

Reading dracula as  
twisted victorian  
detective fiction: van  
helsing and seward  
VS...



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“ There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact” — Conan Doyle

The fin de siècle was an era wrought with anxieties brought about by emerging modernity — vast technological innovation paired with new scientific knowledge. New enlightenment understandings prompted an existential crisis as to what extent the scientific method and modernity can result in empirical “ certainty” and “ truth” — a classic question we still grapple with to this day. The emergence of Victorian detective fiction in the 19th century has been attributed to this “ Victorian desire for social and epistemological order.” (Pittard 1). In “ We Must Have Certainty” J. K. Van Dover writes “ The detective story implies, as part of its essential generic contract with the reader, that in the world of the narrative there will be baffling appearances, and that, in the end, these bafflements will be exorcized.” (Dover 2). In essence, the detective story is supposed to alleviate gothic fears. A detective restores justice and order using modern empirical scientific understanding as a positive good, creating optimism for a modern future and eschewing ignorance and uncertainty.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula contains many elements of Victorian detective fiction in the context of the fin de siècle as a gritty crime thriller, and like Victorian Holmesian detective fiction, it contains many elements of the gothic. However, Dracula intentionally perverts and distorts the classical Holmesian detective story - Abraham Van Helsing and John Seward function as a twisted Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson. Rather than exposit pure cold modernity in their forensic deduction, they undermine modernity by seeking truth in a way which allows the horrors of the gothic to exist and seep into reality, demonstrating accrediting these uncertainties’ existence is

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necessary to overcome them. This contrasts Holmes and Watson, who alleviate gothic fears by proving such horrors exist only in the realm of temporary misunderstanding of modern empirical science.

When reading *Dracula* as a work of detective fiction, the Helsing and Seward dynamic functions as a warped Holmes and Watson archetype. Parallels between Holmes and Helsing abound. Both are the eccentric loner as a separate “other,” both are bachelors, academics, and revered scientific experts commanding the leadership role. In their detective work, as Theresa Jamieson describes in “Working for the Empire” both are masculine, as is required in such a dangerous profession, and both serve morality in truth and justice. Both even employ similar middle-class fluidity in their personal interactions. However, Van Helsing clearly differs from Holmes in his motivations, strong emotions, and detective methods (view and use of modern science and technology). In *Dracula*’s larger narrative, Helsing differs in his existence in a warped gothic version of the very real world. *Dracula* is filled with “baffling appearances” which are not in fact ever fully resolved or understood by science and modernity.

Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson are the quintessential public epitome of Victorian detective fiction. “The Great Detective” himself is world renowned as the ultimate denizen of cold, logical, modern scientific deduction. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Holmes is “the hero-detective acting specifically as the champion of empirical science, facing its crucial challenge, the challenge of the seemingly supernatural... to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis.” (Clausson 62). Holmes represents that Victorian-era search for <https://assignbuster.com/reading-dracula-as-twisted-victorian-detective-fiction-van-helsing-and-seward-vs-holmes-and-watson/>

certainty amidst chaos. “ A character like Holmes could grow to full stature,” says Christopher Clausen, “ only in a time when [. . .] science was viewed by its enthusiasts as a new force crusading for progress against ignorance and unreason.” (Clausson 62). Holmes actively prevents emotion from marring his work. “ whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things...Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science...and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.” (Doyle 116).

In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Watson is an ironic apprentice to Holmes. Not only is Watson older, but being a university educated combat medic he should have the same if not more forensic police detective acumen than Holmes. However, the duo’s dynamic is very much novice seeking to emulate master. Holmes teases Watson to use his cold, logical intuition – and free himself of his emotions. Holmes implores Watson to lose his functional fixedness and expectations of what is possible to solve puzzles Holmes already has completed due to his mastery of said tactics. “ How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?” (Doyle 83). But vitally, it’s never outside the modern empirical scientific method Holmes thinks, and thus, constrains Watson to think inside of. These detective stories reward this way of thinking by proving following the scientific method to pierce through superstition is the single, correct path to unraveling even the most baffling, inexplicable, and seemingly unnatural of crimes. Finally, all the Holmesian detective stories serve to uphold the scientific status quo. “ Holmes is not only the voice of scientific detection but also the preserver of the political and social status quo: Holmes is rarely or never threatening [...]

because his potentially corrosive intellect never questions the basic assumptions of his society.” (Clausson 62).

In *Dracula*, detection is flipped nearly on its head in the Helsing-Seward duo dynamic. Again, mirroring Watson, Seward is the ironic apprentice – Seward is a well-respected psychologist and denizen of science; he should have everything well in hand. Seward is even akin to Holmes in his tactics, he never thinks outside of empirical science, as Helsing points out “ Seward cannot recognize the evidence of vampirism because he is “ prejudiced” about what can be true.” (Jann 274). Seward even does drugs, a nod to Holmes’ cocaine use. Yet, the problem of occult *Dracula* leaves Seward helpless. In *Dracula* Seward is the apprentice learning from Helsing “ a scientist, philosopher, metaphysician...one of the most advanced scientists of his day.” (Jann 274). Like Holmes, Helsing implores Seward to follow his methods. Yet crucially, Helsing’s methods are nearly the exact opposite of Holmes — he teaches with tools that are superstitious and unscientific, but which work just the same.

