

Attention, Predation, Counterintuition: Why Dracula Won't Die

His peculiarities caused him to be invited to every house; all wished to see him, and those who had been accustomed to violent excitement, and now felt the weight of *ennui*, were pleased at having something in their presence capable of engaging their attention.

—Polidori, “The Vampyre” (1819)

1. Introduction: A Horror Story for the Ages

Vampires are everywhere. Pop culture teems with undead bloodsuckers, and behind them all looms Bram Stoker's Transylvanian monster, Count Dracula (Stoker, *Dracula* 1897).

The genesis of Count Dracula is truly tangled. We know that Stoker was inspired by a number of sources (Miller, *Sense and Nonsense*), but the author's initial conception of “Count Wampyr” or simply “Count _____,” as Stoker originally called his vampire, is stark and haunting. In March 1890, Stoker jotted down a few notes on a scrap of paper: “old dead man made alive – waxen colour – dead dark eyes – what fire in them – not human – hell fire” (Eighteen-Bisang and Miller 17). From so simple a beginning evolved what has become perhaps the most well-known fictional villain of all time, and certainly one of the most popular (Fischhoff *et al.*). There are now many Draculas—sexy Draculas, disgusting Draculas, malevolent Draculas and tender-hearted ones. Stoker gave the world a vile antagonist who went straight for the jugular.

Stoker did not just create a melodramatic potboiler. He wrote an enduring horror story, one that connected squarely with anxieties peculiar to the Victorian *fin de siècle* while appealing to adaptive dispositions that transcend this historical period; indeed, dispositions that are common to us all. I analyze Stoker's use of formal narrative techniques to engage and sustain the reader's attention. I also examine the way Stoker's violations of natural ontology work toward cognitively stimulating the reader. While these cognitive aspects are important to understanding why the novel—and Count Dracula—refuses to die, they are hardly sufficient.

After all, similar narrative techniques are used in many other genres that rely on suspense, and fantasy literature is rife with counterintuitive beings. The peculiar character and lasting influence of *Dracula* must be sought in deeper sources. My main argument is that the resonance of *Dracula* is explicable in biocultural terms, that is, the complex interplay between cultural contingency and biological substrate.

1.1. The Extraordinary Reception of *Dracula*

Dracula has never been out of print. It has been translated into at least thirty different languages, and it has been adapted for various media literally hundreds of times (Auerbach and Skal; Miller, *Documentary Volume*). The novel was distributed free of charge to American soldiers serving abroad in World War Two in a special 'Armed Services Edition,' a peculiar paperback format tailored to fit in G.I. combat trouser pockets (Loss). A substantial academic industry has even grown up around *Dracula*. There is now a peer-reviewed *Journal of Dracula Studies*, published by the Canadian chapter of the 'Transylvanian Society of Dracula,' and a staggering number of books and articles have been published in the field (Miller, *Documentary Volume*).

For more than half a century, the novel remained virtually untouched by academics. Since the 1970s research has blossomed, partly due to the interest sparked by McNally and Florescu's book *In Search of Dracula* (1972). The two authors famously argued that Stoker built Count Dracula on the fifteenth-century Wallachian Voivode Vlad Tepes. This assertion has since been seriously challenged: the available evidence simply does not support their conclusion. Apparently, Stoker came across the name 'Dracula' in a historical book on Wallachian history, liked the ring of it, and used it for his vampire villain—knowing nothing about the bloody historical exploits of Vlad "The Impaler" Dracula (Miller, "Filing for Divorce").

Paul Riquelme identifies two main strands of critical attention to *Dracula*: psychological, mainly psychoanalytical, and historical. The psychological scholarship has tended to focus heavily on psychosexual subtext; one statement from Maurice Richardson's influential 1959 essay will serve to give a taste of the tenor of psychodynamic *Dracula* scholarship: "[*Dracula*] is a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match" (427). Many scholars have followed suit in viewing the function of *Dracula* primarily in terms of repressed, perverse sexuality (e.g. Roth; Craft; Schaffer; Moretti). Elizabeth Miller, a tireless debunker of academic *Dracula* myths, proposes a thought experiment: "Imagine a *Dracula* in which wooden stakes are wooden stakes, and blood is merely blood. This is not an easy task when we consider the extent to which the text has been pushed to the brink of total libidinal abandon" (Miller, "Coitus Interruptus" n.p.).

