The Ambiguity or Impossibility of Separation

Dacre Stoker on Bram Stoker and *Dracula*

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This year marks the 125th anniversary of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, first published in May of 1897. It has reached beyond the literary concept of the vampire to influence the rendition of this creature of the night onscreen, beginning with Universal's *Dracula* (1931), directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi. Since then, Stoker's novel has been a staple of horror cinema, adapted or reimagined to varying degrees of success.

Dacre Stoker, the great-grand-nephew of the author, was raised in Montreal, Canada. He only became aware of the family connection during his college years when, writing a paper on *Dracula*, he read Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu's *In Search of Dracula* (1972). It was this moment that began his investigation into the family connection, the first, he says, by this strand of the family's lineage. Since his discovery, he has written *Dracula the Un-dead* (2009), a sequel with Ian Holt, as well as the prequel *Dracul* (2018) with J.D Barker, and has also edited with Dr. Elizabeth Miller, *The Lost Journal of Bram Stoker: The Dublin Years* (2012). In April of this year, *Stoker on Stoker: Dracula Revealed* was published by Telos Publishing, bringing together notes and observations on the development of *Dracula*.

In conversation with *MSJ*, Dacre Stoker discusses his distant relative's seminal Gothic novel, and how the work and its author are revealing mirrors of one another.

PR: The separation of the artist and their work is an often-discussed idea. To begin, who was the man behind the novel—who was Bram Stoker?

DS: Bram Stoker left us no autobiography. He did leave us a journal that I discovered and published, and that has been helpful to me to characterise and to understand him. It's a journal he kept while he was in university, when he first started working for Henry Irving [stage actor and theatre manager of The Lyceum Theatre].

[…] In the first seven years of his life he was sickly, with an undisclosed illness. He was confined to the home, and he states in the book he wrote about Henry Irving, a little bit about himself. One of those things was, "I never knew what it was like to stand upright. I had a very unusual childhood for the first seven years of my life."

I believe at that time he developed a dark sense of imagination because he was told stories by his mother and nanny—Irish folklore, mythology, and superstitions. She [his mother] also told him a story we've a record of, the horrifying, real life account of Charlotte Stoker growing up in Sligo, Western Ireland during the 1832 cholera epidemic. Luckily, she survived as did her family, otherwise Bram and none of us would be here.

This was also a story that involved misdiagnosis and premature burial. Told to a young boy who had a debilitating illness himself, I'm sure it resonated with him. I also think he was blood-let during this time because it was a common practice. He also had an uncle who was well known as a bloodletter, and he also wrote a treatise on bloodletting. I read it and it's horrifying when you think even young children were blood-let with leeches until the point where they passed out. Then the wounds were covered up and they were fed a mixture of oil and claret.

Fig. 1 | Bram Stoker, 1906.

Funnily enough, there's a little piece of blood-letting in *Dracula* that could easily have emanated from Bram's personal experiences. When Jonathan Harker finds the Count in his coffin, he looks like a bloated leech after a full meal.

Here's a young boy with a difficult childhood and a dark sense of imagination, who luckily recovers from this to be a big, strapping young man. He passes his entrance exams to Trinity, and while he was there he discovered the writings of Walt Whitman.

He had a mentor professor, Edward Dowden, who was an expert in the occult, and he was also the head of the philosophical society for a term. So this was an area where Bram began to flex his intellectual muscles. He also became interested in spiritualism, mesmerism and the occult, which were going on at the time.

People were interested in what else was happening in the world, even though they're being fed from religion—be a good man on earth, follow the doctrine, go to church, and everything will be fine in the afterlife. People were looking for more answers. There were people investigating things behind closed doors, like The Hellfire Club and The Order of the Golden Dog. Funnily enough, later on when he was in London, Bram became a member of The Freemasons.

There were people thinking there's more as is above, as is below, of what is beyond the normal thinking, and Bram was that type of a person himself. We see some of that reflected in his writings. Later in his life, while in Scotland, he became involved and interested in second sight. As a man he was interested in the world around him, and he wasn't someone to follow the party line—he was looking at what else there was.

PR: By understanding the man, is it possible to more fully understand the novel?

DS: The more I understand Bram Stoker, the more I understand the things that he wrote. For instance, when I discovered the type script for *Dracula* in Seattle, Washington, which is owned by the Paul Allen Estate, I discovered the first 101 pages were missing. The story, "Dracula's Guest" (1914) was part of this story and it has a very Jonathan Harker like character, although his name isn't mentioned. It's the story of a young solicitor heading off to Transylvania and he stops in Munich where he has a strange incident.

