

Stoker's atmosphere
of fear: narrative
technique in the
opening of "dracula"



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The opening chapters of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker set the scene atmospherically and build the feeling of fear steadily through a combination of themes which were feared in Victorian times. Gothic literature was a new and exciting concept for the stoic Victorians, who weren't used to the overdramatic mannerisms of the gothic characters, and the hyperbolic description that Gothic writers use. The mundane style in which Stoker begins *Dracula* is traditionally in keeping with the attitudes and importances of Victorian society, it immediately shows the paradoxical nature of the novel - between the normal and the supernatural. Stoker builds an atmosphere of fear by introducing that which is unknown to Victorians - people were completely terrified by things they couldn't understand. Stoker exploits this very early on with the unexplained blue flame and the paranormal strength of the cab driver.

Stoker begins to create an atmosphere of fear slowly in chapter one with the introduction of Jonathan Harker, a completely innocent middle-class solicitor going on a seemingly innocuous business trip but, he is going abroad and here is the first sign that something maybe amiss. The first sense something is mysterious is the hot and spicy food which denotes a different culture that the typical Christian Victorian would find unfamiliar and possibly threatening as it made Harker uncomfortable and he " had to drink up all the water... and was still thirsty". The culture theme continues with the description of the Slovaks who at first sight, appear to be in a form of unthreatening fancy dress but subconsciously Harker refers to them as " a band of brigands" which to the Victorian traveller would be a potential threat. This obscurity is a key element of gothic fiction and although it interests Harker, it is still

mysterious and brings in an element of subliminal fear. So far, the tenor of Jonathan's narrative is low-key. This is because Harker simply records everything he sees, thinks and does. However, Harker then arrives in Bistritz, not far from the infamous Borgo Pass, coincidentally, on the eve of St. George's Day, a night when "evil things in the world . . . have full sway." Here, Stoker uses real places and events to build fear and tension as it makes the story more realistic to the reader. Furthermore, Bistritz has a terrifying history of "great fires", "a siege of three weeks" and mass death from famine and disease. This builds tension as it indicates Bistritz may not be a safe place. Then come the warnings from the landlord and the local people. The landlady, in a hysterical state says "Must you go?" She then gives him a crucifix saying "For your mother's sake". Clearly the woman knows that something evil awaits Harker. Furthermore, the crowd outside the hotel mentions "Satan", "hell" and "witch" and give Jonathan the sign of the evil eye. Stoker is leaving the reader in no doubt that with such connotations of the devil, a terrifying fate awaits Harker.

As chapter one progresses, Stoker builds the suspense with more and more references to threats preying on the imagination. He adds suspense by hinting towards the supernatural: when the coachman warns him "you may have enough of such matters before you go to sleep" and, his use of certain language such as "it was evident that something very exciting was... expected" help to build the fearful atmosphere because they suggest something terrible awaits Jonathan. Examples of pathetic fallacy such as "the oppressive sense of thunder" and references to the preternatural including "flickering blue flame" all build the obscurity and heighten the tension. Stoker

uses Harker substantially to build an atmosphere of fear. The normality of Harker enhanced fear as the Victorian audience would have related to him. This would have made moments when Jonathan “ felt a strange chill, and a lonely feeling” much more believable as it would have been easier for the audience to realistically imagine it. Monstrous animal sounds such as “ a dog began to howl” generate horror and the reference to “ a hand which caught my arm in a grip of steel” and “ a ring of wolves” is uncanny and indicates Harker is overpowered and outnumbered creating a threatening atmosphere. The chapter ends with a reference to the supernatural; the coach driver takes control of the wolves causing them to retreat. This shocks Harker and the scene is set for the main characterisation of Dracula in chapter two.

Stoker's initial description of Castle Dracula is ominous and gloomy and produces a foreboding atmosphere. He describes an immense door “ studded with large iron nails” which has connotations of an isolated medieval castle from which the gothic genre was modelled on. Stoker uses Harker's naivety to enhance fear. Harker calls his journey a “ grim adventure” which he feels is “ a horrible nightmare”. This is awful because Harker inadvertently foreshadows his fate. Harker should be suspicious of Dracula's hand which he feels is “ more like the hand of a dead than a living man”, instead he is oblivious and his innocence creates tension, building fear. Furthermore, the first sign of Dracula is “ the gleam of a coming light”. This is ironic because usually, light is the symbol of hope, but in this case it brings terror instead of hope, building suspense. One of the first hints that Dracula is a hybrid is when he hears the howling of wolves and says “ What music they make!”. This is incredibly frightening and would not be considered

