

## The Semantics of Historical Interpretation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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### ABSTRACT

Gothic fiction has endured the test of time and evolved into the twenty-first century horror-thriller fiction and ultimately entered the genres of pop culture as well. But they have a time-challenging history behind their ghosts and tunnels, this history being the primary directive of such narrative writers. The emplotment conceals tyranny, slavery, colonial designs, disease, murder and intrigue within the realm of the supernatural. The application of the tenets of Metahistory reveals these facts buried for centuries in the castles, or actually dungeons, of these books. Revolution, change and anarchy being the zeitgeist of the time, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* engages the readers in a compelling plot while warning of historical facts that might repeat at any time in the present. This paper is a research on the historical facts obscured by wraiths of fiction.

**Keywords:** *Dracula, Gothic fiction, Metahistory, New Historicism, Critical Theory*

### INTRODUCTION

The gaining popularity of Gothic fiction during the eighteenth century has evolved into the modern day horror and thriller fiction. These narratives are sources for historical and cultural objects and fields hidden beneath the lines, waiting to be reread to reveal a whole world of meanings. They are not just some old ghost tale to be read around camp fires but chronicles of historical tyrants and a particular timeline, preserving the culture, society and atmosphere of the time. There are shadows and ghosts indeed, ghosts of meanings lost to the ages but lurking behind the shadows of Gothic terror and mystery.

The Gothic novel is a type of historical fiction that became an offshoot of the Romantic Age in the later eighteenth century. The historical field, or setting, is usually a ruined castle full of secret passages, locked rooms, ghost-haunted chambers and a mystery that becomes the major emplotment. Horace Walpole initiated the genre with Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Charles Brockden Brown and Clara Reeve following him. Henry James, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor were also inspired by novels like *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and contemporary writers like Stephen King, Anne Rice, Stephenie Meyer and Neil Gaiman give life to the genre in the twenty-first century. The term Gothic is best used to designate violence, horror and tyranny in the modern sense.

Historical emplotment is the soul of Gothic texts – they are usually constructed around some tyrant who was real and the field allocates certain elements of supernatural terror as proof of the unbearable horror suffered by the

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subjects. For instance, Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) explicates the horrors of the Inquisition and the tortures the Inquisitors subjected innocents just to keep them under control or prevent poor girls from marrying into nobility. The Inquisition was a major historical artifact employed by the aristocrats to get rid of rebels, vagrants, the racially segregated and brand them as witches and heretics. Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) is yet another whistleblower regarding the conduct of monks and nuns behind cloisters and seemingly holy sanctums. Vampire and werewolf legends were born with Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and have continued to inspire readers through the twenty-first century with books like Alice Borchardt's *Silver Wolf* (1993-2001) series and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005-08) series.

Abraham Stoker (1847-1912) is well known today for his classic thriller *Dracula* (1897) for introducing the vampire Count Dracula of Transylvania. The basic plotline of the narrative is about a lawyer helping an old nobleman buy property in England but the plot twists and ends horribly with the old nobleman being a vampire and victimizing everyone he bites. The application of Metahistory reveals a rather different emplotment. This revolutionary theory formulated by historians like Alexis de Tocqueville, Jules Michelet, Jacob Burckhardt and Benedetto Croce was reintroduced for literary writings by Hayden White in his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* (2014). The modes of emplotment and ideological implication break down the entire plot into historical objects, fields, artefacts and the colligative threads that link them. This paper researches some of the historical meaning hidden beneath the tale of vampires and ghosts in the narrative of *Dracula*.

Bram Stoker has implemented the epistolary and diary mode of narration for *Dracula*, thereby shifting perspective from one character to another. The narrative opens on the eve of Witches' Day when all evil creatures, including the human mind, are at bay. Solicitor Jonathan Harker undertakes a quest to prove himself by contacting Count Dracula of Transylvania and making him a client. However, the Count traps him in Castle Dracula and uses him to get to London. Wilhelmina Murray and Lucy Westenra are victimized by Dracula to such an extent that Lucy dies after a short life as an UnDead. Mina and the rest of the team, including Lord Godalming, Quincey Morris and Dr. John Seward led on the brave Professor Abraham van Helsing hunt the vampire down and stake him in his coffin. The text ends with a question beneath the lines if all evil can be staked in this world.

