

Gothic and Realist Conventions in Bram Stoker's Dracula

An analysis of how Dracula, one of the most famous Gothic novels, also employs narrative strategies more commonly associated with realist fiction.

Dracula possesses many narrative features, which have secured it a place in the pantheon of Gothic horror fiction. Yet the famous vampire tale subtly undercuts several of the conventions commonly associated with the Gothic genre. This article explores some of the ways in which recognizably realist elements interact with Gothic motifs in Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Gothic and Realist Strategies

When applied to literature, the term 'Gothic' is generally reserved for narratives of a darkly fantastical nature, although fantasy isn't always a prerequisite for a work of fiction to be considered Gothic. For example, the apparitions that beset the heroine of Ann Radcliffe's seminal Gothic story *The Mysteries of Udolpho* are finally revealed to be of a completely earthbound character. Realist fiction, however, refers to a type of narrative which strives to be as true-to-life as possible, so would therefore avoid the inclusion of fantastical elements within a story. With its emphasis on social commentary, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a classic example of a realist novel. There is also much debate as to the exact definitions of 'Gothic' and 'realism' when applied to literary study. This critical uncertainty is compounded by the fact that many seemingly realistic texts frequently employ Gothic tropes within their narratives, famous examples being Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Castle Dracula

From the opening chapters, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* presents a number of features that would generally be considered Gothic. The wild and rugged landscape where the Count's castle resides is reminiscent of the mountainous regions which housed Ann Radcliffe's *Castle Udolpho*. The young solicitor Jonathan Harker's journey to the castle grows increasingly perilous and eerie as he encounters howling wolves and a "flickering blue flame" (1, p.12). Dracula's abode, "a vast ruined castle" (1, p.14), is a location that often forms the centre-piece of many a Gothic text, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Harker, also has a number of strange experiences within the castle, such as his encounter with the vampire women: "though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor (3, p.37), as well as his discovery of the Count in the castle's chapel: "He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which" (4, p.48). All these aspects are at odds with the dictates of realist fiction.

Modernism vs. History

One observation of this opening section is that it depicts a confrontation between the new and the old. The character of Jonathan Harker is a figure from the modern world entering a domain rooted in its medieval past. He works as a solicitor and comes from a middleclass background replete with the latest technologies. Count Dracula on the other hand is an aristocratic figure steeped in the trappings of ancient feudalism; he also appears to possess supernatural powers. This confrontation corresponds with the tensions between Gothic and realist conventions. The alien environment Harker finds himself ensnared in grows increasingly otherworldly and strange, yet he observes it in a down-to-earth manner, recording his entries in a journal, and it is this journal which Stoker presents to the reader, conveying the narrative in the first person from Harker's perspective. It is

somewhat significant that the protagonist describes his diary as being “nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance” (3, p.36) – a description which contrasts sharply with the centuries old furniture that Castle Dracula is appointed with – and although the diary’s entries describe the most bizarre occurrences, they are essentially composed within the realist mode.

English Gothic

The contents of Mina Murray’s typewritten letters and journal recount events very different from the terrifying incidents experienced by her fiancé in Transylvania. Yet several of the subsequent settings, such as Whitby Abbey and the lunatic asylum, also have an undeniably Gothic flavour. The Abbey, with its ghostly legends of a white lady “seen in one of the windows” (6, p.62) and nearby churchyard, is an archetypal Gothic set-piece. It is near the churchyard where Count Dracula seduces Lucy Westenra while the latter is supposedly sleeping. Ambiguous or trance-like states of consciousness are a common feature in Gothic narrative, and Van Helsing’s descriptions of Lucy’s trance-like state after she has been bitten several times, “In trance she died, and in trance she is Un-Dead” (15, p.201), are reminiscent of Harker’s observations of Dracula when he discovered the Count ‘asleep’ in his chapel.

Doctor Seward’s observations regarding his favourite patient in the lunatic asylum, the “zoophagous (life-eating) maniac” (6, p.70) Renfield, also allude to the relationship between old and new. Seward concludes that Renfield possesses some kind of supernatural link with Dracula yet he records these superstitious notions using the latest technologies of the age, a stenograph. When adopting Seward’s viewpoint in the narrative, Stoker presents the reader with the doctor’s stenographic recordings.

The Narrative Interplay between Realism, Sensationalism and the Gothic

Where Dracula makes a clear break from older Gothic fiction is that it is set squarely within the time Stoker wrote it, the late nineteenth century. Earlier Gothic authors, such as Ann Radcliffe, tended to set their novels in far-off medieval pasts, thus establishing a cultural distance between them and their readers. Another notable difference between Dracula and a text like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is that the bulk of the narrative is set in England, the country where most of the novel’s initial readers resided. These narrative decisions allowed Stoker to bring his Count into unnervingly close proximity to his readers. Unlike most of the villains of older Gothic novels, Dracula invades the typically domestic settings Stoker’s readers were all too familiar with. This lends the novel an uncomfortable immediacy, similar to the effect Wilkie Collins’s achieves in his influential detective story of 1860, *The Woman in White*, generally regarded as the first of the 'sensation' novels.

The narrative form of Dracula also bears a marked resemblance to *The Woman in White*. As with Collins’s novel, it is presented from a range of first person perspectives, which comprise a series of journal entries and letters, even newspaper articles. This also creates a sense of immediacy within the reader, an effect that would have been very different had the novel been written in the third person. It also has a tendency to disorientate the reader as without the guiding voice of a third person narrator, the veracity of each narrative voice is inevitably called into question. In terms of form, this is a strategy frequently associated with Gothic fiction.

Stoker clearly draws on the heritage of Gothic literature in Dracula, yet he also makes use of narrative strategies more commonly associated with both realist and sensation fiction. In setting the story within his own time and utilizing locations familiar to many of his readers, as well as featuring up-to-date technologies, he creates a sense of cultural affinity previously absent from many Gothic novels.