



Book review: Dracula, by Bram Stoker



Faith Jones

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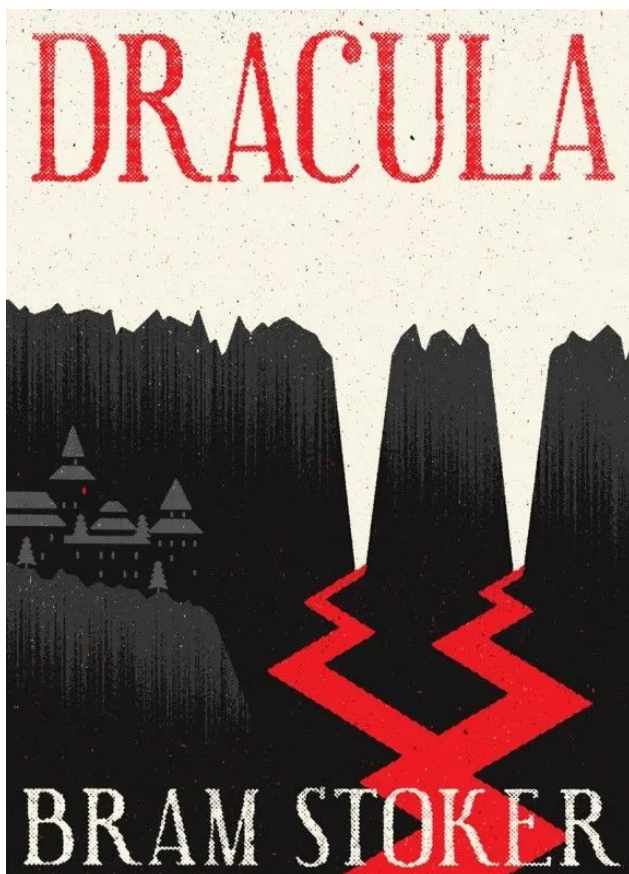
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There isn't a great deal of point bunting in a comprehensive review of a story that everyone already knows, written back in eighteen hundred and blah, so I'm approaching this one differently. I read it for research to guide my own writing because, like many others, I thought I knew this story from other media but hadn't actually read the original to see how powerful it was or what it actually said. Therefore, I wanted to know whether the book was better than the film versions, the writing style, how the sense of fear was built and the original strengths and weaknesses of the main character (as I suspected these had been supplemented).

Firstly, it's without a narrator and almost the entire story is written in diary entries, just as if there were no single author, just a compiler who collected all the surviving characters' diaries (except for Quincey Morris because he dies), picked the seams and re-attached the pages into a single pile in date order. Blair Witch Project did much the same thing with "discovered" hand held camera footage.

Then, there's the frequent and deliberate use of misspellings and phonetic speech. These are intended to show: (i) Abraham (not Aiden) Van Helsing

speaks English as a second language, so uses words strangely and makes allusions which are then lost in translation. (ii) Regional dialects of Yorkshire, Scotland and seafarers. (iii) That working people aren't particularly well educated. The author even tries to make up for their deficiencies by reporting their talk "with much boom and blood and then more bloom again" (leaving less delicate Victorian readers to conclude that what they were actually saying was blooming hell and bloody hell). If this was a true story (not fiction), if the authors of the diary entries had all decided to record what others had said in uncorrected transcript form, you might conclude that they were being supercilious. As it is fiction, it heightens the authenticity by distinguishing multiple witness voices, although I have to add that two pages of malformed sentences is the literary equivalent of forty road bumps. If you take a star off the book for anything, that's got to be it.

In *Dracula*, there are many archaic and sometimes no longer used spellings, such as draut. Some words are rare and have dropped out of common usage, like enkeen, ptomaines, odium and celerity, so you can add to your vocabulary by reading this. There are others that I forgot to note. I liked that aspect and think it should be celebrated, so come on folks, let's bring a few old words back from the grave.

