

# Dracula: symbolism, imagery and significance



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Despite being a work of fantasy, there is a lot that can be drawn from Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*. Its effectiveness, stems from its capability to play on human fears. However, it also reflects anxieties that riddled his era. The figure of Dracula stands as both the incarnation of England's strongest fears during the nineteenth century as well as the timeless vision of evil. Below is an explanation of how all this played out in a historical context.

*Dracula* was published in 1897, a period when the British Empire was at the helm of its expansion. It had taken over large expanses of land in Asia, Africa as well as in North America (Light, 2007). They used these colonies to strengthen their economic and military power. However, this peak also marked the commencement of a decline in their power. The rise of the European powers (for example Austro-Hungary and Germany) and the United States posed a threat to Britain's reign as the most powerful nation in the world. In addition, the rise in immigration brought in unfamiliar cultures and races onto British soil (Wasson, 1966). Just like in America, this spurred violent reactions against the foreigners. *Dracula*, just like any other immigrant from eastern Europe is a representation of the prejudices and biases against outsiders.

The fear of the outsiders was effectively mirrored by new fears regarding the human mind and its content. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the world witnessed the birth of modern psychiatry and psychology (Subotsky, 2009). It was at this time, famous psychologists like Sigmund Freud published their theories of the unconscious as well as those of sexuality and who was also of the idea that the mind is shrouded with more darkness and mystery than most would suppose (McCrea, 2010). In *Dracula*, characters

like Dr. Van Helsing and Dr. Seward were practitioners of this new science of the mind. Examples of these include mental suggestions, hypnosis and compulsive behavior found in Dracula was a reflection of public interest.

In 1895, Oscar Wilde, who came from the same Dublin community as Bram Stoker ended up being prosecuted for homosexuality. The life of Wilde, an international celebrity was ruined by the prosecution whereby he ended up serving two years in prison, after which he died in obscurity later on. The hostility and publicity that surrounded the trial could have influenced Stoker, as was reflected in Dracula where the author showed evidence of anxiety and suspicion towards many forms of sexuality, particularly those considered to be “” perverse (Dyer, 2002).”” The hypnotic powers of the vampire, his taste for young female victims, as well as the sensuality accompanying bloodsucking suggested that Stocker’s mind was preoccupied with things more than monsters. Some have even gone ahead to suggest that Dracula’s evil attractions were an indication of Stocker’s fears concerning his own sexuality.

It is correct to say that Count Dracula is a representation of many things including repressed homosexuality, foreign influence and many other issues. Dracula is a completely realized character even when compared to the book’s heroes. In addition, the different forms taken by Dracula’s threats including the influence of hypnotic suggestion, invasion from the East and the sexual assaults against women is a reflection of the concerns of the time and place the novel was written in.

Dracula also had its focus on the conflict between Eastern and Western Europe. There are numerous sociological and psychological explanations about this novel have been offered which has immensely contributed to its popularity. Among these possibilities is the theme of politics which has appealed to audiences throughout the crisis period of the cold war and the two world wars. Count Dracula is a representation of those forces that were present in Eastern Europe that sought to overthrow through subversion and violence, the West's progressive democratic civilization. Many interpret Dracula as a threat to the barbarians by attempting to disrupt the civilized world.

In Dracula, particularly at the beginning of the story, Jonathan Harker takes a train (a symbol of development and growth in industrial society) to Dracula's Castle. The deeper he travels to the East, the less punctual the trains become. Harker is accustomed to the ways of the West, finds it really hard to keep up the pace with the slow-paced ways of the East. Jonathan Harker describes central Romania (where the story happens) which is at the Eastern part of Europe, as the place where the customs and laws of the West are absent. He goes ahead to call it an imaginative pool of races (Schuller, 2009). On the other hand, Western Europe is dedicated to the development of its economy and education while those in the East are still frail from wars, without civilization. This is well by the imprisonment of Harker who is denied his elementary rights even as a prisoner.

The theme of religion is quite vivid in Bram Stoker's "Dracula." Through its main character, Dracula, the novel depicts Anti-Christian beliefs and values. Though out the whole novel, Stoker's clearly portrays Dracula as the "anti-  
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Christ.”” The author makes use of numerous beliefs from Christianity to portray the diverse types of Anti-Christian principles, superstitious beliefs concerning protection against evil and the comparison between the powers of evil and good.

The novel makes use of many biblical references and imagery by making comparisons between Christ and Dracula. For example, in the battle between evil and good, the vampire hunters symbolize the Catholic forces that are determined to wage war against this evil. On the other hand, Dracula represents evil and his willingness to present “” vampirism”” into life. In addition, there are many religious symbols in the story including the use of rosaries, crucifixes, and communion wafers in a bid to ward off vampires. In the novel, vampirism is depicted as a demonic hitch of the communion. In chapter 13, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing is depicted as one who embraces Catholicism when he goes ahead to remove a small, gold crucifix from his neck and places it on the mouth of Lucy’s corpse (Starrs, 2004). On the other hand, Jonathan Harker who goes ahead to proclaim himself as an English churchman, which primarily translates to mean either a Protestant or an Anglican. At one point in the novel Harker is said to be very respectful to the affiliates of the Catholic church due to the strength of their beliefs.

In the novel, the number three is used symbolically in the novel. Lucy had three wedding proposals, Jonathan wrote home three letters and was seduced by three vampires, furthermore, Dracula purchased three homes. The repetitive nature of number three can be linked to the three wise men and the holy trinity (Herbert, 2002). The other relationship that the novel

shares with Christianity, is Dracula's ability to control the weather as well as his other supernatural abilities that only God can do.

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