

DRACULA

BRAM STOKER



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Dracula, by Bram Stoker

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Dr Robin Sims (programme leader, English)

Dr David Barker (programme leader, MA Publishing)

Dr Moy McCrory (senior lecturer, Creative and Professional Writing)

Dr Simon Heywood (programme leader, Creative and Professional Writing)

Dr Matthew Cheeseman (programme leader, MA Creative Writing)

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Dracula's fangs

The vampire re-imagined

MATTHEW CHEESEMAN

I HAVE HELD Dracula's fangs in my hand. They were long and yellow and fixed to a pale pink gum guard. Behind them was a small cylinder stained with a rusty red residue. Christopher Lee bit this cylinder to coat the teeth with fake blood during the filming of Hammer Films' 1958 Technicolor adaptation of *Dracula*. The prop is kept in a box in the collection of the (then) National Media Museum in Bradford, which I visited on a research trip. In the film there is a striking scene of Christopher Lee as Dracula: his eyes wide and pink, contrasting with the waxy pallor of his cheeks. He's just bitten the cylinder and lurid blood is streaming down the fangs, running off his chin in rivulets from either side of his open mouth. His expression is alert and aggressive. He has the bloodlust.

Until this scene, cinematic vampires didn't have fangs. The images are a search away: Max Schreck in *Nosferatu* (1922) wore extended pointed incisors in the middle of his mouth, rather like a rat, while Bela Lugosi's 1931 portrayal didn't have fangs at all, because Lugosi was reprising his theatrical depiction of the Count (where prosthetic teeth were not worn as they inhibited delivery from stage). It was the critical and commercial success of the Hammer Films production that made it impossible to imagine any vampire (let alone Dracula himself), without canine teeth tapering to suggestive points on either side of the mouth. This was pretty much the way of vampires, on screen and in books, until Stephanie Meyer introduced a more modest dental profile: while *Twilight's* vampires had razor-sharp teeth, they did not have notable, extended canines. This was inspired from the growing tendency to emphasise the human in the vampire, which has come to the fore over the last forty years of vampire literature, kickstarted by the soul-searching, metaphysical vampires found in Anne Rice's (1976) *Interview with the Vampire*.

It is clear that Dracula is far from human in Bram Stoker's novel. The smooth, almost seductive figure is not present. Dracula has hairy palms, pointed nails, rank breath and a beaky nose:

His face was not a good face; it was hard, and cruel, and sensual, and his big white teeth, that looked all the whiter because his lips were so red, were pointed like an animal's. (143)

There's been some work on these depictions: Judith Halberstam¹ suggests that Dracula 'embodies and exhibits all the stereotyping of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism'. This is part of a larger theme in the novel, of the exotic and foreign threatening secure, domestic England. The reason Jonathan Harker (a solicitor) visits Transylvania is to facilitate a property transaction to support Dracula's move to London. Thus, among many things, *Dracula* is a novel about estate agents. The story depicts a planned invasion that speaks to fears of conspiracy and pollution: Dracula landing in the north and then travelling south, drinking English blood and turning women (and maybe—gasp—men) into filthy vampires. Entwined with this xenophobia is a double play that explains his popularity: all the monstrous foreign-ness of the Count is also associated with the sexual. The exotic, foreign, disordered and sexual are all mapped together to characterise Dracula's threat to late Victorian society in a novel that was written to thrill, excite, scare and titillate. Not all of these themes are carried over into further adaptations of *Dracula*, which tend to stay away from the monstrous. As the twentieth century rolls on and vampires begin to multiply, it was Dracula's passion that fascinated the imagination of writers and fans alike.

And so we have Dracula the suave and handsome Count, who would later become Dracula the playboy, Dracula the lounge lizard and even Dracula the hardcore porn star (in 1978's painfully entitled *Dracula Sucks*). This more urbane character can be traced to the authorised theatrical adaptation, written by Hamilton Deane in a four-week period in 1924 while he suffered from a particularly heavy cold. His Dracula was no longer an invader: he wore a cape and a tuxedo and was already part of London society when the curtain went up. This production was to tour the UK in various incarnations for seventeen years, establishing itself on the West End in the process, from which it was revised to Broadway, starring Bela Lugosi, who eventually crossed over to the screen in Hollywood. After the further run of vampires initiated by Christopher Lee's bloodier but still sensual Dracula, the play was revived on Broadway in 1977 and in 1978 in the West End, where Terence Stamp played the title role.

Derby, indeed, has a central role in this story, for it was here that

¹ Judith Halberstam (1995), *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 92.

the very first performance of the authorised adaptation was staged, when it opened at the Grand Theatre in 1924. The building still stands in the centre of Derby: it closed as a theatre in 1950 and spent decades as a dance hall (Pink Floyd played there in the summer of love, 1967). After many years as a nightclub, in 2007 it became an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet by the name of May Sum, which eventually closed its doors in late 2018. At the time of writing the venue has reopened as an adult-only crazy golf bar with glow-in-the-dark graffiti, table tennis and Jamaican ‘street food’.

