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The Dracula Difference: Bram Stoker's Dracula and the Threat of the Other

Taylor Kern '20

Victorian England was a formidable empire. It was the largest superpower, the paragon of Western social order, the colonizer, and the norm. England also made the executive decision to do everything necessary to maintain and enforce these statuses. Like an organism, it had to remain impenetrable to threats to its health. In Victorian England, people feared the exotic outsider, seeing it as a disease that could weaken the Empire. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was born of this fear. England's identity was bound up in its position as the most powerful nation and fear of losing this position reinforced its determination to maintain it. Dracula's radical differences in appearance haunt the English consciousness and he later invades England and its people with physical force. Dracula's spiritual identity is also a threat to an integral component of English identity: Christianity. Foreigners introduced other gods and beliefs that permeated English thought, and in Dracula's case, godlessness. The novel also characterizes Dracula by his cultural otherness, yearning to master his knowledge of English culture in order to best prey on it, under the guise of assimilation. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* depicts the count's otherness as a physical, spiritual, and cultural threat to the English characters to demonstrate the true frailty of the British Empire.

Firstly, the novel portrays Dracula as physically different from an Englishman, and radically so. From very small interactions, Jonathan Harker gathers that Dracula

has unnatural strength. When he helps Harker down from the calèche, the Englishman remarks “I could not but notice his prodigious strength. His hand actually seemed like a steel vice that could have crushed mine if he had chosen” (Stoker 21). Harker is a grown man and yet he comments on another man’s strength, a man hitherto normal (to his knowledge). This exotic, othered figure not only makes him feel weak by comparison but makes him feel as though he could be “crushed” if the other chose to exert its full strength. This observation acts as commentary on the insecurity of the Englishman who can be rendered helpless should the colonized people turn their “prodigious” strength against him. Harker also notices that Dracula’s hand “seemed as cold as ice – more like the hand of a dead than a living man” (Stoker 22). Harker immediately classifies Dracula, from his body temperature, as something other – someone who is not a living man like himself. Moreover, death to the quintessential Englishman is a radical other, for there is no greater unknown to the living than death. The unknown in a Victorian context is a source of fear. Fear implies a perceived threat and invites “the violent and xenophobic disavowal of the Other” (Khader 1). This violent disavowal is evident in Harker’s “wince”; he physically recoils from Dracula’s othered touch, an interaction that so disturbs him that he notes it in his journal (Stoker 22). Harker also notices very unusual qualities in Dracula’s features. He describes him as having “peculiarly sharp white teeth...ears...pale and at the tops extremely pointed” and that in all he was a man of “extraordinary pallor,” (if he be a man at all) (Stoker 24). These factors, coupled with the strange hair on his palms, his pointed nails, and his rank breath, stir within Harker “a horrible feeling” when Dracula comes close to him (Stoker 25). Dracula’s mere proximity makes Harker feel

threatened, and his body reacts instinctively, shrinking from the danger he perceives in his exotic, sharp teeth and claws. Harker, representative of England, feels uncomfortable with even the proximity of the exotic other. This discomfort exemplifies the threat Dracula's otherness poses to Harker's fragile Englishness – Dracula has the power to convert him into a vampire, the exotic overtaking his English identity. Dracula only magnifies this threat as he begins to control Harker's movements and to demonstrate more of his supernatural abilities.

After physically threatening Harker, Dracula essentially invades England through Lucy Westenra. Lucy **Westenra** is a physical embodiment of the **West**, along with its ideals and privileges; she is a blonde, innocent Englishwoman who is uplifted in her native land, wary of the outsider. When Dracula bites her, he is physically invading the golden female symbol of England as well as invading England itself. After the bite triggers the start of Lucy's conversion, she becomes other as well. She no longer acts like herself and her skin is "in excessive pallor" (Stoker 139). Lucy of the West begins to take on characteristics of the Eastern Dracula and then follows in his footsteps preying on England, symbolized by the innocent and powerless children she attacks. Her character realizes England's greatest fears: the power of the exotic to harm one of the Empire's own, and the dissemination of foreign power on English soil. Not only has the Western Lucy become an agent of the exotic East, but she also continues the physical invasion Dracula has begun. Moreover, the novel pointedly shows Dracula attacking and converting women, the sex perceived as weaker in Victorian England. The novel portrays the foreign invasion of England as gendered, a sort of reverse-colonization of the fragile West by the East, with the other as the

