

# The gothic genre over time dracula and poe and their appropriations



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English ExtensionThe Gothic GenreThe value in Gothic fiction lies in its ability to enthrall and delight the reader through a combination of suspense, terror and shock, so as the audience to the genre has changed, so too have the methods used by composers to captivate them. Traditionally, Gothic narratives sought to enthrall their audiences through shadowing more horrific content, triggering the responders imagination and leaving the truly horrendous implicit. This technique builds tension and suspense as it draws upon the fear of the unknown and creates intrigue for the reader. However, the 20th century saw the mass desensitisation of the Western population through the increasingly strong themes of gratuitous violence, sexuality and horror portrayed by the entertainment industry. Because of this, far stronger elements of shock and horror have been utilised in gothic texts to appeal to more contemporary audiences.

This has led to less and less of the monstrous being left to the imagination as more shocking content is used by composers to captivate the modern responder. A clear demonstration of this change in the genre can be found in the many 20th century adaptations of traditional gothic texts for more contemporary cinematic mediums. The composers of the films often use appropriate storylines, characters and themes from the original texts but change the structure, context and values to appeal to more modern viewers. Two examples of such adaptations of traditional gothic texts are Bram Stoker's Dracula directed by Francis Ford Coppola and Roger Corman's 1961 adaptation of The Pit and the Pendulum. Both films were accused by critics of being unfaithful to the texts they claimed to be adapting, however this is only to be expected as by appropriating the 19th century

texts to a more modern film medium and audience, the composer often has to make radical changes in order to create a successful and effective movie for a contemporary audience. Classic gothic literature is embodied in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, published in 1897 and critically acclaimed ever since.

In the year *Dracula* was first published, the *Daily Mail* proclaimed that "Your mind reverts to such tales as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Frankenstein* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*... but *Dracula* is even more appalling in its gloomy fascination than any one of these"[1] naming the text amongst the classics almost immediately. It has been appropriated hundreds of times to many different mediums from ballet to anime, and it is estimated to have over 200 film adaptations in various languages. *Dracula* has arguably created a literary movement in the vampire fiction of today, however although many authors of modern gothic fiction name Stoker among their influences, the values present in more modern vampire fiction are very different. Stoker utilizes the traditional technique of leaving more explicit or horrific content to the reader to interpret to create shock, suspense and terror throughout the book. There are several elements of the text that the author leaves shadowed for a great deal of the novel, the most notable being bloodsucking, sexuality and *Dracula*'s mind and motives.

The mystery surrounding *Dracula*'s mind and motives is created by the reader's ignorance as to why *Dracula* displays a remarkable desire to integrate himself into English society, demonstrated through the channels he uses to obtain property, his study of etiquette and his hard learned proper speech. I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty

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London???. Dracula??™s air of mystery is further emphasised by the fact that Stoker??™s title character is so frequently absent from the book, which the author uses to create suspense through the reader??™s curiosity. Ultimately what Dracula truly wants is left unsaid and so the Count remains an enigma, making him all the more frightening. Stoker creates unclear circumstances regarding the vampire attacks present in the text. The vampire??™s attacks are never explicitly explained, making them all the more horrific through their air of mystery. He uses the pre-existing horror of vampire attack to create shock and suspense in Dracula, relying upon the reader having prior knowledge of vampire myths to understand what he suggests.

Neither Mina nor Lucy can properly recall their bedroom encounters with Dracula, informing the reader of a strange mist or fog and a sense of lethargy. The closest that the reader comes to seeing a vampire drink blood is when Harker describes his close call with the ??? three young women??? and the ??? hard dents of two sharp teeth??? against his throat. Dr Seward even tells of seeing Dracula forcing Mina to drink blood from ??? the man??™s bare breast???, however there is no description of necks being penetrated by fangs in the book. This is implied by the evidence of vampire bites but never described, instead left once again to the reader??™s imagination.

Sexuality is another element shadowed by the author as is largely left to the imagination and interpretation of the reader in Dracula. Stoker creates strong connections between sex and evil throughout the text. He links sexuality to the antagonists Dracula, the three ??? weird sisters??? and <https://assignbuster.com/the-gothic-genre-over-time-dracula-and-poe-and-their-appropriations/>

vampire Lucy. The Victorian era was a time where purity in women was valued highly and Stoker reflects this bluntly through the polarized female characters present in Dracula.

