



The best books ever written

Bram Stoker and the creation of *Dracula* by Christopher Frayling

Dracula first appeared in bookshops on 26 May 1897, price 6 shillings, in a print-run of three thousand copies. It was bound in yellow cloth, with red lettering. Four years later, *Dracula* was reissued in a slightly abridged form as a sixpenny yellow-covered paperback - with, on the jacket, one of the only illustrations Bram Stoker ever had the chance to approve himself. This shows the Count as a white-haired military commander, with a bushy moustache and bat-like cloak, shinning down the stone walls of Castle Dracula - a very far cry from the seductive lounge-lizard of countless movie versions (more than two hundred, at the last count), the charismatic man in evening dress and opera cloak who says portentously 'children of the night, what music they make!'. It is almost impossible today to exorcize visual images of Max Schreck in *Nosferatu* or Bela Lugosi in *Dracula* or Christopher Lee in *The Horror of Dracula* or Gary Oldman in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* to reach back to the novel as Bram Stoker wrote it.

The original reviews were so-so. The *Athenaeum*, which in the past had panned all the fiction Stoker had put his name to, reckoned that *Dracula* was wanting in 'constructive art in the higher literary sense. It reads at times like a mere series of grotesquely incredible events': Gothic novels came in one of two categories - the suggestive ones and the blood-and-thunder ones; *Dracula* was definitely in the latter category. Others were more kind, after a fashion: 'we read nearly the whole with rapt attention', said *The Bookman*. Most reviewers found that the book made them feel uneasy, for one reason or another, but not nearly as uneasy as the works of Oscar Wilde, the plays of Henrik Ibsen and the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley. *Dracula* was probably transgressing *something* - but the critics weren't quite sure exactly what. And they weren't sure whether the author was sure either. Late Victorian readers seem to have read the book as an early piece of techno-fiction: blood-transfusions, phonograph-recordings and shorthand typing, in an adventure yarn about a committee of the forces of good (science, religion and social connections) versus the demon king and his ilk from the land beyond the forest in the east.

Actually, the Count as originally conceived (according to one of Bram Stoker's earliest manuscript notes, written on Lyceum Theatre notepaper when *Dracula* was still called 'Count Wampyr') would have been very much at home with Wilde and Beardsley at a Lyceum opening night. Stoker's list of vampire characters at this early stage of drafting includes:

- 'power of creating evil thoughts or banishing good ones in others present'
- 'goes through fog by instinct' and can 'see in the dark'
- 'insensibility to music'
- 'Painters cannot paint him. His likeness always like someone else'
- 'could not Codak [photograph] him - comes out black or like skeleton corpse'
- 'No looking glasses in Count's house - never can see his reflection in one - no shadow'
- 'never eats nor drinks'

Stoker's *fin-de-siècle* vampire cannot appreciate good music, loves to create evil thoughts for the hell of it, cannot possibly have his portrait painted or his studio photograph taken, seems to be on a diet and cannot stand looking in a mirror: all of which give him a family resemblance to Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), with its society aesthete who has a passion for the latest French yellow-backed novels. But by 1897, most of these vampire characteristics had been jettisoned from the finished novel. Perhaps out of deference to his employer Henry Irving's very public prejudices - and in the wake of Oscar Wilde's trial of 1895, with subsequent hue and cry -

Stoker had decided to repress the aesthetic side of his demon's personality; as indeed he tended to repress his own. He was later to write a spirited article in support of the censorship of 'unclean' contemporary novels and in a note attached to one of the five hundred presentation copies of *Dracula* he enthusiastically sent out to the great and the good, Stoker wrote to W.E. Gladstone no less than he sincerely hoped there was 'nothing base in the book': 'the book is necessarily full of horrors and terrors', he continued defensively, 'but I trust that these are calculated to cleanse the mind by pity and terror'.

The writing certainly seems from the evidence to have been an act of cleansing. On the surface, Bram Stoker was a pillar of late Victorian respectability - a man who was, in the rather patronising words of one recent critic, 'a master of the commonplace' in most of what he wrote. An ex-clerk in the fines and penalties section, and later the petty sessions office, of Dublin Castle, who grew up in the seaside suburb of Clontarf, he had been, since 1878, the business-manager, box-office administrator and front-of-house master of ceremonies at the Lyceum Theatre, off the Strand in London - a career move which led to him routinely rubbing shoulders with the artistic and political establishment of the day. He was by all accounts a hearty, down-to-earth and meticulous man. Doing the accounts for actor-manager Henry Irving at his most flamboyant, keeping the Lyceum solvent and persuading Irving not to overdo the special effects was more than a full-time job. Stoker seldom left the theatre before one in the morning, because his boss liked him to organise regular dinners after the show, in the Beefsteak Room behind the stage which, with typical extravagance, Irving had decked out as a Gothic parlour (complete with its own chef) for the purposes of making useful contacts. Stoker made careful lists of them, in a tiny and tidy handwriting. He missed out Oscar Wilde for some reason.

