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Bela Lugosi as Dracula and Frances Dade as Lucy in the 1931 film. Universal Pictures

Bram Stoker's Dracula: bats, garlic, disturbing sexualities and a declining empire

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The London of the 1890s was a glamorous place – and a dangerous one. Observing the "teeming millions" in his professional role as manager of the London's Lyceum Theatre, Bram Stoker's view also included many celebrities, such as Arthur Conan Doyle (of Sherlock Holmes fame) and Oscar Wilde.

Close by the Lyceum's grand doors are the markets of Covent Garden, where poor girls (like Bernard Shaw's Eliza Doolittle) sold flowers to passing crowds. A little further on is the East End where the poor and despised could eke out a perilous living far from their birthplace in Ireland, Africa, India, Asia, and Eastern Europe (like Dickens's Fagin). If Jack the Ripper no longer haunted the dark streets, then crime, alcoholism and unexplained epidemic disease still brought terror and sudden, brutal death.

The inspiration for Stoker's classic tale was the Irish myths of vampires and banshees told to him by his mother when he was a sickly child. Yet Dracula's hunting ground is London itself: the so-called "civilised" English are endangered by their own modernity, and made vulnerable because of their overconfident belief in rationality and the superiority of race and nation.

Claes Bang in a 2020 adaptation of Dracula. Hartswood Films, BBC, Netflix/idmb

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Dracula's guest

Like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Dracula is an epistolary novel. Shelley's classic is presented as a series of letters. But in Dracula, Stoker goes one better, combining the travel diary of a young lawyer, Jonathan Harker, with collected testimonies from many perspectives: letters, journals, newspaper reports, and patient observations recorded on newfangled wax cylinders and communicated via the typing skills of his wife, Mina.

Harker has been sent to the Carpathian mountains, "one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe", to help a client – Count Dracula – with his purchase of a London property. Imprisoned by his host, Harker is seduced by a trio of vampire women in a sexually charged encounter that ends only when Dracula intervenes. "This man belongs to me," he declares.

Bram Stoker pictured circa 1906. Wikimedia Commons

As Harker deteriorates, the Count grows younger and stronger, but the horrors which leave Harker physically and mentally traumatised and Dracula reinvigorated are never made explicit.

Dracula makes his way to England on a Russian sailing ship – which arrives crewless, its captain dead. A large dog is reported leaving it. In England, Dracula attacks Lucy Westernra, Mina Harker's best friend.

As Lucy weakens, her suitors – Arthur Holmwood (later Lord Godalming), John Seward (head of an insane asylum), and Quincey Morris (a rich American) – seek the advice of Professor Abraham Van Helsing, who recognises the work of a vampire. Lucy dies, and newspapers report a "Bloofer lady" (beautiful lady) attacking children on Hampstead Heath. Led by Van Helsing, the men confront and stake Lucy.

Reunited with Harker and Mina, the vampire-hunters turn to defeating Dracula, combining Van Helsing's knowledge of folk superstition with modern technology. The vampire is dispatched, not with the required wooden stake and decapitation, but with two knives: is he dead?

Sexual transgression

Stoker uses the vampire to explore the cultural perils surrounding him. By the 1890s, Britain feared its empire was in decline – threatened by foreigners without and communities of migrants within. As London grew, diseases like cholera struck suddenly, and ravaged the metropolis.

And there were fears of moral contamination. Liberated "New Women" sought jobs, rights, and the vote. Homosexual scandals erupted in the press, culminating in the 1895 trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde. Dracula's monstrosity threatens to uncover the frailty of Britain's imperial mastery and – as with Harker – its masculinity.

Gary Oldman and Winona Ryder in a 1992 film of Dracula. American Zoetrope, Columbia Pictures, Osiris Films

First published in 1897, Dracula is the best-known vampire story in English, and the one that invented many common tropes – transformation into a bat, the use of garlic and holy wafers. But it wasn't the first British vampire story. Ken Gelder suggests in his book Reading the Vampire that wealthy young Englishmen first encountered peasant folk tales about vampires while enjoying the Grand Tour on the continent in the 18th and 19th centuries (an early "gap year").