aggressor. A gendered representation of foreign invasion also implies that the other can taint England as easily as a man can assault a woman, with as traumatizing of an effect; Dracula's choice to drink the blood of (and penetrate) women paint him as both an inhuman monster and a man who rapes women. If Dracula can leave Transylvania and enter an English woman's room at night to commit violating acts with sexual overtones, an Eastern European foreigner could undermine all of English society.

In addition, the novel emphasizes how spiritually different Dracula is from all of the human characters. Specifically, the novel portrays Dracula as unholy in the eyes of Christian England. Shortly after "leaving the West and entering the East," a woman cautions Harker "when the clock strikes midnight, all the evil things in the world will have full sway" (Stoker 7, 11). She asks him "Do you know where you are going, and what you are going to?" offering him a crucifix to protect himself (Stoker 11). The woman does not say "whom" you are going to but rather "what," the "what" being a creature dangerous enough to warrant the protection of a crucifix and inhuman enough to merit an object pronoun. Moreover, Harker as an "English Churchman" finds the crucifix "idolatrous," (Stoker 11). Firstly, Harker is in near complete denial of the ungodly nature of what he is about to meet. Secondly, his spiritual beliefs do not even align with those of the other human Christians he encounters in the East. Harker's first mistake is thinking that he does not need protection and his second is thinking that his Church of England renders him above using protection from the wrong Christianity. Harker is the male personification of a vulnerable English Empire: equally as susceptible to foreign invasion as a woman but prideful enough to snub non-Anglican Christianity, to deny his frailty, and to ignore warnings from foreigners until it is

too late. The novel spiritually others Dracula from the humans to the extent that Harker's fellow travelers call him "Satan...hell...witch" and even "vampire" in their foreign tongues, crossing themselves continually (Stoker 12). Though they do not intend to go near him, these humans perceive Dracula to be a threat to their godly existences even at a distance. Similarly, the mere existence of foreigners with different beliefs is a threat to the Church of England and England's strength as an empire. Harker later cuts himself shaving and Dracula's eyes "[blaze] with a sort of demoniac fury, and he suddenly made a grab at [Harker's] throat" (Stoker 33). When Harker drew away, "his hand touch[es] the string of beads which held the crucifix. It made an instant change in him," and the fury in Dracula's face vanished instantaneously (Stoker 33). The sight of blood draws out Dracula's unholy and demonic nature, the spiritual opposite of the traditional Englishman. A demon is a spiritual threat to a Christian and therefore Dracula's physical attack threatens Harker's mortality until the crucifix, a symbol of God, protects him. Dracula has the power to kill and convert Harker into a vampire, the power to convert him from a God-fearing Christian to a Devil-worshiping demon. The holy object's effect on Dracula further emphasizes his godlessness and the danger he poses to Harker's English and spiritual identity.

The novel conveys Dracula's invasion of England with Lucy as a victim once again, this time through his spiritual invasion of her Englishness. After Lucy is "Undead", Van Helsing claims that "she differ from all other" and they use "garlic and a crucifix" to trap her in the tomb (Stoker 214). Lucy is now a member of the radical other that is the vampire race. As a result, she no longer has a soul and is subject to the control religious articles impose upon Dracula. Dracula converts the pure and holy Lucy to a

soulless, undead evil, a spiritual other; his spiritual threat to her and the English people is realized. Thus, the critic Jamil Khader argues that the group of vampire hunters “forecloses Lucy’s Otherness” when they drive the stake through her heart (1). He expounds that “in killing her, they frame her murder within a theological narrative of redemption and salvation” (Khader 1). In essence, though they are murdering someone who is Un-dead, she was not truly alive because she was animated without a soul, and therefore outside of the realm of her previous Christianity. In their interpretation of Christian theology, sparing a soul from being a demonic creature absolves the hunters of murder and concurrently eliminates the threat the spiritually othered Lucy posed to the frail English religious identity.