But beneath this glittering surface, Bram Stoker had something gnawing away at his mind. The event which seems to have unlocked his imagination - possibly for the one and only time in his life - leading indirectly to the book which caused everyone who knew him well to say *I had no idea Stoker had it in him; he was such a feet-on-the-ground sort of person* - the event seems to have happened on the night of 7 March 1890. It was a bad dream, which on 8 March Bram Stoker dutifully jotted down on another piece of Lyceum headed notepaper: 'Young man goes out', he wrote, 'sees girls - one tries to kiss him not on the lips but throat. Old Count interferes - rage & fury diabolical - this man belongs to me I want him.' This bad dream was eventually to turn into Jonathan Harker's fictional journal entry for the night of 15 May in the novel: 'I suppose I must have fallen asleep; I hope so, but I fear... I cannot in the least believe that it was all sleep... ' It was the origin of *Dracula*. Among the many changes that happened to the book between March 1890, the month of the dream, and May 1897, the month of publication, one incident and one alone remained constant: the dream which was a bizarre mixture of the witches from *Macbeth* (one of Irving's favourite plays), Stoker's own anxieties about his masculinity - 'This man belongs to me,' says the Count - a tug-of-war over his sexuality, a domineering employer whom he worshipped and a voyeur's fantasy of hungry female vampires. All couched in the rhetoric of the Gothic. As a critic has written, 'when such a man as Bram Stoker, just once, is thoroughly afraid, the charade stops and what you get is *Dracula*'.

The novel was to be full of references to the plays which Henry Irving put on at the Lyceum in the 1880s and 1890s - including a misquotation from *Hamlet* which introduces Harker's waking nightmare and which Irving always insisted on including in *his* version of the tragedy: 'My tablets! quick, my tablets! 'Tis meet that I put it down'; a process which George Bernard Shaw wittily called 'performing *Hamlet* with the part of Hamlet omitted'. At one point, the book itself had the traditional four-act structure of a play: *Transylvania to Whitby*, in which the Count arrives from the east on to English soil - bringing his own soil with him so he can get a good day's sleep; *Tragedy in Whitby and London*, in which the Count attacks Jonathan Harker's fiancée and her friend Lucy Westenra and threatens to start an epidemic; *Discovery* by the intrepid vampire-hunters, including Professor Van Helsing; and *Punishment*, in which the forces of Victorian normality counter-attack, and put the vampires back in their boxes so Mina Harker can become a conventional, repressed young lady again. But the sheer intensity of the primal scene was never

to be repeated anywhere else in Stoker's writings. Harker, incidentally, was the name of the Lyceum's in-house designer, and throughout the novel writes in the no-nonsense style of a junior civil servant. He was evidently a surrogate for Bram Stoker himself.

To judge by the many different headed notepapers he used, Bram Stoker tended to write on the run in hotels, on trains, in libraries and on leave from the Lyceum: Irving allowed him little time for such pursuits in the normal schedule and what today we would call staff development was not his strongest suit. Stoker's first jottings were developed into the beginnings of a story during a wet family holiday in Whitby, Yorkshire in July-August 1890. He found the name 'Dracula' in a dull book about Wallachia and Moldavia written by a retired diplomat, shelved in Whitby's Museum and Subscription Library. Between Summer 1890 and Summer 1896, and between several major writing assignments including three other novels, he methodically worked on the longest piece of work he had ever undertaken: he worked in the British Museum, on summer holidays along the Buchan coast of Scotland, on tour with the Irving Company and at home in Chelsea. The form of *Dracula* matched the fragmentary way in which the book was assembled: a collection of letters, diary and journal entries, press cuttings, transcribed phonograph recordings - the documents in the case, from the points of view of all the main characters except the Count himself. At the very last minute, Stoker sensibly changed the novel's title from 'The Un-Dead' to *Dracula*.

When Bram Stoker died in 1912 (leaving just £4,723), not a single newspaper obituary mentioned *Dracula* by name: today, the obituaries would mention little else. In the intervening century, and especially since the 1970s, the literary-critical context of *Dracula* has shape-shifted beyond all recognition.

Maurice Richardson famously called the text: '...a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match'. Others have more recently related it to civilisation and its discontents, the return of the repressed, sex from the neck up, homo-eroticism, bisexuality and gender bending; reverse colonialism (the East getting its own back on the West) and a cosmic racial conflict between modern Anglo-Saxon stock and the 1,400-year-old bloodline of Attila the Hun; hysteria, the empowerment of women, the disempowerment of women; the sense of displacement of a middle-class Protestant Dubliner, complete with retreat into the occult, crumbling aristocracy and sense of being strangled by red tape. And so on. *Dracula* contains legions.

Stoker himself - as a straight-down-the-line science graduate - would have been amazed at all this analysis, and at the public discussion of themes which he considered as among the great unmentionables: one reason why he was so very frightened by his dream in the first place. He would have been equally amazed at *Dracula's* assured status as a literary classic, its continuation in print all over the world and its pivotal place within popular culture. He listed as his recreation in *Who's Who* 'pretty much the same as those of the other children of Adam'. The ambiguities of that Whitman-inspired statement, when read over a century later, combined with Stoker's determination to appear so very conventional, are part of the novel's continuing appeal.