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Dracula

by Bram Stoker





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Dracula by Bram Stoker

With an Introduction by
George Stade



BANTAM BOOKS

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • SYDNEY

DRACULA

A Bantam Book

PRINTING HISTORY

*Dracula was first published in 1897
Bantam Classic edition / October 1981*

*Cover painting, "Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon,"
(detail), by Caspar David Friedrich. Courtesy of the Nationalgalerie,
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ISBN 0-553-21047-5

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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Avenue, New York, New York 10103.*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

INTRODUCTION

by George Stade

Hair grows on the palms of Dracula's hands. His ears are long and pointed. His red eyes glare out from under thick eyebrows that meet over a knife of a nose. His red, swollen lips are flagrant against the glimmer of his face, with its extraordinary pallor, its long white mustache, its prominent teeth. His breath is rank. He is centuries old and unnaturally strong. Like Beowulf, he has a "grip of steel"; once he gets you he doesn't let go. His intelligence is powerful, but his "child-brain" is entirely at the service of his appetites, the primitive hungers that civilization to maintain itself must deny.

That is how he appears to others, but Dracula cannot see himself, for no mirror will contain his image. Dracula is already a reflection, a shadow, an apparition, a matter of mind rather than matter—and in any case, when we look for him in mirrors, our own faces get in the way. Nor can the light of day illuminate his murks, for until nightfall he likes to lie dormant in his coffin. "I love the shade and the shadow," he says. His opponent and opposite and alter ego, Dr. Abraham van Helsing, notes that Dracula's "power ceases, as that of all evil things, at the coming of day." It is while respectable citizens rest dreaming in their beds that he romps among creatures subject to his command and kindred to his spirit—wolves, bats, owls, rats, and mice—nocturnal predators or nocturnal invaders of our sheltering homes. Their forms are his to take on when he will, and he can materialize out of mists, dust motes, moonbeams, out of whatever our spellbound imaginations have at hand to work over. But he cannot cross any threshold or any windowsill without an invitation from someone within who is responsive to his suit. Once you let him in, he will hypnotize you, thus making it all the easier

for you to do what you have willed him to will you to do.

But he prefers to visit his hosts when they are asleep. Morning finds them exhausted and drained, troubled by half-remembered dreams of suffocation and blood. Madmen confess that Dracula is their master, for lunatics have already succumbed to the abysmal longings that he embodies. But religious men know that the paraphernalia of Christianity are prophylactic against the taint of his infectious and ravening charm. And vampires only rest easy in consecrated ground. Says van Helsing, "this evil thing is rooted deep in all good; in soil barren of memories it cannot rest." (Dracula carries fifty crates of consecrated earth with him to England, just to make sure he isn't caught short.) Vampires, in Stoker's version, are puritan Christianity's demonic underside, its negative image, just as Dracula is a parody of Christ, whom he quotes: "Except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. . . . He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me, and I in him." "The blood is the life." Although Dracula has large canine rather than needle-shaped incisors, when he bites you he leaves two little holes in your skin, very like a serpent.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, in short, is an apparition of what we repress, particularly eros. To be bitten by Dracula is to become a slave to a kind of lust, abandoned to unlawful hungers, a projection of the beholder's desire and dread. After he has gotten Mina Harker to feed from an opened vein in his breast, Dracula says this to his male pursuers: "Your girls that you love are mine already; and through them you and others shall be mine—my creatures to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed." "Unclean! Unclean!" is Mina's own judgment on what she calls her now "polluted flesh."

Dracula is the symptom of a wish, largely sexual, that we wish we did not have. The effect of repression is to turn a hunger into a horror; the image of a repressed longing as it appears in a dream or a fiction is a sinister shape that threatens with what it promises, that insinuates the desire beneath the fear. Dracula, the "undead," is a composite of the buried life we desire and the moral death that is the punishment for

unearthing it. To a late-Victorian gentleman such as Stoker, in any case, sex was likely to seem bestial, polluting, depleting, deathly, satanic, a fever in the blood, the theme of dreams, the motive of madness, the lurking menace in the shadow of every scene. I, for one, am not prepared to dispute him.