Dracula is also very culturally different from the English people. Shortly after Jonathan Harker’s arrival at Dracula’s home, Dracula makes note of their cultural differences. Dracula explains “We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things” (Stoker 28). Indeed, he later addresses Harker by his last name first, pardoning his “country’s habit of putting your patronymic first” (Stoker 29). Though obsessed with understanding English culture, Dracula consistently imposes his cultural tendencies on Harker during conversation. Harker is also uncomfortable with Dracula’s desire to know England so well, to the extent of mimicking his accent, though he claims “we Szekelys have a right to be proud” and launches into the entire history of his people (Stoker 35). Harker is not only disinterested but unnerved, as he has already begun to feel extremely threatened by simply being immersed in Dracula’s culture. He feels even more threatened by Dracula’s culture when in another

conversation “some expression in [Harker’s] face strange to him, he added: - ‘Ah, sir, you dwellers in the city cannot enter into the feelings of the hunter.’” (Stoker 25). Dracula reveals that it is in his culture to be a hunter (before he reveals that it is also in his nature as a vampire). Harker’s delicate English sensibilities are naturally averse to Dracula’s foreign power and animalistic violence, especially if England is to become his prey. Dracula’s desire to live in England further threatens Harker because foreign culture endangers his native land, the culture he cherishes (an industrialized empire without a rung in its social ladder for others or hunters). The critic Hatlen corroborates, averring that Dracula is “culturally ‘other’: a revenant from the ages of superstition when people believed that the communion wafer was the flesh of Christ. But more significantly of all he is the socially other: the embodiment of all the social forces that lurked just beyond the frontiers of Victorian middle-class consciousness” (82). This critic propounds that Dracula is not only an exotic cultural artifact, but his social otherness can destabilize the entire social order that is the backbone of Victorian culture. For example, if Dracula is a foreigner who holds wealth and power in England, he represents a dangerous anomaly in the class structure. Therefore, the cultural threat Dracula poses rivals the physical threat in that England’s very social ideology is vulnerable to foreign invasion. In addition, when it comes to light that children are being kidnapped and returned with neck bites, a Western doctor attributes them to “some animal...some wild specimen from the South of a more malignant species. Some sailor may have brought one home” (Stoker 208). The doctor in no uncertain terms implies that the evil and violent nature of the creature attacking the children must be due to the fact that it originates in some unknown foreign culture. He

practically points a finger at Dracula – the “wild” (not tamed to English standards), “malignant” (evil), “animal” (non-human) that cannot be English and therefore must have been brought on a boat from a foreign land. This claim is in line with Attila Viragh’s analysis that the novel is centered “on a dominant myth of late-Victorian England as ‘obsessed with the preservation of a pure, homogeneous, and unchanging national identity’ that was constantly threatened by foreign and subversive elements” (1). Essentially, Dracula and or even a stowaway animal from another land pose a threat to English lives and their way of life. If just an exotic animal poses a threat to English safety and identity, the empire clearly struggles with its own mortality.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is an exploration of the fragility of the English Empire through the threat of Dracula’s physical, spiritual, and cultural otherness. Dracula is a danger to English lives, threatening Harker, Mina, Lucy, and anyone who dares stop his invasion of England. He is the embodiment of the unholy, a red-eyed hunter that can only be slowed by garlic and symbols of Faith. If the Satanic figure Dracula had won, England’s Christian God would have lost. If Dracula survived and was able to continue preying on England to increase his power, he would have been able to decimate fragile England and repopulate it with his culture of hunters – with foreigners like him. Thus, England’s identity and power rested delicately in the balance of Dracula’s intelligence versus that of his pursuers. Radical others from Transylvania and the rest of the world presented imminent danger to Victoria’s rigid sociocultural structure. Dracula’s pursuit of assimilation, however, begs the question: if he had succeeded in assimilating and Harker did not bear witness to his otherness, could England have protected itself from a

chameleon, his physical, spiritual, and cultural threat concealed? If Stoker did not support the Empire, would any Western character who resisted Dracula's attacks have prevailed?

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