



THE
GOTHIC

DAVID PUPPER AND GLENNIS BYRON



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GOthic AND DECADENCE

The Gothic is frequently considered to be a genre that re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and which serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form. Such a theory would certainly be supported by the sudden resurgence of Gothic in the late nineteenth century. The age which produced some of our most enduring cultural myths, including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (qq.v.), Oscar Wilde's (q.v.) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, rev. 1891) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (qq.v.), was also a time marked by growing fears about national, social and psychic decay.

England was an imperial power in decline, threatened by the rise of such new players as Germany and the United States, experiencing doubts about the morality of the imperial mission, and faced with growing unrest in the colonies. At home, the social and psychological effects of the Industrial Revolution were becoming all too clear as crime and disease were rife in the overcrowded city slums. The traditional values and family structures upon which the middle class had based its moral superiority were disintegrating, challenged by the emergence of such figures as the 'New Woman' and the homosexual. Gothic texts of the late 1880s and 1890s consequently come to be linked primarily by a focus on the idea of degeneration.

Anxieties about the nation are both managed and aggravated by the emergence of what Patrick Brantlinger terms 'imperial Gothic' (q.v.), a 'blend of adventure story with Gothic elements' (1988: 227). There is, as in the original Gothic, an interest in the foreign, but rather than looking to Europe, there is a movement out into the Empire. One of the primary anxieties of this imperial Gothic is that encounters between the English and their colonized subjects may well result in the civilized human reverting to the barbaric. A related and equally worrying fear is that England itself will be

invaded and contaminated by the alien world. Such imperial Gothic narratives articulate anxieties about the integrity of the nation, about the possibility of the 'primitive' infecting the civilized world.

But it is not just a matter of some external force infecting England. As in much previous Victorian Gothic (q.v.), the city itself, particularly London, heart of the supposedly civilized world, continues to be represented as a site of cultural decay and a source of menace. William Booth's influential survey of the degraded living conditions of the poor, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), tellingly echoes the title of Henry Stanley's then recently published *In Darkest Africa*. It was not necessary to travel as far as Stanley, Booth implies, to find a realm of darkness: it could also be found in the heart of the city slums. The presence of the primitive is clearly suggested in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as the city resounds with a 'low growl', and when Wilde's Dorian Gray wanders through 'dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses', he is challenged by 'grotesque children' and drunkards chattering like 'monstrous apes'.

In the new fictional Gothic landscape of the city, however, it is not primarily the criminal underworld or the poor that are implicated as a source of horror. The focus is usually far more on the middle classes, and on exposing what underlies the surfaces of the supposedly civilized and respectable world. The crimes of Helen Vaughan, who engineers the suicides of five respectable gentlemen in Arthur Machen's (q.v.) *The Great God Pan* (1894), for example, are significantly labelled the 'West End Horrors'. They are said to be far more horrific than the East End Horrors, the brutal murders of five prostitutes by Jack the Ripper in the Whitechapel area during 1888.

One of many monstrous (q.v.) females with a desire for power in Gothic fiction of the time, Helen embodies not only anxieties about the potential decline of the middle classes generally, but also, more specifically, anxieties about the breakdown of middle-class gender ideology. The emergence and demands of the New Woman aggravated such fears, and Gothic texts of the time repeatedly produce powerful and sexually aggressive females as alien or monstrous, setting them in opposition to the 'pure' woman in an attempt to stabilize gendered identity. Nevertheless, the stability of such an opposition is also repeatedly undermined as the pure woman metamorphoses into the evil. In *Dracula* (q.v.), for example, the naively coquettish Lucy mutates into a 'nightmare' of 'voluptuous wantonness', and the text suggests that Dracula himself is only a catalyst which allows for the release of an uncontrollable and passionate self within.

If, as Robert Miles and other recent critics have suggested, the Gothic generally represents 'the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation' (Miles 2002: 3), then

this is a concern which is increasingly intensified in the works of this period. The idea that the supposedly civilized subject harbours something alien within is particularly emphasized by the return of the double or *Doppelgänger* in such works as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In both these cases, however, it is suggested that the real problem is not the existence of some more primitive and passionate internal self, but the force with which that self must be repressed in accordance with social conventions. Dorian, who sells his soul for eternal youth while his portrait ages and decays in his place, is warned of the dangers of repression by Sir Henry: 'The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.' As in the case of Jekyll, repression has the potential to produce a split in the psyche. However, although we are encouraged to think in terms of duality by the oppositions of Jekyll and Hyde and of Dorian and his portrait, the texts also imply it is not simply a *split* that is at issue but a more complex fragmentation of the subject. As Dorian suggests, man may well be not a stable unified subject, but a 'complex, multiform creature'.