The three female vampires, described by Harker as ??? those horrible women???, are used to juxtapose the social ideal of the original context represented by Mina – ??? she with all her goodness and purity and faith???. They act as symbols of both symbols of evil as vampires and symbols of what women should not be, demonstrated through their extremely sexually provocative behavior towards Harker, ??? she actually licked her lips like an animal???, almost corrupting and destroying the young protagonist. Stoker never directly describes or refers to sexual intercourse, instead using the power of suggestion to strongly imply it. Both Mina and Lucy are visited by the Count at night, in their bedrooms and exchange bodily fluids in a secret embrace. Lucy is corrupted by her deflowering at the hands of the Count and her ??? purity [turned] to voluptuous wantonness???.

Her awakened sexuality, reflected by her behavior towards Arthur ??? Come to me??;! My arms are hungry for you??? is seen as threatening by the men who used to love her and so they decide that the best course of action is Arthur ??? driving deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake???. This is inherently phallic, but once again left by the author to the readers imagination. The most commercially successful adaptation of Dracula to date was Bram Stoker??™s Dracula, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola claimed to adhere more closely to the original than other recent adaptations, however many critics deemed this questionable or as Entertainment Weekly

put it ?????™ Bram Stokers Dracula??™ has to be one of the most misleading titles in recent movie history???.

[2] The changes in the gothic genre are well represented in the comparison between Corman??™s Dracula and the original, as the film leaves nothing to the imagination. Dracula??™s motives, mind and nature are fully disclosed, there are many sex scenes, all diverse in nature. In the 1992 appropriation, Coppola has demystified Dracula to appeal to modern audiences. Dracula is given a very detailed past, a heart and a powerful motive ??“ love for Mina Harker, the reincarnation of the woman he spurned God for, making him a vampire. Contemporary blockbuster films of most genres are often very formulaic, consisting of a main protagonist, a love interest and a villain that the audience can relate to. An audience from the context of the original Dracula would have condemned Mina for her highly sexual extra-marital affair with an atheist vampire because of the strong influence of the church in Victorian England. However a modern audience considers his love a redeeming feature and Mina??™s infidelity forgivable and through this, they take an interest in the couple??™s combined fate.

Corman uses this to garner audience sympathy with his version of the character Dracula, creating suspense as the tortured protagonist graphically seduces Mina and the viewer??™s wonder how this ill-fated romance will end. Bram Stoker??™s Dracula the movie completely reverses the subtle approach Bram Stoker??™s Dracula had towards sexuality. Film audiences at the time the movie was made identified with the ??? modern woman??™ as demonstrated through the popularity of the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* which details the love life of a prostitute, and the television show <https://assignbuster.com/the-gothic-genre-over-time-dracula-and-poe-and-their-appropriations/>

Sex in the City, which tells the story of a group of liberated women living in New York. In order to shock this modern audience, very graphic scenes of intercourse and young women writhing in ecstasy were littered throughout the film.

Where Stoker had a subtly crafted, ambiguous night time visit from Dracula, Coppola had the Count in wolf form have highly graphic sex with Lucy (dressed only in a flowing red transparent robe) in the rain while Mina watched. Stoker described one of the vampire women placing her mouth against Harker's throat, while Coppola had all three surrounding him, breasts bared and draining his blood from his groin. Bram Stoker's Dracula seemed to use breasts as a symbol of vampirism in women, as the three 'weird sisters' had their breasts exposed whenever they were present, Lucy would unclthe herself whenever she endured one of her vampire phases during her transformation and at the end when Mina seduces Van Helsing at Castle Dracula she too exposes herself. Although Bram Stoker's Dracula has clearly appropriated Bram Stoker's storyline, setting and atmosphere, Coppola changed the way the story was portrayed to appeal to contemporary viewers.

The composer utilises stronger elements of sexuality and leaves less mystery surrounding the title character to engage the more modern audience, ultimately leaving far less to the viewer's imagination. Edgar Allan Poe's The Pit and the Pendulum was written in 1842 as a part of the American Gothic movement and it is considered by critics and academics alike to be a quintessentially traditional gothic text. The short story relies heavily on the fear of the unknown to create shock, terror and suspense.

