

THIS ESSAY SKETCHES OUT THE THEME THAT WILL BE DEVELOPED IN A LONGER, MORE DETAILED ANALYSIS.

## Bram Stoker's Dracula

Essay

by b. b. brown

“One house would be attacked and the next spared,” wrote Charlotte Stoker in a letter of 1872 to her son, Bram. “There was no telling who would go next, and when one said good-bye to a friend he said it as if for ever. In a few days, the town became a place of the dead.” A decade later, Bram Stoker recast this remembrance of a cholera epidemic into a fable for children called “The Invisible Giant”, in which a young girl, Zaya, sees a giant approaching her town. “It was shrouded in a great misty robe that covered it, fading away into the air so that she could only see the face and the grim, spectral hands.” Though the giant is blind, so are the people; they jeer and threaten her when Zaya warns them. But before they can touch her, “the unseen giant was among them, wandering through the city to and fro, so that none could tell where next he would lay his ice-cold hand.” Only Zaya who, like Cassandra, saw what no one else wished to see, survives the plague.

Ambition rather than clear-sightedness seems to have been the ruling point in the Stoker home, for Charlotte pushed her children to excel, even resenting that one of her five sons once missed placing first in an examination “though he came second out of a thousand.” Bram, on the other hand, sought out knowledge for its own sake. Tutored as a child, he was a superb scholar and a star athlete at university, graduating from Trinity College in Dublin with honors in science. He later returned for a MA degree, and then began studying law. Using his father’s limited influence to get a job, Stoker took a civil service position where he produced things for the government such as the book *Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland* (1879). After thirteen years of this safe but deadly dull career, he escaped (“London at last!” reads his diary) to work with the first actor to be knighted, Henry Irving. One of the pleasures of being Irving’s personal manager was the nightly preparation for the Lyceum Theatre’s supper-discussions, which were held in the Beefsteak Room after each evening’s performance. Attracting politicians, writers, historians, and intellectuals ranging from Mark Twain to Gladstone to Henry Morton

Stanley, these gatherings grew into one of London's cultural hubs and became crucial to Stoker's ever-probing mind.

After being called to the bar, Stoker channelled even more of his restless energy into literary work, publishing two books, *The Watter's Mou* and *The Shoulder of Shasta*, in the same year that he began writing his most famous work, *Dracula*. His research for the novel drew him into six years of sporadic research through books of folklore and history, for example, William Wilkinson's *An Account of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia*, and such specialized studies as *Localization of Diseases of the Brain and the Spinal Marrow* by French neurologist, Jean Marin Charcot. In addition, working holidays in Whitby allowed him to collect an enormous amount of first-hand research into shipwrecks, drowning victims, tomb inscriptions, and local superstitions, as well as to study weather variations, cloud formations, storm and tide patterns, and to gather descriptions of town, harbor, and sea. Wherever possible, Stoker sought to make every detail in the story true and real.

As early as 1890, Stoker's notes indicated a novel in epistolary form that detailed the invasion of England by a creature named "Count Vampyr"; but, while working in East European folklore and history, he discovered or was directed to the historical figure of Vlad Tepes, "The Impaler". As a Transylvanian prince whose father was a crusader with the battlename "Dracul", meaning dragon or devil, Vlad came to be called "Dracula", meaning son of the devil. This Vlad Dracula was a trained warrior, born in a foreign land renowned as a "whirlpool" of superstition, who earned a reputation for cleverness and cruelty that was indistinguishable from insanity. In a single day, he had an entire town of 20,000 men, women, and children impaled. When a subordinate present at the massacre mentioned the strong odor, Vlad had him impaled on a tall stake above the offensive smell of death. Such ferocity does not easily die.

Stoker transformed this mortal terror into a plague incarnate, a thing of semi-conscious thought and inhuman power. During one of the vampire-hunters' daily war conferences, where they sift and compare facts, Van Helsing summarizes what they face. The vampire can direct the weather, for the rain, storm, and lightning bend to his will; he controls various wild animals and can assume their shape, including the rat, the death'shead moth, the bat, and the wolf; but, because "this evil thing is rooted deep in all good", he must obey certain rules of nature--almost invulnerable by night, he can be killed like any mortal during the day. And, yet, there is more danger from this "King Vampire", warns Van Helsing, for though the ordinary vampire remains at one level,

never changing, forever impulsive and short-sighted, Dracula both learns and plans. "In him," says Van Helsing in his idiosyncratic manner, "some vital principle have in strange way found their utmost; and as his body keep strong and grow and thrive, so his brain grow too."

Throughout the novel, there are references to knowledge and thought, and most particularly to their inherent power. Mina Harker, the mother figure of Van Helsing's "family" of vampire-hunters, reasons that the "Count is a criminal...and qua criminal he is of imperfectly formed mind [thus] as he is criminal he is selfish; and as his intellect is small and his action is based on selfishness, he confines himself to one purpose. That purpose is remorseless." It is this criminal aspect of Dracula's brain that both frightens and gives Van Helsing hope. "He has all along, since his coming, been trying his power, slowly but surely; that big child-brain of his is working had he dared, at the first, to attempt certain things he would long ago have been beyond our power". Finally, as Dracula himself explains in familiar military terms, "what good are peasants without a leader? Where ends the war without a brain and a heart to conduct it?"

The novel's plot clearly sketches the invasion of a singleminded and lethal "plague", which is destroyed by people of knowledge who have the courage born of a noble cause. Despite this, many interpretations of Dracula have instead emphasized the supposed Freudian tendencies or the novel's underlying tone of sensuality. More than merely expressing a "repressed" Victorian's Oedipal complex, however, Stoker's tale reflects an ancient conflict of human culture: should the power embodied in knowledge be enslaved to selfish ends, as Dracula's child-brain seeks, or should it serve larger human ends? "Oh! if such an one was to come from God, and not the Devil," sighs Van Helsing, "what a force for good might he not be in this old world of ours."

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