The historical *Dracula* scholarship is sounder than hard-line Freudian criticism, perhaps because it is—at least nominally—constrained by reality. Critics have found cultural anxieties peculiar to the Victorian *fin de siècle* darkly reflected in *Dracula*: fears over degeneration (Dijkstra), reverse colonization (Arata), homosexuality (Schaffer), the ‘New Woman’ (Senf), Darwinian materialism and the dissolution of the soul (Blinderman), and so on. Yet mono-causally explaining *Dracula* in terms of anxieties peculiar to late-Victorian Britain does not tell us why the novel retains its narrative power, nor why it was translated to many languages and still sells.

By now, the imaginary landscape that Stoker created in *Dracula* has become a track on which to ride any critical hobby horse imaginable, a text of seemingly endless signification. This is startling in light of the contemporary reception of *Dracula*. As Auerbach and Skal observe, “modern readers and critics of *Dracula* are transfixed by both the novel’s primal narrative power and its extraordinary psychosexual, sociopolitical subtexts,” even as it was “initially treated by reviewers as a harmless, if thrill-producing, entertainment” (363).

The question remains: why has *Dracula* sparked the imaginations of several generations of readers, academic and leisure readers alike? What has allowed it to withstand the test of time, transcend the anxieties specific to late-nineteenth-century Britain, and breed a thousand offspring? I argue that biocultural analysis—locating cultural analysis within an evolutionary framework (cf. Carroll; Boyd; Gottschall)—can help us account for why the novel became a success, why it is still being read today, and why Count Dracula lives on in the popular and academic imaginations. I draw from evolutionary and cognitive psychology partly to take advantage of advances in the evolutionary social sciences, partly as a corrective to academic horror studies that have for a long time been mired in untenably reductive explanatory paradigms (versions of cultural determinism) and a reliance on arcane and unscientific psychologies (most notably psychoanalysis in orthodox Freudian versions as well as poststructuralist reconfigurations, e.g. Lacanian psychoanalysis). As Joseph Carroll points out in a discussion of *Hamlet*: “If there is a ‘deep structure’ to *Hamlet*, we will not get to it by violating the folk psychology implicit in the common idiom. We will get to it only by developing analytic concepts congruent with the common idiom but encompassing the common understanding within a more systematic and integrated body of causal explanations” (*Reading* 124). This observation is equally applicable to *Dracula*—enough with the talk of “bleeding vagina[s]” (Craft 125) and evil mothers (Roth) already. *Dracula* scholars would do well to leave Freud and his followers behind, and turn instead to modern naturalistic psychology when they explore the psychological underpinnings and functions of the novel.

By adopting a biocultural perspective we can see how *Dracula* gives strong emotional shape to conflicts and fears that are deeply ingrained in human nature, but also how the novel is a product of its time. Count Dracula is a contextually inflected embodiment of ancient, evolved terrors: the vampire is a supercharged predator, a fierce beast reminiscent of ancestral predators to which we are hard-wired to attend, the kind with sharp teeth and homicidal intent. He is also highly contagious, a parasitic disease-bearer, a supernaturally animated corpse with a range of disturbing abilities and connotations. Moreover, supernaturalism plays a crucial and ambivalent role in the novel. On the one hand, Count Dracula embodies 'bad' supernaturalism, the horrible idea of a decomposing corpse coming to life with ill intent. On the other hand, Van Helsing's band of vampire hunters embody a 'good' supernaturalism inflected by Stoker's Christian ethos. Stoker intertwines this bifurcation of supernaturalisms with a basic social conflict rooted in adaptive dispositions, namely the conflict between egalitarianism and dominance. Van Helsing's crew, the solid Christians, embody an egalitarian ethos; Dracula is dominance incarnate. In Stoker's worldview, this makes Dracula bad and the vampire hunters good. All these elements work together to produce the total imaginative effect of the novel.

2. Cognitive Stimulation

2.1. Narrative Gambits

Bram Stoker was in the business of writing page-turners. To him, keeping readers engaged must have been a primary concern. Human attention is preferentially engaged by themes of adaptive significance: we are endlessly fascinated by stories about sex, murder, neglected children, incest, devious sociopaths, and so on (Cooke). Hence, Stoker's story about a dangerous, contagious monster is well-engineered to capture our attention, but the author also uses formal narrative strategies to keep us engaged.

Count Dracula is an ageing Transylvanian warrior-aristocrat who turns out to be an animated corpse that sustains itself on the blood of the living. He has almost depleted the local prey population and so wishes to move to London with its "teeming millions" (Stoker 53). He solicits the legal assistance of a young English clerk, Jonathan Harker, who soon finds himself imprisoned in Castle Dracula. He manages to escape, however, but Dracula beats him to England. A series of complications ensue, and the best friend of Harker's fiancée Mina, Lucy Westenra, is turned into a vampire. Under the leadership of the Dutch polymath Abraham Van Helsing, the Harkers and their friends Dr. Seward, Quincey P. Morris

and Arthur Holmwood assemble a vampire-hunting team. They eventually track down and defeat Count Dracula.