To a woman in a Victorian frame of mind, Dracula's kiss is but a scratch where she itches—if we can believe the experts. Bela Lugosi, not quite seriously, told an interviewer that ninety-one percent of his admiring letters came from women, "and the rest from scientists and priests. The scientists and priests ask my views about spiritualism, Yogi, theosophy, and things like that. Women are interested in terror for the sake of terror. For generations they have been the subject sex. This seems to have bred a masochistic interest—an enjoyment of, or at least a keen interest in, suffering experienced vicariously on the screen."

Christopher Lee, into whose person the spirit of Dracula seems to have passed from Lugosi, reached a similar conclusion: "Men are attracted to him because of the irresistible power he wields. For women there is the complete abandonment to the power of a man. . . . It's like being a sexual blood donor. What greater evidence of *giving*, than your blood flowing from your own blood-stream." Peter Wyngarde, who has been playing Dracula on the stage, agrees: "It's a totally sexual thing. All that blood sucking and the girl's apparent orgasm when he kisses her—a form of the sex act. . . . He has that sinister, almost violent look that men have who are extremely sexually attractive to women." The testimony of Lugosi, Lee, and Wyngarde is anything but conclusive evidence, but it tells us, at least, how three successful male leads have played Dracula. And certainly the male leads of women's gothic romances, from *Jane Eyre* to the latest imitation of *Rebecca*—those aristocrats with ancient names and ruined mansions, with their awful demands, their hawk noses and piercing eyes, their stern and stepfatherly aspects—have been infected with the blood of the vampire.

But to the modern reader what is likely to seem scariest in Bram Stoker's novel of 1897 is not so much the effect of Dracula on women, as the effect on *men* of Dracula's effect

on women. The prevailing emotion of the novel is a screaming horror of female sexuality. Along with the horror, of course, goes fascination and hate. Early in the novel Jonathan Harker lies on a couch in Dracula's castle, pretending to be asleep, as three of the vampire's loathly ladies, who are nevertheless very beautiful, come to him. He looks out from under his eyelashes "in an agony of delightful anticipation" and in a "languorous ecstasy" as one of the women, he tells us, "went down on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the sharp white teeth." As she slowly came closer, Harker continues, "I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and I could feel the hot breath on my neck." That breath is honeysweet, "but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood."

The emotional center of the novel balances quiveringly between two long episodes: in one, sweet and virginal Lucy Westenra, the Light of the West, is turned into a vampire by Dracula; in the other, Mina Harker, Stoker's paragon of womanhood, is saved, just barely, from that fate worse than death. At one point van Helsing, Arthur Holmwood (her fiancé), and two former suitors come upon Lucy, who is on her way home to her grave after a night of preying on children, blood trickling over her chin and staining "the purity of her lawn death-robe." When she sees them, "with a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone"—for to become a lady vampire is to invert the roles of nurturing mother and chaste wife. "Come to me, Arthur," she says. "Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" At that moment, says Dr. John Seward, a former suitor, "my love passed into hate and loathing; had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight."

One night later, he gets his chance. The four men steal into Lucy's crypt and pry open her coffin. "She seemed like a nightmare of Lucy as she lay there; the pointed teeth, the bloodstained, voluptuous mouth—which it made one shudder to see—the whole carnal and unspiritual appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy's sweet purity." And just listen with your Freudian ear open to the language in which Dr. Seward describes the driving of a stake into Lucy's breast by her fiancé:

The thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, driving deeper and deeper the mercy bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart spurted up around it. His face was set, and high duty seemed to shine through it; the sight of it gave us courage so that our voices seemed to ring through the little vault.

And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth seemed to champ, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. The terrible task was over.

That ought to hold her.

Mina Harker escapes a like fate for a number of reasons. For one, "she has a man's brain . . . and a woman's heart," a saving combination. The usual woman, Stoker makes clear, is less resistant; like madmen and children and Dracula, she has only an unreliable and unevolved "child-brain" to preserve her from evil—unless brave men come to her aid. Says Mina, "I know that all that brave men can do for a poor weak woman, whose soul is perhaps lost—no, no, not yet, but is at any rate at stake—you will do. But you must remember that I am not as you are. There is a poison in my blood, in my soul, which may destroy me." Says van Helsing, "A brave man's

blood is the best thing on this earth when a woman is in trouble." The men around her, having learned from Lucy, know what ails Mina and have what it takes to effect a cure.