It was John Polidori whose 1819 story (reportedly composed the same night as Shelley's Frankenstein) introduced British readers to "The Vampyre". As Gelder notes, his Count Ruthven reproduces the dangerous influence of the poet, Lord Byron. But while Byron's infamous sexual magnetism is embedded in the vampiric Ruthven, his bisexuality is not.

Homosexual transgression enters the vampire story through Samuel Taylor Coleridge's unfinished poem Christabel and Sheridan Le Fanu's Carmilla. In these tales, vampiric women deceive unsuspecting fathers to contaminate pure English maidens. The early vampires are, from the beginning, associated with sexual deviance.

Between myth and parody

Arriving at roughly the same time as early experiments with film, Dracula quickly became synonymous with horror films. First played by Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, Dracula is endlessly adapted. The vampire is now ubiquitous in popular culture.

The uncanny – familiar objects behaving in unfamiliar ways – lies at the heart of horror. But today's Dracula narrative is often diluted by its familiarity. Sanitised versions of the vampire abound. Children meet "Drac" through Sesame Street's The Count, or the character voiced by Adam Sandler in Hotel Transylvania. These vampires' obsessions are maths and domestic fatherhood – nary a drop of blood in sight.

Comic and campy versions have repositioned Dracula as part of the harmless family fun of Halloween – from Grandpa in The Munsters, to Nandor the Relentless in the mockumentary, What we do in the Shadows. If the best way to deal with our worst fears is to render them ridiculous, then perhaps these parodies still speak to the power of Stoker's original vision, and the unconscious fears it taps.

For every spoof, there is another story of the vampire as the predator in the darkness or the monster inside our home – including the genuinely unsettling vampire film, Let the Right One In.

And Dracula continues to be an effective allegory for our worst social and cultural fears. In the 1980s, the vampire's association with blood and sexual transgression made it perfect for exploring the AIDS crisis. More recently, in series like True Blood, vampire stories have explored the demonisation of social minorities and difference.

The gothic revival

Gothic stories emerged in the tumult of the late 18th century. But, as gothic critic, Kelly Hurley observes: "the Gothic is rightly, if partially, understood as a cyclical genre that reemerges in times of cultural stress."

At the turn of the 20th century, the British were gripped by cultural uncertainty. Literary scholar Stephen Arata has identified a fear of enervation at this time: "the sense that the entire nation – as a race of people, as a political and imperial force, as a social and cultural power – was in irretrievable decline."

This led to the gothic revival, during which our most popular (and persistent) gothic stories emerged: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the return of the vampire in Dracula.

***Read more:* [Guide to the classics: Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier — gender, gothic haunting and gaslighting]**

Gothic stories excite the senses, relying on our preconditioned responses to common textual elements: castles, ruined abbeys, storms, uncanny doubles to evoke terror. Stoker uses these gothic tropes to heighten expectation. For example, when Jonathan Harker first arrives at Dracula's castle, it is midnight, dogs are baying, there is a ghostly figure, and a wolf attack.

As Harker realises he is a prisoner, Dracula's uncanny animal qualities are revealed:

> *But my very feelings changed to repulsion and terror when I saw the whole man slowly emerge from the window and begin to crawl down the castle wall over that dreadful abyss, face down with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings.*

If the story lingers on events which can only be supernatural, the novel's structure with its compilation of letters, diaries, and cuttings insistently locates the text in the "real" world, demanding readers receive it as fact. Events are carefully dated to between May 3 and November 10. Harker says in his epigraph:

> *There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within range of knowledge of those who made them.*

Yet the gothic instability produced by a book of fragments also undermines its own assertions of authenticity. Indeed, by the end of the book, Harker declares "in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of typewriting."

The monster as warning: anti-semitism

Scholar Jack Halberstam has described Dracula as an "aggregate of race, class, and gender [...] Dracula is otherness itself."

