

Gothic tropes in dracula: novel and film



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This chapter from the novel 'Dracula' by Bram Stoker includes an abundance of conventions typical of the Gothic genre, primarily employed here through Stoker's characterisation of Johnathan Harker, Count Dracula and the three seductive women. Published in the late 19th Century, at a time when the focus of the Gothic genre was often on the darker elements of the human psyche in the familiar setting of the modern world, 'Dracula', for the most part being set in Victorian Britain, indeed conformed to the genre norms of the time. However, this chapter contains a number of conventions established early on in the genre; a protagonist suffering an excess of emotional distress, caused by supernatural phenomena, the events taking place in unfamiliar locations, distanced from the present. Indeed, such elements ensure the foundations of this novel are deep-rooted in the Gothic style.

The overtly sexual tone of this chapter establishes this a theme of the novel, indeed one which is common in the Gothic genre. Stoker depicts one of the recurring Gothic stereotypes of female characters in his portrayal of the three women introduced in this chapter; they are attractive, illusive and sexually assertive. Johnathan recounts how the "fair girl went on her knees, and bent over [him], fairly gloating", the proxemics here creating the sexual tone and reinforcing a notion typical of the Gothic genre: that women are only able to exert power through their sexuality. Sexuality is a prevalent Gothic theme; indeed, it can be seen famously in Angela Carter's anthology 'The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories' where numerous female characters display prevalent sexual desires. However, female sexual assertiveness was not generally accepted in the Victorian era and so contemporary readers

would have been suitably shocked and even disturbed by this moment in the narrative, indeed fulfilling one of the aims of the genre. In the 1992 film adaptation of Stoker's 'Dracula', director Francis Ford Coppola exaggerates the sexual atmosphere further by choosing to have the three women topless and to have all engage with Johnathan, kissing and licking him repeatedly. A century after the original novel societal opinion on sex would have changed, and by making this seen even more outrageous, Coppola is successful in upholding the Gothic motive of shocking his audience. Yet another Gothic trope which is portrayed during this moment is the notion that humans are simultaneously repulsed and enticed by the supernatural. Stoker provides the reader with more than one example of juxtaposition that demonstrate Johnathan's confusion as to how to react to his strange predicament: "some longing and at the same time deadly fear", "which was both thrilling and repulsive". This strong juxtaposition is also seen in Stoker's description of the women's physical appearances, indeed they are "ladies by their dress", mimicking the appearance of a Victorian lady, contrasting the disconcerting emphasis placed by Stoker on their "brilliant white teeth". The overwhelming sense of Johnathan's confusion here, as well as his guilt in knowing that "it is not good to note this down, lest someday it should meet Mina's eyes", demonstrates that the sexual element of the chapter is perhaps transgressive but presented in such a way that it is attractive to both contemporary and modern readers, indeed conforming to the Gothic tradition of exploring inexplicable fascination.

Another character that is inherently Gothic is Count Dracula. At this point in the novel, the supernatural elements to his character has already been

hinted to the reader, and here they are only emphasised. Stoker depicts how “ the red light in [his eyes] was lurid, as if the flames of hell-fire blazed behind them”. Colour semiotics are so often used to depict characters in Gothic fiction, and here it is no different. The allusion to hell, along with the connotations of the colour red not only associate Count Dracula with evil, but also with the myths surrounding vampirism – red eyes being an indicator of such. This foreshadows a potentiality for cruelty in the Count and establishes him as the novel’s Gothic antagonist. Furthermore, the Count exerts tremendous power both physically and in the way of gender dynamics, reinforcing his Gothic characterisation. Johnathan recounts how Count Dracula “ hurled the women from him”, the powerful verb “ hurled” eliciting extremely aggressive connotations. His actions here re-affirm male dominance in this moment as Stoker introduces the concept that gender hierarchy, a recurring Gothic theme, exists in both the human and supernatural realms; men will always dominate. Indeed in the 1992 film adaptation by Francis Ford Coppola, these power dynamics are demonstrated starkly through the camera angle at this point in the story, which looks up at the Count from below mimicking the way in which women might look up to a man. The Count’s aggressive actions ensure that this is yet another moment in the narrative that is successful in shocking the contemporary reader as the Victorian façade of respectability is subverted.

Additionally, the apparent emotional distress and disorientation of the protagonist Johnathan Harker contributes considerably to the Gothic atmosphere of the novel. Johnathan describes how “ the lips...seemed about to fasten on [his] throat”, the use of the verb “ fasten” being successful in

manifesting tangible tension in this moment as it connotes a sense of claustrophobia and impending danger. Indeed, Johnathan's lack of reaction might baffle the reader, since it is human instinct to avoid danger; his passive and docile manner in this moment only emphasises the power dynamics between Johnathan and the woman, indeed Gothic in style as Stoker demonstrates the helplessness of the human – the relatable character – in the face of the creature that is both foreign but also alarmingly familiar to the reader, as she is to Johnathan. Stoker is also successful in creating a potent sense of disorientation at this point in the narrative when the Count states “ I must awaken him”, the fairly obvious implication being that Johnathan was asleep. This is portrayed starkly in the 1992 film adaptation by Francis Ford Coppola in which the echoing whispers of the three women, who are not yet present, combined with the mist that initially covers the bed creates a fantastical, dreamlike sequence which reinforces the possibility that Johnathan is indeed unconscious, calling into question whether or not this occurrence was merely Johnathan's imagination. Whilst the reader remains uncertain as to whether or not Johnathan was unconscious, it was Stoker's intention, in true Gothic form, to create an unreliable narrator which subsequently unnerves the reader. ‘ The Turn of the Screw’ by Henry James is one of the most famous examples of the Gothic trope of the unreliable narrator; the story ends in a shocking and confusing manner, leaving the reader totally unsure of what took place. Indeed this moment is similar in that the reader is left uncertain as to whether or not the actions actually took place or whether it was part of a dream – a manifestation of Johnathan's fear. Here, Stoker fulfils one of the most important Gothic aims; to stimulate a psychological response of fear in the reader. Indeed, the essence of the

Gothic is to threaten stability and lose control of what is traditionally believed by the reader to be normal and true. The end of the chapter heightens the reader's fear as it describes how "the horror overcame me, and I sank down unconscious". The contrast in sentence structure and the emphasis on the loss of consciousness is extremely powerful in that it mirrors the theatrical climax of a blackout, indeed making the end of this chapter suitably sudden and dramatic. Stoker's makes effective use of narrative techniques throughout the chapter; the epistolary style and here in particular, first person narrative, yet another frequent Gothic trope, ensures that the "horror" of the situation resonates strongly with the reader and the Gothic style of the narrative is magnified.

In conclusion, Stoker's employment of traditional Gothic tropes, combined with the reader's prior knowledge of the remote and isolated location where the narrative unfolds, vigorously conforms to the style of early Gothic literature; indeed Horace Walpole's 'The Castle of Otranto' is considered to be the first Gothic and its remote setting paves the way for effectiveness of such convention. By combining this element with others familiar to a reader of the Gothic – elements of the supernatural, an unreliable narrator and an overtly sexual tone – Stoker is successful in telling a story which is well established in Gothic form.