I wasn't prepared for how many references there are to buying drinks and sponsoring alcoholic binges in return for information (Jonathan Harker pays the tab to find things out on about four occasions and Van Helsing does it to his informants once). One labourer knows Harker will be coming to ask him questions, the middle-class toff's reputation precedes him, so starts pre-drinking to make a session day of it and gets too tonked to answer any questions by the time Harker arrives. Every worker complains of dust and thirst at some point, making thirst an obstacle for them to speak. A modern variant of this is to let slip that you get inebriated really fast and then some men take advantage, which is a high risk strategy if it is true but saying so ensures the free glasses keep coming. It's the human version of being a fruit machine because they will keep investing until you pay out; or occasionally there's one who might open you up with a crowbar, so don't be stupid.

There are also several references to bribery or baksheesh, especially in relation to the Turks, who Bram Stoker stereotyped in this as dishonest at a national level (Nigeria has been branded this way in recent times). Stoker was Irish though and would have been disgusted by a collective accusation of this kind against his own ethnic grouping. The author also regularly misrepresented Slovaks as lawless gypsies, even though Romany gypsies are a different ethnic group who may or may not have had their previous stop in Slovakia. Of the earthy band that Stoker describes, settled Slovaks could be expected to say "those foreigners are nothing to do with us".

Quite early on in the book, the word "quickly" is used about five times in little more than one paragraph. That isn't the worst case of repetition though as "stentorious" (ly) is massively over-used in relation to breathing and Quincey speaks "lugubriously" and "languidly" on dozens of occasions. Unfortunately, I read the paperback and couldn't use the Find tool to include a count of those instances but it was too many. That's often a sign of a limited vocabulary but that isn't true of Bram Stoker so perhaps he didn't know he'd done it. Van Helsing also over-discussed his theory that Dracula has a "child mind" and they, the band of Christian civilised warriors, have "man minds". Mina has a "lady mind" (seriously?) but has trained it and learned the skill of shorthand until she has improved and evolved her brain to earn the accolade of now having a "man mind". Apart from the sexist crap, this child mind

stuff is too often repeated. A monster can't survive for five hundred years in any land, heavily outnumbered by people, without a strategic adult brain. In contradiction, the history of the pre-vampire local lord called Dracula is brought up, in which he is almost a Renaissance intellectual, a scholarly mind who sought truth and fought for civilisation. Did he open his head and swap it?

The character Lucy is a Miss, but she also has a mother with the same surname who is a Mrs. There is an early mention of Mrs Westernra in the book which I think is an error that's never been picked up after 130 years as the context suggests that reference is to the younger one, Miss Lucy.

Everyone loves Mina, to the point where you don't want to hear about what a paragon she is any longer. She's made out to be a flawless and angelic creature poised on a plinth, for the sake of whose life all the others should willingly sacrifice their own. This may be the way the world worked in Victorian times but lives have much more equivalence of value now. She married Jonathan and rejected the others, so they should stop flattering and playing martyrs because she is no unicorn.

There is a perceptible sense of menace throughout, of the kind where you have a creepy neighbour and can't be sure what they're up to so are always prepared for the next worrying piece of news to collect and make out a pattern. This audience reaction would have been fear in the old days but now we are desensitised, so it's just impending creepiness. The author's use of landscape features and elemental weather to amplify mood and intimidation are superb, one of his best aspects of the storytelling. You can't miss the ever-present sense of proximity to death and madness, or physical and psychological threats. There's also a sense of journey, having travelled a long way through different geographical settings, with land and sea voyages and meeting characters with a depth of experience who have also travelled great distances. As with Tolkien, by the end you feel you have completed a tiring quest alongside the characters and that makes it feel more real because the reader feels what they feel (weary, thankful, now rest).