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Poe uses first person narration to create a strong connection between the reader and the narrator so that as the storyteller feels “ sick??” sick unto death” with terror at his highly uncertain future, the reader too feels terror. Throughout the duration of the text, the author leaves many of the most monstrous elements in the text unidentified or uncertain, namely the narrator??™s surroundings, his tormentors and most significantly his fate. The narrator fears not just death but the unknown, demonstrated by the fact that he would rather ??? have clasped the red walls to my bosom??? than face the shadowy, uncertain fate that lies in the pit despite the fact that he recognizes ??? what sweet rest there must be in the grave???. Poe utilizes this fear of the unknown by surrounding the narrator with shadows, both figurative and literal. Although the reader knows from the beginning that the narrator does not die as he refers to the judges lips as ??? whiter than the sheet on which I trace these words???, Poe employs mystery and the unknown very effectively to create strong feelings of tension, dread and trepidation. The antagonists are arguably the most horrific element of the text, more monstrous even than the torture inflicted upon the narrator, as they are cruel enough to inflict it. Poe leaves the antagonists very unclear, as they are only really identified by the narrator as ??? tall figures???, ??? the inquisition???, ??? my persecutors???, ??? demons who [take] notice of my swoon???, ??? my tormentors??? and ??? most demoniac of men???.

The narrator never truly sees them and the reader can only judge them through their various machinations of pain, creating truly horrendous antagonists with ??? monkish ingenuity in torture.??? Poe shadows them entirely and through this makes them all the more horrific. The 1961



adaptation of Poe's classic text takes a different approach to create suspense, shock and horror.

The director, Roger Corman selectively appropriates different parts of Poe's original text, because as he put it a two-page short story is not about to give you a ninety-minute motion picture. He claims to construct the first two acts in what we hoped was a manner faithful to Poe, as his climax would run only a short time on the screen and through this create a gripping and effective appropriation. Where Poe used the unknown to create an effective text through shadowing his antagonists and the fate of the narrator, Corman fully discloses these elements to the audience. Corman, like Coppola, created a back-story for his antagonist in order to justify his actions to attract audience sympathy. The antagonist, Nicholas Medina, witnessed his father (a significant agent of the Inquisition) torturing his mother and burying her alive. As a result, he suffers horrific fits of insanity, and during one such episode he straps the narrator under the pendulum and sets it in motion telling the narrator 'You are about to enter hell!' and meet the razor edge of destiny. Corman removes the mystery and the shadows from his antagonist, instead creating a truly monstrous and psychologically damaged individual with homicidal tendencies. There is never any fear of the narrator actually dying however, as his love interest, the antagonists sister, is shown rallying forces to rescue him.

The film adaptation also gives the story a strong and horrific background, where the original linked the story to the Spanish Inquisition but gave no detail on the crimes, past or future of the narrator save that he was not crushed to death by the red-hot walls. Corman reveals a monstrous, skeleton  
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ridden plot by the narrators adulterous sister to drive her besotted husband insane through faking her own death and ??? haunting him??™, in the style of Anne Radcliffe??™s ??? explained supernatural??™. The scheme ends up with most of the characters lying dead in the bottom of the pit, with their limbs at odd angles and eyes bulging. This is another example of modern composers using excessively strong content to appeal to their audiences. Roger Corman??™s film adaptation was quite different to the original *The Pit and the Pendulum*, because many changes had to be made in order to adapt a short story that takes place almost entirely in ??? the blackness of eternal night??? to a 1960??™s film medium. The film appropriation was also different in that the director chose to reveal and give detail on the more horrific content such as the antagonist and the background of the story. The strong content broadcasted media in the 20th Century had a significant impact on the techniques used by the composers of gothic texts to enthrall their audiences.

Both of the film composers discussed chose to reveal what the original authors left shadowed, in order to appeal to contemporary audiences. In Francis Ford Coppola??™s *Dracula*, Coppola thoroughly demystified and strong sexual scenes are integrated into the film, while Stoker chose to leave these elements uncertain. Corman too informed the viewer on the background of the story and the nature of his antagonist and where Poe left it unknown. This demonstrates a significant change in the gothic genre and the techniques it uses to enthrall its audience.—[1] Daily Mail review of June 1, 1897[2] Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*, Nov 13, 1992