Dracula is a mixture of history, folklore and imagination. The novel places itself within Gothic territory with its sensational focus on monstrous aristocrats, decaying castles, preternatural happenings, and melodramatic plot elements. Yet Stoker also dispenses with that tradition, conspicuously by setting *Dracula* almost contemporaneously—in 1893—rather than displacing its action to quasi-medieval exoticism, much to one reviewer’s applause: “That is the way to make a horror convincing. The mediæval is well enough in its way, but you don’t care what sort of bogeys troubled your ancestors all that way back” (“For Midnight Reading” 260). Count Dracula is a monster from the darkest heart of uncivilized Europe, but eventually he is able to prance around Piccadilly, ogling pretty English girls. As he tells Harker sometime before revealing his true nature and monstrous intent: “I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity” (26).

Stoker presents the novel as a documentary volume in the short disclaimer preceding the story:

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. (5)

This passage serves to justify his use of the epistolary format (the novel is told through letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings, and so on), to give the appearance of historical veracity, and thus probably also to ameliorate readers’ healthy skepticism toward vampires and other supernatural creatures that go bump in the night. The contemporaneous, local setting and the pseudo-documentary format are techniques by which Stoker increases the immediacy of the threat posed by Dracula, and hence of heightening the salience of the monster and the emotional engagement of readers. Moreover, the epistolary format is one of several means by which Stoker creates suspense by using it to control and manipulate the flow of information to the reader. This keeps the reader alert and, for large parts of the narrative, actively involved in collecting and fitting together bits of information to stay abreast of the unfolding events. As one contemporary reviewer noted in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1897: “Such is Mr. Stoker’s dramatic skill, that the reader hurries on breathless from the first page to the last, afraid to miss a single word, lest the subtle and complicated chain of evidence should be broken” (Courtney 262). The vampire is kept offstage for

most of the narrative, but very much onstage in the consciousness of readers and protagonists alike.

In the first part of the story, Harker's journey to and stay in Castle Dracula, the monster is introduced. This part of the story is told exclusively by Jonathan Harker, a timid English solicitor. Harker travels from West to East, sinking steadily deeper into alien territory fraught with vague terror and dark portents; in an unhinged state of deep anxiety, he (and the reader) meets Dracula. Noël Carroll emphasizes the crucial role of audience-instruction in horror fiction (88-96): the reader needs a character with whom to empathize, and the reactions of this character toward the horrors depicted in the story become emotional cues for the reader. Such a transfer of emotion from character to reader is possible because humans have an adaptive capacity to mirror the emotional states of other humans, including fictional ones. This phenomenon is known as 'emotional contagion' (e.g. de Gelder *et al.*). For example, the emotion of disgust is processed by a brain region called the anterior insula. Whether we ingest something disgusting, watch somebody else do it, or even imagine taking a bite out of a maggot-infested lump of meat, it causes activation in the anterior insula (Jabbi, Bastiaansen and Keysers). This capacity for emotional contagion is obviously adaptive: if we mirror the disgust of somebody else eating bad meat, we don't have to partake ourselves. And if we react to a sudden expression of wide-eyed fear on the face of a conspecific, perhaps we react in time to evade the pouncing predator. Emotional contagion allows for swift response to a threat that one has not personally observed, and it accounts for the way that we mirror the emotional responses of even literary characters. Thus, Stoker provides a mirror character in bland, everyman Mr. Harker through whose eyes the horror of Dracula is initially presented.

After Harker's exploits, the narrative changes character from a densely atmospheric, fairly traditional horror story to being predominantly a story about *tracking*, about the collection and collation of information. The third and final part of the novel is about hunting and annihilating the monster. Having to keep track of the mental states of several characters lays claim to the reader's attention. For much of the narrative, the protagonists possess different non-overlapping bits of knowledge. The reader thus knows more than the individual characters: for example, when reading Mina's breezy, careless diary entries in chapter V, the reader already knows about the looming threat. We know something bad is coming; Mina emphatically does not, and this disjunction in knowledge states between reader and characters adds an edge of tension to the emotional experience of reading *Dracula*.¹

The critical turning point, the point at which the protagonists gain the upper hand against Dracula, occurs about halfway through the narrative, when they start comparing notes and thus begin to learn the rules that govern even a supernatural predator. As Mina Harker puts it: “We need have no secrets amongst us; working together and with absolute trust, we can surely be stronger than if some of us were in the dark” (197). The vampire hunters soon enough revert to keeping information from at least Mina, but with disastrous consequences (she is attacked by Dracula). The point remains that only collectively can the protagonists hope to vanquish the monster. Dracula, on the other hand, is denied the power of joint action and creative thinking, as Van Helsing points out: “we ... are not without strength. We have on our side power of combination—a power denied to the vampire kind” (210).