It's so much like Bram Stoker going to Munich and Nuremberg with Henry Irving. So he wrote his stories loosely based on things he did. In Nuremberg, for instance, they went there to look at how to depict the castles in the play *Faust*, on stage at the Lyceum. Stoker some years later then writes the short story, "The Squaw" (1893), [featuring an old tower in Nuremberg], which I've turned into a graphic novel called *The Virgin's Embrace* (2021).

To make matters more interesting, Bram had met Buffalo Bill Cody, the famous cowboy showman while he was in America. He and Irving helped him come over to Scotland and London to do his Wild West show. Cody was the perfect model for three characters that Bram wrote, where he needed an American frontiersman: Quincey Morris in *Dracula*, Elias Hutchinson in "The Squaw," and Grizzly Dick in *The Shoulder of Shasta* (1895), are all derivations of Buffalo Bill Cody.

Bram Stoker is that solicitor Jonathan Harker in *Dracula*, or parts of him are—that inquisitive man who goes off and brings the legal papers for the count to consummate the land transactions for his homes in London. But it's more than that. It's Bram Stoker, the inspector of clerks and petty sessions travelling around Ireland in a train and a carriage, going to places where he's not particularly welcome, or are somewhat foreign to him, and having to make sure all the legalities are correct in the zone that he goes.

There are also experiences that Bram had with the travelling group of the Lyceum actors. He wrote a book called *Snowbound* (1908) because they really did get stuck in a train in the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, when there was too much snow for the train to go through the pass.

Whitby [England] was another perfect example. He found kinship with the guys in the coastguard, who told him about a ship, *The Dmitry*. Bram actually got the details of wrecks off Whitby into his notes from the coastguard man, Mr Petherick. His details of the wreck of *The Dmitry* were turned into the wreck of the *Demeter* that comes over from Varna with the count and his boxes of dirt and lands in Whitby. Bram originally had him landing in Dover, but he was so taken by Whitby and these accounts of this ship.

There is one other thing that's a little more esoteric. There is a quote in *Dracula*, which I believe if you and I were sitting here with Bram by our sides and he said, "What is the meaning of this story?" I think he would say to us, "There are mysteries that men can only guess at, which age-by-age they may solve only in part." This is the crux of the issue for people at the end of the century. In Victorian England, they're trying to make sense of these new mysteries that scientific processes were trying to explain.

Charles Darwin had just recently, in 1859, published *The Origin of Species*. That was cutting edge science and it's still controversial. Bram is introducing a supernatural character from Transylvania, which Londoners were somewhat aware of. They were aware of these treatises about vampire scares and contagious diseases, that people thought were vampires, because that's how they understood it. They could make rationale sense of a superstition, whereas they had no idea about germ theory and so on. Bram was unleashing onto his readers the real fears he understood they had, but he packaged them in a way that was believable and understandable, even though it was a fantastical story. That is Bram Stoker inserting himself into how to tell a great story.

PR: Picking up on your point about the influence of the spatial, could you discuss in more detail the influence on Bram Stoker's creative choices and approach to storytelling?

DS: He was brought up just outside of Dublin and moved to a number of places throughout the city. He had to go to places

to write, and we found out that he went to a little town, south of Dublin, called Greystones. The first piece of writing we've ever found, that has been dated by Bram in his journal, was called "Night Fishing." He would just get out of the hustle and bustle of Dublin, away from the castle and Trinity College. I think that place [Greystones] was stimulating to him because it was quiet, but as he sat on his porch, he could also see the intricacies of these men with their lanterns, fishing at night, and all the things they had to do with the nets. It was mysterious and interesting.

Bram was influenced by the sea in many of his novels. In *Dracula*, there's the mystery as to what really happened on the *Demeter*. The count has control of the weather, of the fog and the wind. He basically takes over the ship with his mastery of the dark arts. Whitby provided this to Bram with his interest of the ocean.

He wrote another book called *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902). Along with his notes from Whitby, he wrote the story in Cruden Bay, Scotland, where there was a rock reef a couple of hundred meters offshore. At high tide you don't see much, other than the waves breaking over some rocks, but at low tide you see the rugged rocks. Bram also knew from the history books and the accounts of the coastguard that there were hundreds of people who had died a tragic death on these rocks, and the souls that were not at rest were littering the seabed with their bones.

Bram would pick up on local superstition and lore. The fog and the sea mist were actually the spirits of the dead—reaching out for lives to bring down, so their souls could be put to rest.