The Harkers describe Dracula as "a tall thin man with a beak nose and black moustache and pointed beard". Dracula's body marks him as Jewish and criminal, interrelated concepts in the medical language of the 1890s. "Scientific" experiments of the time – thoroughly disproved since – linked criminality to (commonly racialised) physical features.

Similarly, Dracula's desire for blood aligns him with blood libel (a false allegation made about Jewish people murdering Christian boys to use their blood in their rituals). So does the taking of children by both Dracula and Lucy.

Halberstam connects the novel's anti-Semitism with the increased migration of Ashkenazi Jews to the East End of London around the time Stoker was writing his novel.

Technological change

Victorian inventions like the typewriter, the telegram and the railway now seem slow and outdated. But they were the cutting-edge technologies of Stoker's day.

Van Helsing declares to his fellow vampire-hunters:

> *[W]e have sources of science; we are free to act and think; and the hours of the day and the night are ours equally. In fact, so far as our powers extend, they are unfettered, and we are free to use them.*

Dracula relies on the old ways – carriages, sailing ships, and letters. His pursuers use shorthand, wax cylinders for voice recordings and the typewriter, enabling them to collate and share information: the power of mass media. Ultimately, it is technology that defeats Dracula.

But if modernity is their greatest weapon, it's also their greatest weakness. For example, Dracula gains access to Lucy through her mother's ignorance of folklore: she removes Van Helsing's protective garlic flowers and throws open the window.

Threatening sexuality

Lucy becomes the focus of Dracula's attention because she is a modern woman. It is her unconventional views that make her a target for Stoker.

In Dracula, female sexual desire is more than a simple metaphor: it's unnatural. The sexual aggression of Dracula's three vampire "wives" proves irresistible to Harker. They are monstrous as much for their overt sexuality as their fangs. And Lucy crosses an important line by venturing out at night (albeit by sleepwalking) – the street at night is the realm of the prostitute.

Lucy also frankly enjoys the courtship of three men: Arthur Holmwood, John Seward, and Quincey Morris. She questions traditional English monogamy, asking "Why can't they let a girl marry three men?"

Sexual excess is foreshadowed when Lucy requires blood transfusions from four men. And realised in the "voluptuous wantoness" she displays as a vampire, which hardens her by-now husband, Arthur, to the violent necessity of staking her.

Lucy's independence aligns with the New Woman's first-wave feminist demands for education, suffrage, and financial self-sufficiency. Dracula's other victim is Mina, the schoolmistress with a "man's brain [...] and a woman's heart", whose typing skill links her to emerging areas of women's employment.

Stoker positions his women ambiguously. They are both valued beyond measure and disposed toward monstrosity. Possibly the most disturbing moment in the novel is when Mina is forced to drink Dracula's blood as a kitten laps milk from a saucer. It is the women who are the weakest links in the nation's armour.

Poster for the 1931 movie. Universal Pictures

English fears of homosexuality peaked with the trials of Oscar Wilde, who Stoker knew well. Indeed, author and scholar Talia Schaffer argues Stoker's passionate admiration for Walt Whitman displays a homoerotic intensity.

Lurking in the novel's shadows is the question of what happened between Harker and Dracula in Carpathia? Harker's experiences leave him shattered in mind and body. Sister Agatha reports, "the traces of such an illness as his do not lightly die away."

Dracula's at-arms-length condemnation of homosexuality is almost certainly influenced by the timing of its composition, so close to Wilde's conviction for gross indecency. Perhaps, like many of Wilde's former friends and associates, Stoker wanted to signal his distance from Wilde and his scandalous lifestyle.

Dracula's defeat promises resolution. But the birth of baby Quincey Harker, whose "bundle of names links all our little band of men together", reminds us of Mina's exclusion from the band. It recalls her sharing blood with Dracula – and echoes Lucy's promiscuous desire for three husbands. Questions of racial contamination and England's fate are left open.

Dracula, as gothic monster, represents turn-of-the-century fears of immigrants, of modern technology, of Jews, of women's rights, of homosexuality. Yet, 125 years later, Stoker's creation continues to target our deepest fears.