Multiplicity, an even more disturbing concept than duality, is repeatedly suggested in decadent Gothic texts through the representation of metamorphic bodies or what Kelly Hurley (1996) identifies as the 'abhuman'. The abhuman may be a body that retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different. Alternatively, it may be some indefinable 'thing' that is mimicking the human, appropriating the human form. Either way, it is the integrity of human identity that is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive. Examples of such disturbing bodies abound in Gothic of the time, most obviously perhaps in the beast people of H. G. Wells's (q.v.) *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896). The protagonist, Prendick, is initially puzzled by their uncanny effect, by a sense of familiarity and yet of strangeness. When he discovers that they are the products of 'Moreau's horrible skill', he becomes increasingly repulsed by these disturbing hybrids, and by what they suggest about the instability of the human subject. Prendick's attempts to reinstate 'sane' and stable boundaries between the human and the beast, however, fail; when he returns to civilization the people he meets appear like beast-people, and he fears that they, like Moreau's creatures, will begin to revert.

The majority of these abhuman bodies are the product not of supernatural forces but of scientifically explainable processes, and it is the scientist who becomes the pre-eminent figure in the Gothic fiction of the period.

Many forms of materialist science, including criminal anthropology, had attempted to provide tools for identifying and categorizing what was alien and abnormal, the agents of dissolution and decline. What we now call criminal profiling was first attempted at this time in the hunt for Jack the Ripper. But science did not just offer reassuring ways of locating and defining difference, it could also function in various ways as a transgressive and disruptive force, challenging the stability and integrity of the human subject (see also 'Science, Industry and the Gothic' above).

Fears about the integrity of the self are forcefully articulated at this time through the emergence of what some critics call 'Darwinian Gothic'. Evolutionary theories had dissolved the previously accepted boundaries between human and animal. Darwin's claim in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that man was descended from a hairy-tailed quadruped which had in turn evolved out of a series of diverse forms, ultimately leading back to a fish-like being, disturbingly challenged any belief in the integrity and superiority of the human species. Furthermore, it led to the conclusion that if something could evolve it could also devolve or degenerate, whether it were individual, society or nation. The destabilizing effects of such thought are at least partly responsible for the body becoming a particular site of anxiety in the Gothic of this time, and the possibility of sliding down the evolutionary ladder is perhaps most horrifyingly suggested by the physical metamorphosis of the dying Helen in *The Great God Pan*. A doctor who witnesses the sight reports how the human body, 'thought to be unchangeable and permanent', begins to melt and dissolve. And what is primarily horrific is not that Helen changes from 'woman to man, from man to beast', but that she then changes from beast to worse than beast, into some 'horrible and unspeakable shape' that lies outside any stable and reassuring binary thought.

Significantly, Helen is the result of experimental neuro-surgery carried out by Dr Raymond on her quite ordinary human mother. Moreau is not only a vivisectionist; he also practises behaviour modification, and is clearly familiar with much contemporary thought in the field of mental physiology. As science moved away from its materialist base during this period to explore the less tangible arena of the mind, it contributed even further to the idea that the threat to order had its origins in human nature. The threat represented by Helen may well have less to do with the supernatural than with the simple liberation from repression. As the operation on her mother Mary allows her to see beyond the veil of this world to the 'real' world it hides, exposes her, perhaps, to the full forces of the unconscious, so Helen seems to have been born without any social or psychic restraints.

In *Degeneration*, one of the most notorious non-fictional texts of the Decadence, Max Nordau proclaimed the end of an era: 'Over the earth the

BRAM STOKER,

DRACULA

(1897)

In *Dracula*, Bram Stoker established the prototype of our modern vampire (q.v.) and created one of the most potent of all literary myths. Few Gothic figures have been so repeatedly revived and reworked as Stoker's vampire, and after more than one hundred years interest still shows no signs of abating. Even in a formal sense, *Dracula* is an extraordinary narrative. The novel begins with Jonathan Harker's diary, in which he keeps a shorthand account of his journey to Transylvania, his meeting with Count Dracula, who is purchasing the ancient estate of Carfax, and his experiences in the Count's castle. From chapter 5 onwards the novel becomes a compilation of a wide range of genres, including letters, journals and newspaper clippings. Dracula disembarks at Whitby, and proceeds to attack Lucy, the friend of Jonathan's fiancée Mina. In spite of all the efforts of Professor Van Helsing, and multiple blood transfusions, Lucy eventually dies, or, rather, becomes one of the undead. She is 'saved' only by being staked through the heart by her fiancé, Arthur, under Van Helsing's direction and with the support of her other admirers, the American Quincey Morris and John Seward, the superintendent of the lunatic asylum at Purfleet. The remainder of the narrative is concerned with Dracula's advances on Mina and the attempt of the vampire hunters to save her, to find and neutralize the boxes of earth which give the Count sanctuary, and to destroy him. The chase eventually leads them to Transylvania, where the vampire is finally despatched.