So was Bram influenced by space and the things around him? Absolutely, and just as importantly he went to the London library and picked up books, such as *The Baedeker Guide* [German travel guides]. He read at least four books by people that had been to Transylvania, or what is now Romania. Even though he'd never been to Transylvania, Bram had to get the sense of what the countryside and the mountains were like, how the people spoke that lived there, the different ethnic cultures, the food and the clothing. He got it from these books and he wrote as if he were there.

He chose a part of the world that had a tremendous amount of interesting history, which he utilised in the horrific backstory of Vlad Dracula, or Count Dracula. But Bram also understood this area was rich as a melting pot of different cultures and religions, that created a diverse and complex series of superstitions that he was looking for, to create a fertile area for a vampire to be a believable creature.

So space absolutely, and how did Bram get there? Some say he was there in person, others say he had to study on maps. We found in The Rosenbach museum and library [in Philadelphia], the map that had the coordinates to his fictional Castle Dracula on top of a volcanic mountain. Why we know that's important is that it's definitive in the typescript I looked at, that Bram had originally planned a volcanic eruption at the end of the story.

That's Bram Stoker speaking to us, telling us, "I'm so detail orientated, if I'm going to have a volcanic eruption at the end of my story, by golly, this castle will be on an old volcano." Sure enough, these map coordinates designate this area as a volcanic region. So that tells me the detail-orientated side of Bram is meshed perfectly with the creative side. He puts location and story together on an even keel, but both are an important facet that were put together nicely to make his story so special.

PR: It seems fitting to consider *Dracula*, the novel, as part of a larger story, both in the context of the relationship of its author, but also of the genre to which it belongs.

DS: You've got to look at two parts of it. One is what existed before Bram wrote *Dracula*—what did he know and what was his process? Based on his notes, we know it was a seven-year process. We know there was a story by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu called *Carmilla* (1892), and we know James Malcolm Rymer wrote *Varney the Vampire* (1845), and John Polidori wrote *The Vampyre* (1819) based on a holiday he had as the doctor to Lord Byron and Mary Shelley on the shores of Lake Geneva.

Bram didn't invent the vampire in fiction, but what he did do was to capitalise on stories that already existed, but also as I mentioned earlier, vampire treatises and scares during the Middle Ages. […] You have to look at this whole process, of where was Bram in his mindset, where was he physically when he was writing this because that's a big part of it.

Seven years is a long time from start to finish. We know he wasn't working on it consistently because he was helping run a theatre, and some of the interesting things about that are where does he go, and what influences him while he's travelling around America for instance?

One of the cool things we find is that he had a newspaper clipping from a newspaper called *The New York World*. It was dated 1896, and so we know it was while he was writing the novel. It mentions the New England vampire scare—a contemporary incident that was a result of a tuberculosis outbreak. There were at least fifty state exhumations of bodies from the grave to perform these rituals that were hauled over from superstitions back in the medieval days.

He cuts it out and brings it with him, and it's part of his *Dracula* notes now. Why we know that it made such an impression is because he utilised a reference that Charles Darwin was quoted on in this article, when he discovered vampire bats in South America. He [Darwin] said, "One of my servants found these bats coming out of the trees and drinking blood from our cattle." Bram Stoker used that term almost word-for-word in *Dracula*, when Van Helsing is trying to explain to the band of heroes what's happening with the vampire taking blood from Lucy. Quincey Morris says, "When I was in South America, these bats came out of the trees and one drank so much blood from my favourite mare, I had to put her down." That's contemporary stuff, and then we have to look at the greater story after the book is published.

Fig. 2 | Bran Castle. Photo by Dacre Stoker.

Fig. 3 | Photo of Slains Castle, courtesy of Paul Clashan in Cruden Bay, Scotland.

Fig. 4 | Postcard of Whitby Abbey from the Reliable Series.