Their bravery consists largely of self-control, of a rigid moral armament against temptation, but is related to the progressive values of high Victorian culture, of which these men, eminent Victorians all, are the custodians. The last third of the novel reads like a parable of consciousness, reason, and science stamping out the last recalcitrant monsters of unreason. "We are pledged to set the world free," says van Helsing. "Oh, unconscious cerebration!" says Dr. Seward, "you will have to give the wall [give way] to your conscious brother," a sentiment that anticipates Freud's famous formula: "Where id was, there shall ego be." Through scientific teamwork and method, through research and the sifting of documents, through the gradual accumulation of evidence ordered and documented by advanced devices such as phonograph rolls and typewriters, these sons of Hercules track Dracula and his consorts to their lairs and impale them like specimens.

The leader of Stoker's knights of progress is Abraham van Helsing, a doctor and a lawyer, "a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day." Like Victor Frankenstein three-quarters of a century earlier, he sums up the advanced thinking of his time. But like his contemporaries Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, he can solve mysteries and banish horrors that elude everyone else because he knows about them firsthand, from within. Van Helsing, for example, owes his life to an episode of benevolent vampirism, to the sucking (by Dr. Seward) of infected blood from a wound in his hand. Again like Holmes and Freud, van Helsing suffers from melancholia, but he also suffers momentary breakdowns into hysteria and something like madness. Like Dracula, he lets out a sharp hiss when startled; his bushy eyebrows, like Dracula's, meet over his nose. Van Helsing is to Dracula as Victor Frankenstein is to his monster, as Holmes is to Moriarty, as Dr. Jekyll is to Mr. Hyde, as Freud's ego is to his id. But he is also related to his author, with whom he shares a first name.

About Bram Stoker's earliest years we know very little, except that he was born in 1847, in Dublin, one of seven children, but his mother's favorite. According to his own account, he was very sickly during the first seven years of his life, which he spent in bed, while his mother tended him with loving care. She also entertained him with Irish ghost stories—the worst kind there is—with tales of banshees, demons, ghouls, with horrific accounts of the cholera outbreak of 1832. "Its bitter strange kiss, and man's want of experience or knowledge of its nature, or how best to resist its attacks, added, if anything could, to its horrors"—so she wrote it out, years later, at her son's request.

Mrs. Stoker was a remarkable woman—strong-minded, ambitious, proud, a writer, a social worker, a visitor to workhouses for indigent and wayward girls, above all a feminist—much like her friend, Oscar Wilde's mother. When asked how she would cure all the social ills she saw around her, she shot back, "equalize the sexes." Oddly enough, however, she also said that she "did not care a tuppence" about her daughters; she much preferred her sons. When her husband, a mild, deferential civil servant, twenty years her senior, did not get a promotion due him, she protested, and damn well got results.

During his years at Trinity College, Bram Stoker more than compensated for his sickly youth. He became a champion athlete in a number of sports, a record breaker, known for his exaggerated, his (one might say) polemical masculinity, as he later was known for his insistent and inflexible chivalry to women. He also discovered Walt Whitman's poetry, which overwhelmed him. He lectured on it, defended it against scoffers, who were legion, wrote long, earnest, no longer extant letters to Whitman, who wrote back: "You were right to write me so unconventionally, so fresh, so manly." Stoker also lectured on feminism and argued feminist causes before the Philosophical Society, although by the time of *Dracula*, in which the "New Woman" is put firmly in her place, Stoker had changed his mind.

And he continued, during his young manhood, to sneak off with his father to the theater, where he met and was

overwhelmed by his real-life vampire, the actor and producer Henry Irving, whose stage manager Stoker later became. He worked so prodigiously and faithfully for Irving (and for such scant material reward, during a twenty-seven-year period, that he had to borrow money from friends after Irving died), that the cause of his own demise, as his death certificate put it, was "exhaustion." (But Stoker's grandnephew, Daniel Farson, suspects that he died of syphilis. Certainly he became dotty near the end of his life. It is not known to what expedients Stoker's beautiful and frigid wife drove him.) As Orson Wells noted, there is a good deal of Henry Irving, Stoker's "bad father," in *Dracula*, as there is something of Stoker's good father, Abraham Stoker, in *Abraham van Helsing*.

