

An Analysis of the Opening Chapters of Bram Stoker's Dracula by Ben H. Wright (submitted 2010-09-08)

This article explores the opening chapters of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, focusing specifically on questions relating to what literary genre the novel could be considered to belong. Although Stoker adopts a range of typically realist strategies in *Dracula*, the novel also prominently reworks several Gothic staples, and therefore fits into the realm of Gothic fiction. This particular literary genre is generally thought to have been inaugurated with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), a novel which first established several of the common Gothic settings and motifs, such as the remote castle in an exotic medieval past. The Gothic novels that followed Walpole's adopted and elaborated many of his features, such as those of Ann Radcliffe and her contemporaries.

Some of the features that regularly manifest in the Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth-century are as follows: the setting of an oppressive ruin or castle in a wild and remote landscape; the figure of a tyrannical older man, intent on imprisonment, rape and murder; sleep-like or death like states; and subterranean spaces. The above are all undeniably apparent in *Dracula*, especially during Jonathan Harker's stay at the Count's creepy abode. *"Suddenly I became conscious of the fact that the driver was in the act of pulling up the horses in the courtyard of a vast ruined castle"* (I, p.14). The hills of this wild landscape where *Dracula*'s castle is situated are described by Harker as *"so steep that, despite our driver's haste, the horses could only go slowly"* (I, p.8). The figure of a sinister older man is apparent in the Count himself, *"Within, stood a tall old man, clean-shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere"* (II, p.15), and his intentions of imprisoning Harker are evinced when the Englishman proclaims: *"The castle is a veritable prison, and I am a prisoner"* (II, p.26). Harker's encounter with the vampire women is depicted as possibly in a dream-like state, *"I suppose I must have fallen asleep; I hope so, but I fear, for all that followed was startlingly real - so real that now, sitting here in the broad, full sunlight of the morning, I cannot in the least believe that it was all sleep"* (III, p.37), while his discovery of *Dracula*'s tomb portrays the Count in a death-like state, *"He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which"* (IV, p.48); and this tomb is situated in an underground vault, *"I went down even into the vaults, where the dim light struggled"* (IV, p.47) - an apparently subterranean location within the castle.

Although extremely popular in their day, the eighteenth-century Gothic novels fell out of favour with most Victorian readers, however the Gothic strain was never entirely submerged, with some of the era's major writers, such as Dickens and the Bronte sisters frequently incorporating Gothic conventions into their own seemingly realist works. Also there were still other primarily Gothic writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Sheridan Le Fanu writing in the mid nineteenth-century - Le Fanu's *Carmilla* exerting a considerable influence over *Dracula*. So in choosing to write a Gothic novel Stoker wasn't necessarily making a colossal literary departure but instead continuing a long established tradition.

Regardless of its undeniably fantastical narrative, *Dracula* is related as though it were fact. Despite describing seemingly incredible events, Stoker's prose style is often simplistically lucid and straightforward. In a manner similar to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Stoker's novel is narrated from the viewpoint of several characters. This series of first-person narratives gives the story its immediacy, increasing the sense of horror and bewilderment, particularly evident during the earlier scenes in *Dracula*'s castle, described in Harker's journal: "*I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes... Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer - nearer*" (III, p.38).

Strengthening the novel's ambiguity is the fact that there is an absence of a controlling voice denying the reader any real certainty. Stoker's novel might be considered therefore a supreme example of what the Russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin calls a 'polyphonic text' - a dialogue between several voices. The narrative appears more democratic, since control is not exercised through a single narratorial voice, but instead through several characters, including Jonathan Harker, Mina and Doctor Seward. *Dracula* himself is never given a formal narrative voice, consolidating his role as a symbolic Other, on to which can be represented a range of anxieties and fears.