Stoker’s success in holding the attention of his readers is evocatively (if anecdotally) affirmed by a reviewer, writing in 1897, who became so engrossed in the story that “we could not pause even to light our pipe.” Having begun reading in the evening, the reviewer claimed that at “midnight the narrative had fairly got upon our nerves; a creepy terror had seized upon us, and when at length, in the early hours of the morning, we went upstairs to bed it was with the anticipation of nightmare. We listened anxiously for the sound of bats’ wings against the window” (“Review of *Dracula*” 364). Even the violently hostile American critic writing for *The Wave* in 1899 said that *Dracula* is “worthy of notice” because “in spite of it all, it holds to the end.” This critic denounced *Dracula* as “degenerate” and a “literary failure,” yet wrote that “if you have the bad taste, after this warning, to attempt the book, you will read on to the finish” (“The Insanity of the Horrible” 273).

2.2. Counterintuition

Fred Botting, a prominent critic of the Gothic, claims that the “ritualised killing of vampires reconstitutes properly patriarchal order and fixes cultural and symbolic meanings” in that it restores “the boundaries between life and death, body and soul, earth and heaven” (151).² But the ontological disturbance that the undead cause goes deeper than messing with arbitrary cultural categories: it violates distinctions fundamental to human cognition.

Un-death is the vampire’s most salient characteristic. The distinction between life and death is basic, binary, and inescapable: an understanding of death as the cessation of agency is a reliably developing part of human cognitive architecture (Barrett and Behne). But since the distinction between intentional agents and non-intentional objects has been so crucial in human phylogeny—the distinction boils down to that most basic of questions, does it want to eat me or not?—people tend to over-attribute agency, sometimes even to corpses. Paul Barber has demonstrated

that the vampire of 18th-century European superstition is really the result of a prescientific misunderstanding of perfectly normal decomposition processes in corpses, a misattribution of agency to unruly bodies.

We have what Justin Barrett calls a “hyperactive agency detection device,” a mental mechanism whose default position is to assume agency based on the most innocuous of cues. Thus, a non-intentional, mechanical event may be interpreted as the result of agency. If you hear an odd noise when the moon is down and the hour is none, you might assume that you are not as alone in your house as you had thought. This type of non-reflective cognition does not linger over statistical risk assessment; it is a fast-and-dirty response, one that has proved adaptive if, more often than not, inaccurate. But when the stakes are high, a false positive is much better than a false negative (Marks and Nesse): assuming that a malicious agent is prowling through your house is better than immediately dismissing the noise as the result of some mechanical event as long as there is the remotest chance that you could be in danger.

A tendency to over-attribute agency sometimes works in conflict with an intuitive understanding of death as the final shut-down. Thus we may find ourselves at a funeral, thinking that the deceased is hovering around somewhere, finding comfort in the turn-up or disapproving of a certain floral arrangement. Or we may think that a string of strange deaths in the local community is attributable to the activities of a malicious agent, such as an angry god or a thirsty vampire (Barber). Natural scientists have been working hard over several hundred years on replacing intentional explanations with mechanical ones—thunder is the result of electrical discharges, not an angry god—but science is working against deep-seated intuition. People are natural-born creationists (De Cruz & De Smedt), dualists (Bloom), and spiritualists (Barrett), and only with training can we shape our reflective beliefs to conform to the counterintuitive findings of science (e.g. complex functional design in organisms does not imply the workings of an intelligent designer).

Thus, the vampire emerges from this conflict between an intuitive understanding of death as final and an intuitive tendency to over-attribute agency. The result is a counterintuitive concept, the ‘un-dead.’ The vampire is a highly salient figure, one that clashes with our beliefs about organisms. The odd state of ‘un-death’ violates a basic assumption about animacy and its termination, and this makes the vampire virtually pop out from a background of mundane, ontologically obedient objects. Moreover, a concept that flagrantly violates one’s worldview—a concept “at variance with later-day belief,” in Stoker’s phrase—may cause cognitive dissonance or even a nauseating sense of disorientation. This is familiar territory in horror

fiction. Lovecraft, for example, traded in cosmic violations, creatures and ideas that literally drive his characters insane. In his treatise on *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, he described how weird tales, Lovecraft's brand of horror fiction, should aspire to invoke "that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space" (15). Van Helsing is thus given the task of convincing his friends of the existence of "the strange things, the extraordinary things, the things that make one doubt if they be mad or sane" (Stoker 166).