Now you can eat jerk chicken and play indoor golf on the very stage where Dracula was once reborn as a sex symbol. Suitably, the place is called ‘The House of Holes’ and is decorated with images of giant bats, dildos and sex mannequins. Any reading of these as an explicit homage to the Count would be misplaced, however, for they are references to Bacardi and hen-dos. Dracula has long flown this particular roost, although I am sure he will make a slight return around Hallowe’en, when his teeth will flash in fancy dress.

This edition of *Dracula*, published in Derby, seems a suitable place to mark the decline of the Count as sensual aristocrat. That particular erotic energy has been discharged and defused: who, in these times of pervasive and systemic male abuse, has any desire for a mesmerising predator, however witty and charming? This is a welcome result of raised consciousness and feminist solidarity. Because of the #metoo movement (and others) smooth-talking, society vampires of all stripes have been revealed for what they are: monsters that walk among us.

This end does not necessarily mean, however, that it is time for more of the overtly monstrous vampires referred to in this novel and depicted in films such as *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Van Helsing* (2004). We have enough people spreading hate and uncertainty to call forth monsters born out of nineteenth-century blood and soil. It wouldn’t be fair, however, to claim that Dracula is no longer relevant; for we will keep reading and adapting him. Indeed, we are in no danger of stopping: he is in our blood, or as we prefer to say now, our DNA.

The vampire begets investors who fund fictional works depicting the vampire. As a result you would be hard-pressed to find someone who has never heard Dracula’s name or doesn’t recognise one of his many mutations (from *Sesame Street*’s Count von Count to *Castlevania*’s Dracula Vlad Țepeș). Through all the shapeshifting the star remains a bankable asset. Despite this novel being long out of copyright, Bram Stoker’s estate maintain a ‘Signature Shop’ selling everything from postage stamps signed by his grandsons to a ‘Limited Edition Bram Stoker Commemorative Dracula Pen’, which comes in a coffin that, when opened, plays Bach’s

'Toccatà and Fugue in D minor'. Presumably this Dracula wouldn't feel out of place signing autographs on the stage in *The House of Holes*.

Vampirism, then, is a curious affliction. It can be brilliant and terrifying, like Christopher Lee, but it can also be sadly commodified, hawking pens from inside the cloak or appearing in non-erotic erotic films. We are caught between these vampires, who at times behave like predators, other times like prey, at once both victim of capitalism and its aggressive manifestations. The original source is full of such ambivalence. It is written across Lucy Westerna as she slowly turns into a vampire:

... we saw a spasm as of rage flit like a shadow over her face; the sharp teeth champed together. Then her eyes closed, and she breathed heavily ... shortly after she opened her eyes in all their softness, and putting out her poor pale, thin hand, took Van Helsing's great brown one; drawing it to her, she kissed it. 'My true friend,' she said, in a faint voice ... (134)

The predator animates in a spasm, in a shadow. The beast comes over us. The teeth elongate at night, as we both resist and relish our corruption. Like Jonathan Harker, however, there is something in us that desires to be prey. We long for 'the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there' on the 'supersensitive skin' of our throats (32). We love to be desired just as we love to desire. Perhaps it is because we are all made of meat. Born food; we know how good we taste. No wonder, perhaps, that our desire exceeds what we are allowed to have. As Lucy memorably says, 'Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble? But this is heresy, and I must not say it' (49).

Comparing vampirism to capitalism is certainly no heresy; it's an old metaphor, older than this novel—but one which still has some bite. Run your tongue along your teeth. How sharp are you? Hungry much? We are caught in the constant buying and selling of Dracula just as we are caught in the constant buying and selling of ourselves and of all things. Products, games, films, books, costumes, blood, jerk chicken, cloaks, crazy golf, Bacardi, stamps, pens and now this book, here in your hands, this edition of *Dracula*, all swallowed up in the same story. Which is to say that the vampire has become us, it hides everywhere, in and out of sight, no longer bothered by broad daylight. The evil smiles have gone and in their place the 'cold stare of lion-like disdain'. (255)

But fear not, if there is one lesson we can draw from this novel, it is that with courage, thought and careful preparation, vampires can be defeated. It is Professor Van Helsing, of course, who galvanises this victory:

DRACULA

He is a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day; and he has, I believe, an absolutely open mind. This, with an iron nerve, a temper of the ice-brook, an indomitable resolution, self-command and toleration exalted from virtues to blessings, and the kindest and truest heart that beats—these form his equipment for the noble work that he is doing for mankind—work both in theory and practice, for his views are as wide as his all-embracing sympathy. (94)

Van Helsing can certainly be read as a manifestation of the potential of Higher Education. I'd like to say that it is he, and not Dracula, who we are most likely to encounter in Derby today.