musical but to Dracula, it is sweet music which is unexpected and therefore creates fear. The description of "gold" and "beautiful fabrics" suggests Dracula's wealth and therefore power. Mention of the furniture being "centuries old, though in excellent order" suggests it is never used which is odd. This is another hint that Dracula does not lead the typical lifestyle of a Count which is frightening. Dracula advises Harker not to venture into some places of the castle suggesting he "will not wish to go". This is threatening and suggests there are dangerous things hiding within the castle which helps build the atmosphere of fear. The description of Dracula's "long, sharp, canine teeth" is frightening because it animalises him indicating he is supernatural. It has connotations of a predatory carnivore suggesting Dracula is very dangerous and attacks other animals (including humans). At the end of the chapter, Harker realises Dracula has no reflection because "there was no reflection of him in the mirror". This startles Jonathan and makes him feel uneasy. However, when Dracula saw the blood on Jonathan's neck "his eyes blazed with a sort of demonic fury" which was quickly overcome when he touched the crucifix. This is incredibly frightening and the reference to the demon suggests Dracula is evil generating horror. This is also the first appearance of Dracula's demon-like alter ego, a key Gothic element which helps evoke fear in the reader. Finally at the end of chapter two, Harker's doubts get the better of him and he realises "the castle is a veritable prison" and he is a prisoner. Harker realises Dracula is a monster and that he is therefore in danger which scares the reader as we pity and are frightened and anxious for Jonathan who is an innocent victim.

Stoker begins to build an atmosphere of fear in chapter three with the use of gothic opposition. Harker describes how the crucifix “should in a time of loneliness and trouble be of help”. Here he is fighting the good of God against the evil of Dracula. Stoker's novel was not the only production of the late 19th century to register the feeling that some gigantic evil was gnawing away at Christian self confidence and therefore the thought of a supernatural monster that was able to challenge God's omnipotence, terrified the Victorians. Stoker also animalises Dracula in this chapter. Harker is careful “not to awake his suspicion” suggesting Dracula is a sleeping beast who could become very dangerous. This adds suspense and helps build the atmosphere of fear. Furthermore, Harker becomes terrified when he sees the Count “crawl down the castle wall... just as a lizard”. This is unbelievable and creates fear because it focuses on the gothic idea of a dominant supernatural creature, evoking horror in the reader. The introduction of the vampire brides creates fear because their seductive personality went against the traditional views of Victorian society including the Seven Deadly Sins one of which was lust. The terror that haunts Stoker's work most persistently is a male fear of, yet desire for, sex. One of the brides “went on her knees and bent over me fairly gloating” and Jonathan admits he felt a “wicked, burning desire”. This would have shocked the Victorians, many of whom would not have been impressed however, it would have added suspense. Stoker presents the brides in a very seductive way in order to create a tense atmosphere. One of the brides “arched her neck”, “licked her lips”, and “lapped” her teeth. All these movements resemble feline characteristics suggesting the brides are sensual and possibly predatory, generating fear.

The use of an oxymoron, “thrilling and repulsive”, to describe Jonathan's
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reaction emphasises the sublime of the supernatural, and how they (the supernatural) have immense power over Jonathan. The thought of a more powerful creature terrified the Victorians who believed they were superior and therefore builds an atmosphere of fear. Furthermore the brides are very shocking because they appear as fine ladies but it is all an illusion. The gothic element of the alter ego would have horrified the Victorians who believed the most important role of a women is to be a good mother which they do not display. Instead, they become demon-like creatures “ with fury” and “ rage” and they horrifically kill and eat a living baby. This particularly gruesome and horrific event causes Jonathan to “ sink down unconscious” and builds and horrifies the reader building an atmosphere of fear.

Interestingly, Stoker adds a homoerotic element when Dracula says “ this man belongs to me” referring to Jonathan. The idea of homosexuality was taboo and built up fear because it displayed Dracula's dominance over Jonathan who is completely helpless. Stoker also uses the gothic element of female victimhood to create fear but instead feminises Harker, the innocent male victim, by overwhelming him and causing him to faint. This weakness evokes fear as it shows how horrific Dracula and the vampire brides are that even a man cannot handle their action.

This brilliant build-up leaves the reader in no doubt that something terrifying and supernatural is going to happen. The initial introductory chapters develop the readers anxiety because we fear for Harker's life. Stoker's effective use of foreshadowing and pathetic fallacy help build suspense and fear as they suggest danger awaits Jonathan. Setting is clearly immensely important to the novel. The gothic description of Castle Dracula is frightening

and foreboding which helps build an atmosphere of fear. Characterisation is also significant. Harker is an innocent, naive man who comes face to face with a supernatural monster, Dracula. The opposition between them is a key gothic element as it emphasises how helpless Harker is against Dracula physically and mentally, making the reader anxious and terrified. The horror and obscurity which is involved in so many of the events as well as the Gothic setting all help to build an atmosphere of fear; in light of such narrative mastery, it is unsurprising that the character of Dracula became one of the most terrifying monsters of all time.