Dracula has a range of counterintuitive properties, un-death being only the most conspicuous. He also does not reflect in a mirror—hardly what we expect of physical objects—and is able to change his shape. In one scene, Dracula scales the outer wall of his castle like a lizard, apparently defying the laws of gravity. Unbeknownst to the Count, Jonathan Harker is looking out of a window and sees Dracula's head emerge from another aperture: He is "somewhat amused" initially, 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* ... What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man?" (39). As the editors of *Stoker's Notes* affirm, this is "one of the most memorable scenes in the novel" (Eighteen-Bisang and Miller 97). Likewise, several contemporary reviewers emphasized the passage. The London *Times* reviewer spent more than a third of his review citing the scene ("Recent Novels" 268-70), and the *Bookman* reviewer noted that readers should "keep *Dracula* out of the way of nervous children ... but a grown reader, unless he be of unserviceably delicate stuff, will both shudder and enjoy [the lizard passage]" ("Review of *Dracula*" 267).

The vampire also has peculiar traits that are not counterintuitive in the technical sense of upsetting ontological distinctions. Dracula is vulnerable to sunlight, for example, although it is not lethal to him. This characteristic serves a dramatic purpose in giving the vampire hunters an edge during daytime, and a thematic purpose in emphasizing Dracula's evilness: he is a creature of the night. Moreover, the drinking of blood is strange to be sure, but not counterintuitive. Much has been made of this particular habit in the psychoanalytical literature: Ernest Jones claimed that in the "unconscious mind blood is commonly an equivalent for semen" (199), and from that strange premise wrought a colorful tale about the psychosexual significance of vampires. To Jones, blood-drinking was a sexual act, but we need yield no a priori credence to this interpretive twist. Blood is quite obviously causally connected to

vitality: most everybody at some point makes the observation that if you get hurt badly enough, you bleed. And if you bleed enough, you die. Hence, “the blood is the life” (Stoker 130).

Stoker originally intended his vampire to have even more strange and/or counterintuitive characteristics than those already mentioned. We know from his working papers that Dracula cast no shadow, was supposed to be “insensible to the beauties of music,” and impossible to paint or photograph (Eighteen-Bisang and Miller 18-21), but Stoker decided to cut back on the weirdness. It was a wise decision, because if a concept becomes too bizarre, it loses its mnemonic advantage. Cognitive scientists have demonstrated that *minimally* counterintuitive agents—agents that breach with their ontological categories only in one or a few respects—are easier to remember and more likely to be faithfully transmitted than both ordinary concepts or highly bizarre ones (Norenzayan *et al.*; J. Barrett; Boyer). Count Dracula is striking enough as a taxonomic anomaly, but his resonance goes deeper. He is contagious and highly dangerous, and evokes ancient, evolved terrors and conflicts.

3. A Biocultural Analysis of *Dracula*

3.1. Predation

Up until a few thousand years ago, our ancestors were regularly pounced on by ferocious feline predators, bitten by snakes, and attacked by conspecifics (Hart and Sussman; Quammen). This million-year-long struggle for existence has shaped our species profoundly, and we retain our keen interest in such enemies, even in environments that completely lack them. That is why we are still fascinated by dangerous beasts (Coss; Grimes; Öhman), including the supernatural kind found in horror stories like *Dracula* (cf. Scalise Sugiyama). Alpha predators with sharp teeth and hooked claws may be gone from our natural environments, but they live on in our horror stories. In E. O. Wilson's words, “a sweet sense of horror, the shivery fascination with monsters and creeping forms that so delights us today even in the sterile hearts of the cities, could [in ancestral environments] see you through to the next morning ... We stay alive and alert in the vanished forests of the world” (101). Ferocious monsters thus have a salience for us that makes sense once we consider our evolutionary past: in the hard currency of fitness, it paid to be alert to dangerous organisms. That is why our horror stories brim with fearsome monsters that are so often souped-up versions of ancestral predators (Clasen, “The Horror”; “Can't Sleep”); a species of supernormal stimuli, exaggerations of entities to which we are already disposed to pay attention. And this explains why Count Dracula

is such an interesting creature, even as a 500-year-old vampire with supernatural abilities is a highly implausible idea: Dracula taps into an adaptive mechanism for danger management by meeting the input specifications of this adaptation and then some, that is, by being basically a tweaked predator. As Van Helsing says to the seasoned hunters Morris, Seward and Holmwood after Dracula has eluded them: “You follow quick. You are hunters of wild beast, and understand it so” (267). Dracula is fundamentally bestial, and has prominent fangs, “pointed like an animal’s” (155), and sharp nails. He is repeatedly described as an animal—a panther (266), a lion (*ibid.*), and a tiger (278)—and he has fiery, red eyes, superhuman strength, and a volatile temper.