Stoker's immense labors for Irving did not prevent him from writing, besides *Dracula*, seventeen other volumes, in a number of which women disguise themselves as men. In *Famous Imposters* women disguise themselves as men and men disguise themselves as women. Queen Elizabeth, we learn, was really a boy who was brought up as a woman for mainly political reasons. Stoker's last novel is called *The Lair of the White Worm*, the horror in which is an alluring snake woman who lives in a 1000-foot hole on the site of an ancient temple called Diana's Grove. A hapless servant falls in love with her, and his reward is to be dragged, "her white arms encircling him, down into the noisome depths of her hole." The White Worm, who in human form is the beauteous Lady Arabella, is a particularly difficult monster to overcome, because "this one is a woman, with all a woman's wit, combined with the heartlessness of a *cocotte*." Nevertheless, the men steel themselves: "it strikes me that, as we have to protect ourselves and others against feminine nature, our strong game will be to play our masculine against her feminine." Lightning finally blasts Arabella in her hole: "At short irregular intervals the hell-broth in the hole seemed as if boiling up. It rose and fell again and turned over, showing in fresh form much of the nauseous detail which had been visible earlier. The worst parts were the great masses of the flesh of the monstrous Worm, in all its red and sickening

aspect. . . . The sight was horrible enough, but, with the awful smell added, was simply unbearable.”

In spite of such obscenities, Stoker was a prude, who favored censorship. “A close analysis,” he wrote, “will show that the only emotions which in the long run harm are those arising from sex impulses, and when we have realized this we have put a finger on the actual point of danger.” In any product of the imagination, Stoker argues, “there is a possible element of evil.” And that is why we need censorship of fiction:

A number of books have been published in England that would be a disgrace to any country less civilized than our own. They are meant by both authors and publishers to bring to the winning of commercial success the forces of evil inherent in man. The evil is grave and dangerous, and may, if it does not already, deeply affect the principles and lives of the young people of this country.

And as by now you might expect, “women are the worst offenders in this form of breach of moral law.”

In spite of the disparity between this prudery and the prurience of *Dracula*, Stoker was not a hypocrite. He simply did not know his own mind. He would not have been able to write a book like *Dracula* if he had. Horror has to be played straight, or it becomes something else. It becomes camp. The practitioner of camp, in art or life, mocks what he imitates and therefore mocks himself. He looks down on the form or style he mimics, but he looks askance at himself for mimicking it. He is like the female impersonator who parodies, assumes, disparages, and envies the female forms and styles he cannot call his own.

I don't know whether *Dracula* affected the principles and lives of the young people of Stoker's country or any other, though I doubt it. There is little doubt, however, that the prurience and prudery of Stoker's time affected the makeup of his Transylvanian count. There is still less doubt that Stoker shared the intimate anxieties of his time, among them the worrisome question as to what constitutes manliness and

what femininity. Much as Stoker feared and hated and loved the woman in women, it was the woman in himself that bothered him most. In another of Stoker's novels, *Lady Athlyne* (1908), a "deep thinking, young madman who committed suicide at twenty-five," speculates about the relations between the sexes:

All men and all women, according to him have in themselves the cells of both sexes; and the accredited masculinity or femininity of the individual is determined by the multiplication and development of these cells.

Thus the ideal man is entirely or almost entirely masculine, and the ideal woman is entirely or almost entirely feminine.

That he might not be entirely masculine is what bothered Stoker. The uninterrupted and unequalled success of *Dracula* is proof that Stoker's worries and those of his time bother us still. The likelihood is that in one form or another they have bothered us always.

For *Dracula* is a classic, a book that tells us not what happened but shows us something of what happens wherever there are humans. The fear of death and fear of the dead and the dream of immortality; the psychological and sexual dialectic within us of mastery and submission, of sadism and masochism, of the desire to hurt those we love and to be hurt by them for our desires; the conflict within us between knowledge turned into civilizing power and the power of unknowable and uncivil urges; the alternating control over us of the moonlit energies of the night, when fantasies rise from our sleeping heads to enact our darkest desires, and the waking renunciations of the day, domain of the reality principle; the struggle to achieve, maintain, and define manhood and womanhood—these have always been with us. In *Dracula*, for all its occasional clumsiness and systematic naiveté, Stoker transformed what was merely personal or only of his time into images of something more—of something at once monstrous and definitively human.

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. 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 the range of knowledge of those who made them.

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