Unlike Holmes, Helsing battles the status quo – from breaking into property, traveling abroad, and being one who accepts vampires’ existence (and much more) in the face of disbelief. Helsing’s Dutch heritage ties into his connection with the supernatural foreign East. Contrarily, Holmes’ deeply British roots prove no threat to modern British empire or status quo scientific institutions. As a detective, Helsing delves into what modernity cannot tackle. Helsing attacks the science Holmes’s methods are founded on and encourages his fellow detective to do so. “ It is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it can explain not, then it says there is nothing to

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explain.” (Stoker 272). Helsing implies men like Holmes would fail miserably to combat threats like Dracula. “ In this enlightened age, when men believe not even what they see, the doubting of wise men would be Dracula’s greatest strength.” (Stoker 348). Indeed, “ What Dracula’s implacable enemy Professor Van Helsing teaches is that the confidence of modern empirical science and rational skepticism is misplaced, that Victorian naturalism has blinded itself to the continuing terrible powers of the supernal and the supernatural worlds. Beliefs dismissed as primitive superstitions carry vital truths we have forgotten, and this is a core element of the gothic’s constantly restated criticism of modernity.” (Luckhurst xiii). Yet, Helsing does not eschew modernity entirely. He ensures the group utilizes modern tools; pistols, time measurement, typewriters, cameras, phonographs, and much more. “ We have on our side power of combination - a power denied to the vampire kind; we have resources of science” (Stoker 222). Seward presents a hybridized view of modernity which undermines the absolute version Holmes lives by. Helsing criticizes modernity for missing crucial aspects of our world because modernity ignores them out of an ironic ignorance of certainty, rather than to explore or combat such uncertainties as needed.

Ultimately, while Helsing and Seward mirror Holmes and Watson in that by the end they still “ solve the crime” of Dracula, the way they accomplish this feat of detection is far from the optimistic positivist method made famous by Homes and Watson. In his detective methods, Helsing invokes emotion — like Holmes Helsing’s detective quest to defeat Dracula comes from his motivation he is in the right. But while Holmes sense of righteousness stems from his prided infallible logic, Helsing’s comes from supernal divinity: God. “

For if we fail...to us forever the gates of heaven shut; for who shall open them to us again? We go on for all time abhorred by all; a blot on the face of gods sunshine; an arrow in the side of him who died for man." (Stoker 221). In addition to his emotive to protect those he cares about. " my true friend...I swear it" (Stoker 151). Helsing's motives are for the good of all. " We have self-devotion in a cause, and an end to achieve which is not a selfish one." (Stoker 222.) This attacks Holmes atheist, selfish simple motive " I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession." (Doyle 67).

Beyond motivations, in his work Van Helsing uses archaic, unscientific methods - ironically the only methods which can solve the problem of Dracula. " these things - tradition and superstition - are everything." (Stoker 222). Garlic, crucifixes, and holy wafers are required for a gothic monster like Dracula, methods that defy scientific logic - but align with the logic of superstitious lore. Helsing uniquely presents these gothic horrors and archaic detection methods as a part of modernity. " A year ago, which of us would have received such a possibility, in the midst of our scientific, skeptical, matter of fact 19th century?" (Stoker 222). Helsing and Seward existing in a world where such gothic monsters like Dracula exist and threaten our modern world in itself mocks the Holmesian detective story, which never contain any such threats it is necessary for Homes and Watson to overcome. " The phantasmagoric imagination of the gothic actually begins to provide many of the metaphors for how we conceive of our modern subjectivity." (Luckhurst xiii). Dracula's larger narrative aligns with yet actively undermines the Victorian idea of the detective story grounded in uncovering

the unknowable undesirables of the world (crime) using modern methods and non-modern methods.

In the end of any detective story in Holmes' modern selfish, cold, and calculating search of truth, he eventually reveals to investigators the correct explanation for a crime, using empirical facts and data investigators were unable to logically align. Such an ending is the opposite of Helsing's conclusive solving of Dracula. " We want no proofs. We ask none to believe us!" (Stoker 351). Helsing doesn't require a burden of proof from anyone. In fact, Helsing seeks truth in a way which doesn't require the backing of modern empirical science. Helsing uses the methods necessary to get the job done, modern or archaic and unscientific. The narrative of Dracula itself is not a clear-cut narrative told by a certain detective as a linear timeline, instead it is a subjective pastiche of documents filled with uncertainties; missing events, time, and objectivity. Like Helsing's detective methods, the narrative is full of emotion and uncertainty.

Stoker's employment of detective fiction in Dracula is crooked in that empiricism and the scientific method never solves or understands the crime of the Dracula in the modern world. Dracula suggests the limits of scientific deduction and, thereby, the optimistic view of modernity. Helsing and Seward as detectives in Dracula suggests we need to keep an open mind and indulge in uncertainty, not cast it away as nonsense - ironically the opposite of what empirical science seeks to do in the first place. " It is that the chief proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness." (Doyle 90).



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