And yet Dracula is unlike your garden-variety alpha predator. His cognitive powers vastly surpass those of carnivorous felines. He is a seasoned conversationalist, a suave businessman of cosmopolitan sophistication. Dangerous and of ill-intent, yes, but also fascinating. Dracula’s animal-human hybridism makes him more dramatically compelling, more interesting, than a leopard—or a human-sized vampire bat—could ever be.

The evolutionary perspective allows us to see Count Dracula as a reflection of the kinds of very real dangers that our ancestors faced (Saler and Ziegler). But of course, the bestiality of Dracula has not been lost on more traditional *Dracula* scholars. Several have pointed out that Dracula embodies late-Victorian fears of degeneration or retrograde evolution, in that the vampire is a threat from the past, essentially an atavism (e.g. Dijkstra). Stoker thus framed his monster in terms of a discourse on degeneration that was highly salient in the Victorian *fin de siècle* (Block). Mina Harker (296) characterizes Dracula with reference to the cultural critic Max Nordau—author of *Degeneration*, an overwrought indictment of ‘decadent’ late-nineteenth-century culture as a hotbed of primitive hedonism—and the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who claimed that criminals could be identified by a distinct physiognomy which bespoke a savage or atavistic nature.

To contemporary readers, Dracula may very well have carried a special significance as an embodiment of degeneration. But Dracula is more than a metaphor, and his literal, predatory presence should not be forgotten by critics intent on excavating subtext and *Zeitgeist*.

3.2. Contagion

Count Dracula has been read as the embodiment of a variety of other late-Victorian anxieties, for example the fear of syphilis (e.g. Auerbach and Skal 363). Dracula certainly is contagious. He eventually infects Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker with vampirism, and as Jonathan Harker surmises, Dracula’s goal is to come to

London “where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons” (53-4).

By portraying Dracula as a disease-carrier, Stoker invested his Count with the subtext of syphilis and tapped into an anxiety of sexually transmitted diseases that was widespread at the time. But fear of contagious disease is not a cultural construction, and neither is the disgust with which the characters react to Dracula: “As the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder” (24). And later in the story, when Harker has to search the resting vampire for a key: “the whole awful creature [was] simply gorged with blood; he lay like a filthy leech ... I shuddered as I bent over to touch him, and every sense in me revolted at the contact” (53).

Disgust is an adaptive response to pathogenic substances (Curtis and Biran) and is coded in our genome. Disgust comes with a characteristic, universally recognizable facial expression that serves the purpose of ejecting disagreeable substances from the mouth and blocking aversive odors (Rozin). Thus, disgust is a functional mechanism that protects the organism from harm. In terms of fitness, it pays to be alert and cautious toward disgusting objects. And like many other animals—for example ants, bullfrogs, mice, and chimps—people tend to avoid conspecifics who look diseased (Curtis 3484). They also tend to bury or burn the dead, since putrefying corpses generate the disgust response. At the same time, humans are strangely drawn to the revolting. Disgusting jokes, erstwhile freak shows and stories about disfigured monsters and bodily mutilations exert a strong pull on many. As soon as disgust-elicitors are safely distanced, for example by being fictitious, they awaken curiosity as well as revolt.

By portraying Count Dracula as a viscerally disgusting creature, Stoker taps into this evolved mechanism and keeps the reader engaged, attracted and repelled at the same time. The fear of disease is culturally modulated and depends on local circumstances such as the salience of particular diseases, but it rests on an evolutionary substrate.

3.3. Egalitarian Politics

Dracula is a story of suspense. It draws us in by featuring a sympathetic—if bland—character in great danger, it has a highly salient antagonist, and it keeps us hooked by strategically dispensing information and manipulating expectations in order to sustain suspense. The reader is being held in a state of alternating hope and fear for the protagonists. Moreover, the novel is stoked full of elusive subtext and suggestion.

But that is not all. Functionally speaking, *Dracula* might serve a greater purpose than just entertaining readers for a handful of hours: it might be adaptive. In a large-scale empirical study, Joseph Carroll and colleagues analyzed reader responses to 435 characters from 143 Victorian novels. They proceeded from the hypothesis that “protagonists and good minor characters would form communities of cooperative behavior and that antagonists would exemplify dominance behavior” (51). In this respect, the agonistic structure of the novels under analysis reflects the egalitarian ethos found in hunter-gatherer communities. Humans have evolved dispositions for forming cooperative social groups, and in hunter-gatherers, group members tend to stigmatize and suppress status-seeking and dominance in their peers; indeed, we have adaptive dispositions to monitor and suppress dominance in group members, but that disposition works in tension with a disposition to seek dominance. Carroll *et al.* found their hypothesis confirmed, and conclude that “the novels provide a medium of shared imaginative experience through which authors and readers affirm and reinforce egalitarian dispositions on a large cultural scale” (70).