Although nosferatu is mentioned by Van Helsing earlier, I was quite surprised that the first accusation, the first levelling of the word vampire against Dracula is on page 224. A vampire's main target also appears to be babies and children. Adult victims, apart from the two English women, generally have their throat ripped out to kill them quickly, not taken for sustenance. In one passage that is truly an image of horror, Dracula directs a pack of wolves to pull down and eat a mother who has come a-knocking, looking for her kidnapped baby. He could do this himself, but he abdicates that responsibility. In England, he attacks with a thousand rats but there isn't the suggestion he has split himself into rats to do it — just controlled all the local wild rodents and sent them over the top.

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Dracula, together with other vampires of his making, is able to become fog, control its direction and enter rooms through cracks in the doors and windows. He does need to be invited in (just like Salem's lot), so Renfield being on the inside is effectively a swinging door. When the big D reaches Mina in her bedroom this way, the others see her weakening nightly but are

too slow on the uptake to put two and two together. If she's lost blood, where has it gone? He also gets into her with her husband sleeping alongside, impotent to move. Was Bram Stoker playing on men's fear of being cuckolded? The sexual aspect is pretty strong stuff for the reign of Queen Victoria.

One important thing I got from this is that a branch of wild rose can pin a vampire in its coffin. Has that been used in any version of this story since? It might be fun to bring that back. Here's another connection I hadn't seen before: The lunatic Renfield is based on the Biblical character Enoch; he who walks with God. Renfield tries to strangle Dracula, to protect the saintly Mina, then Dracula beats his brains out against the floor — which also seems to be missing in the re-telling.

Another random twist not mentioned since is when Jonathan resolves that, if Mina is going to be a vampire, he would like to be a vampire too, so she does not have to go alone into the darkness. For this reason he is excepted from the promise she extracts from the others to put her out of her misery.

I did notice the supernatural theme around boundaries between natural things and the various rules vampires must obey. The day and night aspect is obvious but, for example, vampires can only board ships or cross flowing water at the high and low points of tides, so Dracula has to make fog and delay a ship's departure otherwise he wouldn't be able to get on-board. Mina, whom the scientifically-minded Van Helsing believes has a mental link to Dracula (hardly scientific), can only hypnotise her and get news of the vampire's current location in the ten or so minutes just before sunrise and just before sunset, when the vampire's mind loosens its grip. There's no reason given for why this might be, within the book, but it is part of Celtic mythology that boundaries form the link between realities and, within them, you have a moment of choice to go one way or another (our world vs the supernatural world, also good vs evil).

It's also fascinating to see what this original story does not include: No cape. No crossed candlesticks. No funny haircut. Mina is not the re-incarnation of Dracula's old squeeze. He does spend quite a lot of time sitting on windowsills and ear-wiggling in the form of a fat bat. The original Batman.

The tale seems to accelerate near the end, then the finale is gone in a flash (three pages?) with Dracula being intercepted on the way to the castle and not putting up a fight. The fear in the final scene is not from the physical actions of vampire because he lies quite still but is instead psychological and structural, the use of the ticking clock — defeat him before the sun sets or he gets his power and wins! Then he's finished off with steel poked through the heart, not a wooden stake, an aspect which has been changed in subsequent versions.

I can't give this story anything less than five stars, for several reasons. Firstly, it is the dawning of a legend that will be retold forever, part of our collective cultural framework. Secondly, this has survived the test of time and still has power, which can't be said of other top horror titles published in the very early years (Mary Shelley's *The Modern Prometheus* [Frankenstein] mentions plague, murder and a bit of ice but is otherwise unshocking). Of that period, what other competition is there? Unless there's a worthy answer, this would appear to be the very best horror story of its age by a clear margin.

Thirdly and finally, without the novel Dracula moving into film, we wouldn't have had the Christopher Lee (Dracula) and Peter Cushing (Van Helsing)

combination. Without them, the Jellybottys would never have written this:

“Peter Cushing lives in Whitstable,

I have seen him on a bicycle,

My mate’s gran buys his vegetables,

Peter Cushing lives in Whitstable...”

Repeat, repeat and then the drumbeat tempo of fear increases until you
screeeeeam!

- Dracula
- Horror
- Horror Fiction
- Vampires
- Bram Stoker

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