The historical object Count Dracula is a fictional version of Vladislaus Dracula III or better known as Vlad the Impaler for his tyrannical reign of Wallachia in 1428. He was the Voivode or King of Romania and lived in what is today called Bran Castle near the Carpathians. The Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II claimed tax from Romania though young Vlad had already been held hostage previously to gain the loyalty of the Transylvanian kings. Vlad became furious and impaled all the envoys of the Ottoman Sultan. He put up a fantastic show by setting up thousands of impaled victims that the Sultan was terrified. Though history tags Vlad as a tyrant, the Romanians considered him a hero till he had his own subjects impaled for trifles. The German epic poet Michael Beheim (1416-1472) produced a horrendous version of Vlad in his "Story of a Violent Madman Called Voivode Dracula of Wallachia". Boston professors Raymond T. McNelly and Radu Florescu claim in their 1994 book *In Search of Dracula The History of*

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*Dracula and Vampires*; “In one version Beheim described Dracula as dipping his bread in the blood of his victims, which technically makes him a living vampire – a reference that may have induced Stoker to make use of this term” (85[1]). Beheim’s poem is also the document referred to by Professor van Helsing in the novel; “There are such beings as vampires, some of us have evidence they exist. Even had we not proof of our own unhappy experience, the teachings and the records of the past give proof for sane peoples” (Stoker 338 [2]). But the poor translation of the German original which actually refers to Vlad washing his hands in his victims’ blood to show his authority to the Turks has greatly been misunderstood for centuries creating the vampire myth. However, Romanian epic poet Ion Budai-Deleanu commemorates the Voivode in his *The Gypsyiad* thus;

‘Fore Vlad Voivode armes the gypsies,  
The Fury goads Satan upon them,  
Who wishes them evil.  
In this way, taking bread for their journey,  
From Hungrie mirthfully leave  
The Gypsy folk straighte towards Full-Hearted. (Budai-Deleanu, *The Gypsyiad*, [www.Asymptotejournal.com](http://www.Asymptotejournal.com) [3])

The poem goes on singing the praises of Dracula or the Son of the Dragon who fights against the forces of Satan.

Stoker’s *Dracula* mentions he is a “Boyar” (Stoker 30[2]), a Transylvanian feudal lord who fought in the wars against the Turks and secured peace for Romania. But his descent is traced back to Attila the Hun to emphasize the barbaric character. Stoker’s usage of Szkeley, Slavic and Eastern lineage suggests the Occidental vantage point of the Orientals as exotic and inhuman. Professor van Helsing recalls the Voivode of being a scholar who sold his soul to the devil to save his country from the Turks; “They learned his secrets in the Scholomance, amongst the mountains over Lake Hermanstadt, where the devil claims the tenth scholar as his due” (Stoker 344[2]). The repetition of animals like “the rat, and the owl, and the bat, the moth and the fox, and the wolf” (Stoker 338[2]) are indeed references to carriers of the plague during the fourteenth century.

Vampirism in itself is symbolic of contagion passed from one victim to another. Transylvanian superstition forced the people of the time to exhume corpses to confirm vampirism. Modern day archeologists find ruins with vampire burials even today. An archaeological dig in Lugnano, Italy has revealed children buried with stones inserted into their mouths to prevent them from returning back to the land of the living. The ominously named Cemetery of the Babies has other graves with victims weighed down by boulders and objects like raven talons, toad and dog bones too. Archeologist Michelle Star has discovered that these children were all victims of malaria. Star observes, “. . . they represent a fear of the diseases that wiped out communities and threatened to return with a vengeance” (Solly,

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Smithsonian.com [4]). Stoker's introduction of the lunatic Renfield who consumes spiders, flies and rats is yet another reference to lack of sanitation and healthcare during the nineteenth century.

Castle Dracula is a historical field that is in ruins though grand and magnificent suggestive of the downfall of the aristocratic race. Stoker's imageries of dungeons, locked chambers and hidden passages reflect the unstable nature of the human unconscious. The Count ordering around his three wives and beating them brings out nineteenth century patriarchy in Europe. Historical narratives explicate the suffering of women in a society that is made up of both patriarchs and matriarchs. Lucy's mother watches over her every move and the mighty slayers of Dracula use Mina as a medium to find out the vampire's location just because she is a victim. Feudalism was another form of government that reduced the common people, the producers, into peasants. They had to pay huge taxes to their lords and obey their every command. Medieval epidemics were used by feudal lords to reduce the peasant population in their lands and prevent them from inheriting their ancestral lands.

Hayden White follows the semantics of historical interpretation explicated by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). The historical field is a metaphor where individual incidents overpower the historical objects. Ranke believed that humans are chaotic and order must be restored by the state and religious institutions. But these are created and governed by the same humans and hence, these are also in chaos. The field remains a "Gothic gloom of indecision" (White 170[5]). The "idea of a nation" (172[5]) is eternal and changeless, and it is this idea that real history must record. This idea is always born out of a trauma for revolution. Harker fighting vampires directly represents civilization fighting against chaos. Gothic fictions reveal the horrors of tyranny, abuse, feudalism, slavery, racism and the tactical usage of epidemics. *Dracula* haunts readers and re-readers to this day not of the supernatural but the realistic chaos that is present today and will continue in future.

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