Dracula fits snugly into this picture. Count Dracula is distinctly non-cooperative, dominance-seeking, and violent and repressive. Indeed, in Carroll *et al.*'s study, Dracula “offers an unmistakably antagonistic profile.” Dracula scored very highly on a dimension called ‘Dislike’ “and—despite having his head lopped off with a bowie knife—an only average score on Sorrow” (62).³ Conversely, the protagonists of *Dracula* strive to form a small, close-knit cooperative community. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for their cause and claim to be fighting for a greater good: “We have self-devotion in a cause, and an end to achieve which is not a selfish one,” says Van Helsing (210). This greater good is framed in terms of Stoker's Christian ethos, rather than hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, but the pattern remains: Dracula, a highly dominant individual, must be suppressed, and egalitarian values vindicated. The vampire hunters are supposed to be the good guys. An anonymous reviewer, writing in 1897, captured this in his judgment of the vampire hunters as “resolute and highly-principled persons” (“Recent Novels” 270). Subsequent criticism may have vilified the vampire hunters (e.g. Craft), but there can be no doubt where Stoker's sympathies lay.

By participating vicariously in Stoker's vision, readers were—and are—confirmed in their egalitarian dispositions and strengthened in their aversion to selfish dominance behavior.

3.4. The Significance of *Dracula*

Stoker clearly succeeded in telling a captivating story about good versus evil. He tapped into ancient, evolved cognitive dispositions for supernaturalism, but he

split this supernaturalism into two distinct tiers and pitted them against each other: horrible supernaturalism, embodied by the nasty, predatory vampires that rise from the grave, and nice, clean Christian supernaturalism where the dead stay decently dead until they are quietly transmogrified into angelic form or are relegated to the eternal flames of Hell. They certainly don't come back as rotting corpses. The two forms struggle for dominance in the novel, as embodied by Dracula versus Van Helsing's Christian Brotherhood. When Lucy Westenra changes from human to vampire, she becomes a sexualized, voluptuous, cruel creature that "recoils" at the sight of a crucifix, eyes blazing with "unholy light" (188). Conversely, Van Helsing uses the Host to 'disinfect' Dracula's native soil. This conflict, and the resolution of this conflict, is central to the novel, and the formal structure of the story contributes to emphasizing it, in that the structure allows for identification with the protagonists, who embody Stoker's Christian ethos, and inhibits sympathy with Dracula, who is never allowed to speak for himself, and who is cast as a counterintuitive, 'unnatural' creature, a violation of the natural order.

4. Dracula's Progeny

The primary strength of the vampire is its ability to capture our attention. Vampires fascinate us, and they make for great storytelling with their supercharged literal presence and strong metaphorical significance (Clasen, "Vampire Apocalypse"). While Stoker did not invent the vampire single-handedly, his Dracula would become immensely influential, "the father or furtherer of a new order of beings," as Van Helsing puts it (263). As Margaret Carter observes, "it was *Dracula* that established the stereotypical traits of the vampire for eighty years following its publication" (624). In the 1970s, a radical reinterpretation took place: the vampire became a pitiable creature (Auerbach). Certainly an unmistakable ambivalence was latent in the vampire at least since Romanticism, but Stoker's Dracula is pure abomination. Subsequent authors have offered very different vampires, of which Anne Rice's morally complex, glamorous bloodsuckers (in her 1976 *Interview with the Vampire*) and Fred Saberhagen's reinterpretation of Dracula as a persecuted victim (in his 1975 *The Dracula Tape*) are extreme examples. The hyper-sexualized vampires of the 1990s onwards are another story altogether.

The vampire has become ever-more conspicuous in popular culture. Vampire novels feature regularly on bestseller lists, and each season sees several new vampire movies. Perhaps sheer exposure to vampires in fiction has made the figure less salient to modern audiences, hence authors' need in recent years to make it more extreme in its strange characteristics. Whereas Count Dracula merely had "the strength of twenty men" (219)—impressive enough in his day—the vampires of

the twenty-first century (in *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and so on) move with the speed of sound and have the strength of industrial wrecking-machines. They are invested with vastly more sexuality than Stoker's repulsive Count ever was. And in some versions, they make vampirism seem attractive, even preferable to traditional human life. Bella, in *Twilight* (Meyer), longs to be a vampire, and is eventually turned into one—beautiful, strong, rich and happy beyond measure. In a culture strongly dedicated to self-realization, this is perhaps unsurprising. But Stoker would have been shocked. His vampires signified everything that humans should aspire to transcend—they are soulless, carnal, egoistic monsters—and the type of vampire that currently dominates bestseller lists symbolizes everything that we wish we were: beautiful, strong, rich and happy beyond measure.