Like most Victorian Gothic (q.v.), Stoker's *Dracula* insists on the modernity of its setting. The opening section, as Jonathan details his trip through Transylvania, may return to a feudal world populated by fearful and superstitious peasants, but the text soon leaves this alien land and locates itself firmly in back in England. There is a particular emphasis on London, the urban nucleus of the modern world, a world that would have been eminently

familiar to the contemporary reader. Repeatedly, the modernity of the text is emphasized by references to recent technological advances: telegraphs, typewriters, telephones, phonographs and Kodak cameras are all drawn upon in the struggle against the vampire. Like the shorthand diary that Jonathan keeps, the text is 'nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance'.

Set against the orderly and civilized modern world is the atavistic vampire himself. Like all vampires, Dracula is associated with the disruption and transgression of accepted limits and boundaries. As shapeshifter he resists any stable, fixed identity; as 'undead' he straddles that seemingly ultimate boundary between life and death. He is usually absent and yet strangely present. Although central to the opening section set in Transylvania, he practically disappears after arriving in London. His presence is felt thereafter primarily as a troubling presence in the mind, first of Lucy and then of Mina. When Arthur observes of Lucy that 'There is something preying on my dear girl's mind', he unknowingly points out the primary problem with Dracula: it is not just bodies that he penetrates and disturbs. His significance ultimately lies not so much in the way he embodies transgression as in the way he functions as the catalyst for transgression in others: he prompts the release of energies and desires normally repressed in the interest of both social and psychic stability.

Such transgression is a source of both pleasure and fear. When Jonathan begins to succumb to the female vampires, for example, he feels 'a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips'. The experience is nevertheless as repulsive as it is thrilling and both the encounter and his own reaction cause him to question his sanity, as he turns to his diary to record his experience in the seeming fixity offered by the text. Even Mina, that 'good, good woman', demonstrates ambivalence: while she recalls the moment when Dracula forces her to feed from a wound in his breast with horror, she has to admit that 'strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him'.

If *Dracula* is above all concerned with the breaking of taboos, it nevertheless needs to be read as an expression of specifically late Victorian concerns. It is, for example, persistently anxious about the breakdown of gender roles. Victorian middle-class gender ideology tended to police the boundaries of male and female quite rigorously, aiming to control by defining and delimiting the nature and roles of the sexes in a manner that particularly constrained women. Throughout the century women had nevertheless reacted against these restrictions, and the challenge to gender ideology led to the emergence of the New Woman, referred to upon several occasions in *Dracula*, who was characterized by her demands for both social and sexual autonomy. The anxiety caused by the breakdown of traditional roles

pervades the text. Female vampires feeding on children, for example, a rather obvious rejection of maternity, provokes some of the vehement expressions of horror, while Lucy's flirtatiousness makes her suspect from the start, and Dracula's visits only serve to release a barely repressed sensuality as she turns into a voluptuous wanton 'nightmare of Lucy'.

This was not only the age of the New Woman, however, it was also the time when the homosexual was first constructed as a category. What was then termed 'sexual inversion' began to enter into discourse in such texts as John Addington Symonds's *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, published and then suppressed in 1897. The confusion of gender categories, many critics have noted, is most clearly demonstrated by Jonathan's feminine passivity in the scene where he is seduced by the three female vampires; here the conventions of sexual difference are inverted as the fluttering Jonathan awaits the moment of penetration. For Christopher Craft, what is always threatened in the text is that Dracula will seduce and penetrate another male. This desire, however, is never directly enacted and instead finds its fulfilment in a series of heterosexual displacements (in Byron 1999: 110).

This breaking down of traditional gender roles was just one factor in what was seen as a more widespread degeneration of society, of growing cultural and social decay and corruption (see 'Gothic and Decadence'). The discourse of degeneration pervades *Dracula*, with Stoker even making reference to two key figures in the debate: the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who argued that habitual criminals were throwbacks to the primitive, and Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration* (1895) extended Lombroso's arguments and further saw evidence of degeneration through excessive emotionality in many of the writers of the time.