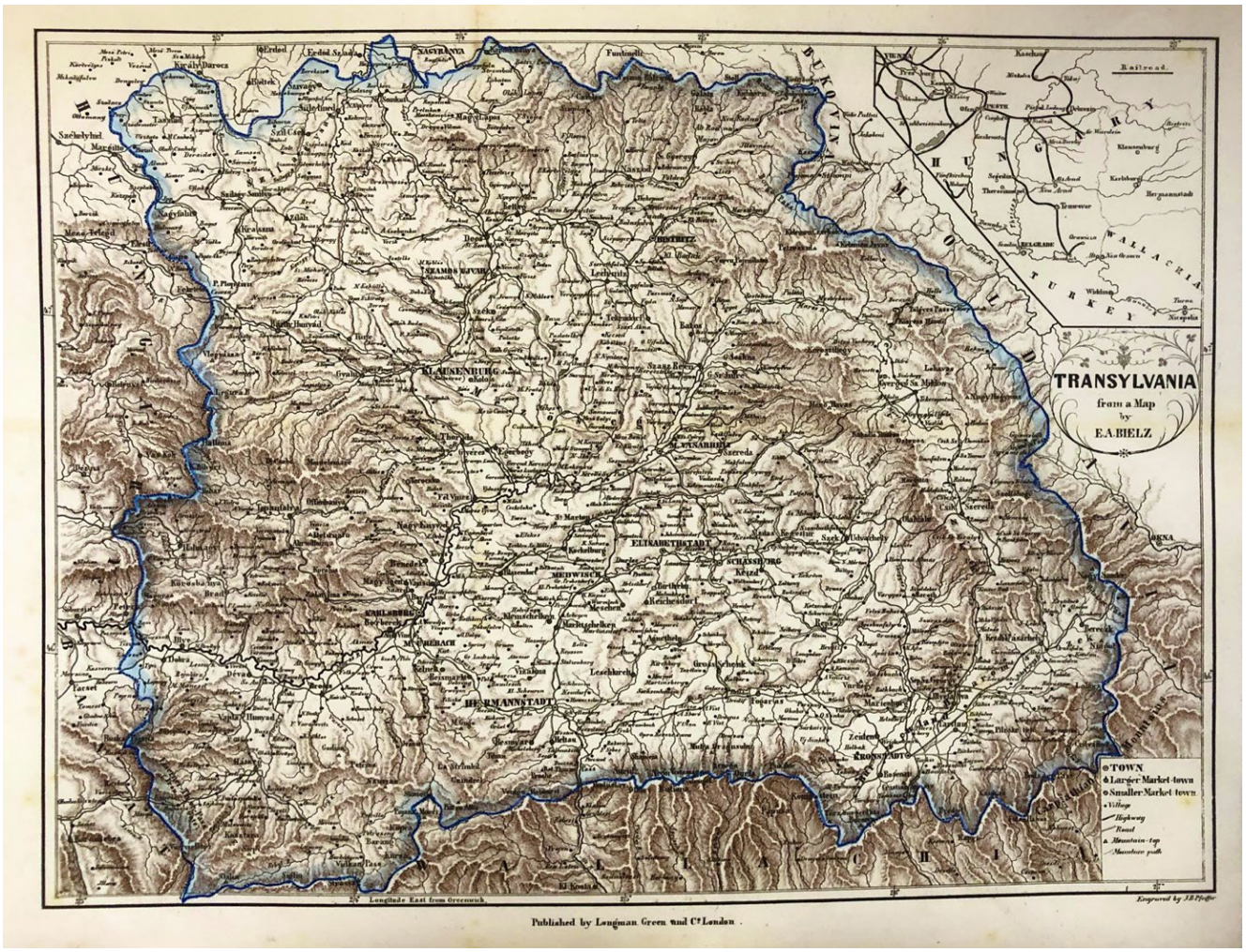

Fig. 5 | Map of Transylvania from the back of *Transylvania: Its Products and Its People* by Charles Boner, 1865.

In some places, *Dracula* is met with mixed reviews because it was so sensational and horrifying—it was almost too much for some of the sophisticated readers to take. It was so fantastical that people couldn't believe that conservative Bram Stoker, the manager of the Lyceum Theatre, could write such a thing. But all in all, researchers, and one in particular, John Edgar Browning, a professor at Savannah College of Art and Design, found that there were hundreds of reviews, and the vast majority were glowing. Yes, there were a few that were horrified, but most of them were glowing towards Bram.

The sad thing was, Bram the theatre manager knew he needed to protect the dramatic rights of the story for the future. He knew what was coming and I think he had an idea this story could go on stage. He had a stage reading six days before the book was published. He followed the rules from the Lord Chamberlain's Office and protected the dramatic rights for the story, but he dies without seeing it go on stage.

His widow, twelve years after his death in 1912, makes a deal with Irish playwright Hamilton Deane. They get the play going on stage in England, and John Balderston from America gets involved. They combine forces and have the play on stage in New York and it travels across America. It became very popular and in 1931 the three sell the film rights to the stage play to Universal, and that becomes the movie with Bela Lugosi, directed by Tod Browning.

From humble beginnings of those early vampire stories, Bram packaging *Dracula* and making it feel like a real story based on a real person, Vlad the Impaler, it becomes this enormous franchise that I don't think Bram would ever have imagined. He played a small role, but a very important role at that. ▪