The twentieth century saw a proliferation of vampire types, oftentimes embodying different sets of anxieties and/or desires (Auerbach) and fulfilling different psychological functions. For example, present-day stories about attractive vampires and their human girlfriends have more to do with mate choice and romantic dilemmas than with the fear of being eaten by a fearsome predator or infected by an unclean organism. Authors and readers are attracted to vampires because of their salience and metaphorical juiciness, their capacity for the embodiment of salient anxieties, conflicts or desires. In *Dracula*, Stoker gave an emotionally charged portrayal of good versus evil, of a supernatural predator that must be exterminated by the forces of good, embodied by Van Helsing's crew. Fred Botting analyzes Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 adaptation of *Dracula* and notes that in "moving from horror to sentimentalism Coppola's film, appropriately enough for the 'caring 1990s', advocates a more humane approach to vampirism, one based on love, tolerance and understanding" (179). Conversely, Stoker conceived of vampires as soul-less and vile, ungodly creatures, "foul things of the night ... without heart or conscience" (209). And infected Mina Harker, fearing that she is turning into a vampire, makes her husband and friends promise that "should the time come, you will kill me" (287). Evidently, death is preferable to vampirism. In Stoker's Christian worldview, trading your soul for immortality or an existence dedicated exclusively to hedonic pleasure is just not a viable proposition.

The old-fashioned, nasty, conservative vampire has not been completely ousted by the glitzy, sexy undead. Justin Cronin, author of the popular 2010 vampire novel *The Passage*, betrays a sentiment closer to Stoker's. According to Cronin, *The Passage* is really about "love, honor, courage, valor, the connections between people." On the fascination that vampire stories exert, Cronin claims that "at its heart, it asks the question, what part of your humanity would you be trading away

if you got to live forever? It's ultimately a fable to reassure us that it's better to be mortal" ("Justin Cronin"). Cronin's vampires are repulsive, scary creatures who go under a variety of names: jumps, smokes, virals—and 'dracs.' His debt to Stoker is openly acknowledged. And like Stoker, Cronin uses the vampire as a vehicle to tell a moral fable, an ideologically modulated tale about good and evil.

The vampire will presumably change even more in the future, but it is unlikely ever to find peace. It is simply too effective at what it does to stay put belowground. And what it does is play on evolved dispositions in its audience. The sexualized vampires made popular by *Twilight* and other such stories evoke a different range of emotions in their audiences than does *Dracula* (cf. Johnson), but they are no less products of adapted minds working in socio-historical ecologies to produce monsters designed to resonate with other adapted minds (Clasen, "Monsters Evolve"). The vampire can signify virtually anything, from our deepest fears to our deepest desires, but its sheer literal presence, the chords it strikes deep within human nature, makes the figure exquisitely suited to capture our attention: the vampire is guaranteed immortality. Count Dracula certainly survived being stabbed and decapitated and lives on in the pages of Stoker's novel and the popular imagination, far-removed from the Victorian *fin de siècle*.

Notes

¹ Brian Boyd cogently explains how dramatic irony builds on evolved 'mind-reading' capacities or Theory of Mind (*Origin* 278-281 *et passim*). See also Noël Carroll on how discrepancies in knowledge states between characters and audience work toward heightening suspense in horror fiction (*Philosophy*).

² Botting thus claims that the male protagonists of *Dracula* by staking vampire-Lucy "subject her to phallic law" (151), presumably proceeding from the observation that a wooden stake vaguely resembles a penis—as do a vast number of other objects in the physical world. We need invest the stake with no special psychosexual significance because of its shape. Moreover, Stoker not only modeled this scene on similar descriptions in previous vampire literature (e.g. Le Fanu's *Carmilla*), he took the idea of the wooden stake as apotropaic from vampire folklore. As Barber documents, bloated corpses would sometimes be understood by prescientific observers to have gorged themselves on the blood of the living, and the stake provided them with a mechanical means of deflating the body—in reality not so much killing a vampire as forcing decomposition gases to evacuate an organic balloon.

³ Actually, *Dracula* is decapitated with a kukri knife. The bowie knife goes into his heart (Stoker 325).

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