While many of the threats to society in *Dracula* are seen to come from within, the text also enacts late Victorian society's most important and persistent narrative of decline: the narrative of reverse colonization, the fear of a racial degeneration which would corrupt and destabilize identity. Dracula clearly has plans for colonization: 'Your girls that you all love are mine already', he tells the vampire hunters, 'and through them you and others shall yet be mine – my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed.' Dracula's 'foreignness' is made quite clear, and descriptions link him to the 'monstrous Jew' constructed by nineteenth-century anti-Semitic discourse. And this 'foreigner' blends just a little too easily into the modern Victorian world, strolling down Piccadilly in full daylight and watching the pretty girls pass by.

Dracula's modernity lies both in its emphasis on a contemporary setting and in its concern with technology and data accumulation: the acquisition

of power is closely associated with the collection of data. The vampire hunters defeat the Count partly because they learn enough about him to predict his movements and responses. All the information comes together in the type-script Mina produces, and even Dracula, as he demonstrates with his attempts to destroy their hoard of information, is aware of the power such information confers. As well as drawing upon these recent technological advances, however, Stoker also engages with many of the most recent theories and developments in the mental sciences.

Published one year after the term ‘psychoanalysis’ was introduced, *Dracula* participates in many of the debates in the field then known as ‘mental physiology’, the study of the workings of the mind. Seward studies madness and is interested in the unconscious; dreams, hypnotism and telepathy all play a significant role in the text. The study of such issues was a growing part of a movement away from a more materialist science. Many scientists were reluctant to shift completely from a materialist explanation of behaviour, however, and *Dracula* also articulates such reluctance, appearing to swing between the two sides of the debate. While Dracula’s ultimate defeat is partly due to Van Helsing placing Mina in the hypnotic trance that allows them to track the vampire’s movements, it is also partly due to the more materialist science of physiognomy. Mina, with her knowledge of the theories of Nordau and Lombroso, is able to identify Dracula as a criminal type and consequently to make certain assumptions about his responses and behaviour. Nevertheless, the text also repeatedly questions the validity of this science. The sleeping Lucy, her face full of sweetness and purity, awakens to snarl and seduce; lines of difference, such moments suggest, are not so easily stabilized. Furthermore, as Van Helsing notes when Seward insists there must be a rational explanation for Lucy’s condition, it is the vampire hunters’ very reliance on the rational sciences that makes them vulnerable to Dracula: ‘in this enlightened age, when men believe not even what they see, the doubting of wise men would be his greatest strength’.

Boundaries must ultimately be reconfirmed, social and psychic order restored. The staking of Lucy provides the most brutal enactment of the restoration of gendered boundaries. As Arthur, supported by his friends, pounds in the ‘mercy-bearing stake’, Lucy’s writhing body is released from the grip of desire and restored to ‘holy calm’. Mina, suitably punished for her momentary lapse when feeding at Dracula’s breast by being branded with the sacred wafer, is ultimately restored to her proper role as nurturing mother. The female vampires in Dracula’s castle are, like Lucy, despatched with the appropriate penetrating stake. Dracula himself, however, is destroyed not with a stake, which would suggest further transgression, but with the weapons of empire (see ‘Imperial Gothic’), with Jonathan’s kukri

knife and Quincey's bowie knife; he dies like a man. And as the primary alien threat is neutralized in this final struggle, it is notable that Quincey, representative of the rising imperial power of America, is the one vampire hunter who does not survive. The novel ends with a 'Note' from Harker which appears to place us back in the secure Victorian bourgeois world, but the restoration of order is nevertheless problematized. As Van Helsing is well aware, the oppositional terms of good and evil depend upon each other: 'it is not the least of its terrors', he observes, 'that this evil thing is rooted deep in all good'. The threatening other, which ultimately resides within the characters themselves, is not destroyed in *Dracula*: it is simply repressed once more.

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shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which all certainty is destroyed and any guess seems plausible. Forms lose their outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist' (1895: 5–6). Not only does Nordau clearly appropriate Gothic elements to convey a sense of cultural decline, he also precisely puts his finger on what may well be the primary fear that haunts the age, a fear that is simultaneously managed and intensified by the Gothic fiction of the time. Repeatedly, we are offered the spectacle of devolution and decay, of chaos and multiplicity. Forms and boundaries dissolve as comforting certainties mutate into questions. The Gothic horror of the Decadence is the horror of dissolution, of the nation, of society and, ultimately, as we move into the Modernist world, of the human subject itself.

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