalls of relying too much on science and rational thought, Dr. Seward's adamant refusal to go beyond proven theories and scientifically sound explanations causes him to falter and miss major signs that point to the truth about Dracula. Because he lacks any other scientific explanation, Dr. Seward initially diagnoses Lucy's illness as mental. His reliance on diagnosing his patients with mental illness makes it easy for him to categorize all unexplained occurrences into this category. Because Dr. Seward cannot conceive that physical changes like Lucy's canine teeth sharpening could occur to begin with, he dismisses his own actual observation as a "trick of the light" (Stoker 154), similar to when he doubted that the marks on Lucy's throat could account for her blood loss. His rigid and uncompromising adherence to science and rationality means that he constantly ignores red flags, denies entertaining even a spark of his intuition, and ultimately fails to help save either Renfield or Lucy. Only after Dr. Seward begins to buy into Van Helsing's ideas do they save Mina and take down Dracula.

Throughout Lucy's ordeal, Dr. Seward does not connect the dots between her blood loss, her symptoms being exacerbated at night, and the changes in her physical appearance. Not having any scientific theory with which to connect these occurrences, Dr. Seward dismisses them. Even when Dr. Seward sees his patient, Renfield, lapping up his blood like a dog and proclaiming "The blood is the life! The blood is the life!" (Stoker 139), Seward is blind to any possible connections to Lucy's blood loss. After Van Helsing takes Dr. Seward to Lucy's vault to explain that Lucy has turned into a vampire, the next day, Dr. Seward questions Van Helsing's sanity and wonders if he may not be the one behind the entire debacle. Dr. Seward, lacking faith in any beliefs not explained by rational thought, relies on his standby of insanity as an explanation. Through Dr. Seward's example, Stoker shows us the limitations of science.

With his multiple degrees in medicine, philosophy, law, and literature, among others,

Van Helsing is not just a scientist; his vast knowledge spans across many fields and is seemingly boundless. He is not relegated to conventional, traditional medicinal treatments and is open to old-world superstitions and beliefs like using garlic flowers, crucifixes, and communion wafers as remedies. His methods, of course, astound Dr. Seward, who comments that such treatments are not found in any pharmacological books of the time and even describes them as “grotesque” (Stoker 130-131). Yet, we see Dr. Seward as helpless and unsuccessful without Van Helsing’s guidance and willingness to rely on these old beliefs.

Turner writes that “a large measure of the scientists’ complaint against religious influence over education and culture generally was reserved for Roman Catholicism, which Huxley described as ‘our great antagonist’ and ‘that damnable perverter of mankind’” (373). Van Helsing, the only Catholic in the group trying to defeat Dracula, represents a return to the gothic, rekindling beliefs and ideologies shunned by scientists as well as Anglicans in late Victorian society. Notably, Van Helsing is also a foreigner, someone who has to travel out of England and back to Amsterdam in order to consult his books that could be helpful in defeating the supernatural chaos and mystery that is Dracula. The items Van Helsing brings to help defend against Dracula are from outside of England: garlic flowers, communion wafers, and crucifixes. All mythical, supernatural, and old-world religious beliefs are relegated to the foreign settings in the novel, highlighting that they are not commonplace or accepted in England.

We see this theme from the beginning of the novel, when Jonathan Harker first travels to Transylvania and ignores the superstitious locals who warn him about Dracula. His observations and responses as he travels further east and tries to make sense of the delayed trains, strange customs, and superstitions highlight “a concrete instance of more fundamental and wide-ranging oppositions: between Western progress and Eastern stasis, between Western science and Eastern

superstition, between Western reason and Eastern emotion, between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism” (Arata 637). Because of this underlying contrast between the west and the east, Jonathan’s instincts as a reasonable Anglican businessman from England lead him to dismiss the townspeople’s warning signs on the way to Dracula’s castle, save for the crucifix, which serves as his protection. Jonathan’s discomfort and inclination to disregard the superstitions and mythical beliefs mirror Dr. Seward’s attitudes toward those same beliefs and ultimately lead to Jonathan’s imprisonment at Dracula’s castle. Stoker shows us that discounting these old-world beliefs does not bode well for characters.

The era of modern development in Victorian England created anxieties and tension between old and new beliefs. In *Dracula*, Stoker shows us it is unproductive and unwise to accept science blindly by highlighting the pitfalls of relying solely on rational thought and modern methods. When attempting to use science to explain a world of chaos, superstition, and discord, the characters in the novel find that answers are muddled and frequently wrong, driving them further away from saving Lucy and thwarting Dracula’s plans. Stoker does illustrate some of the positive aspects of modernization in the novel such as Mina’s typewriter, which plays a pivotal role in unifying the fragmented narrative, bringing about clarity, and helping set plans in motion to overpower Dracula. Also, as Keep states, “Dr. Seward records his diaries on a wax cylinder phonograph, the passage of Dracula’s ship is mapped by an elaborate system of look-outs connected by telegraph to England, and Harker impresses the peasants of Transylvania with his Kodak camera” (para. 12). Despite the inclusion of these modern elements, however, Stoker also issues a warning: tradition, religion, and superstitions should not be disregarded, and that abandonment of these ideologies could have grave repercussions. It is through a melding of modernization and old-world beliefs that Dracula is finally defeated.

Works Cited

- Arata, Stephen D. "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1990, pp. 621-645. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3827794. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.
- Keep, Christopher. "The Introduction of the Sholes & Glidden Type-Writer, 1874." *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Sept. 2013, www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=christopher-keep-the-introduction-of-the-sholes-glidden-type-writer-1874. Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.
- Leatherdale, Clive. "Christianity, Darwin, and Dracula." *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker edited by John Edgar Browning and David J. Skal, WW. Norton & Company, Inc. 2022, pp. 484-499.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Edited by John Edgar Browning and David J. Skal, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022.
- Turner, Frank M. "The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion: A Professional Dimension." *Isis*, vol. 69, no. 3, 1978, pp. 356-376. *JSTOR*, www-jstor-org.mutex.gmu.edu/stable/231040?sid=primo. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.