Revisiting Stoker's *Dracula*: No Brave Good Villains Left*

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This article considers the implication of the main character, Count Dracula, the villain/anti-hero in Stoker's text, as a starting point to analysing the approaches deployed in the novel that introduce new stratagems to uncover the motives which allow the readers to find excuses to deny "pure" evilness. Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) introduced the plausibility—in the realm of the gothic horror novel—of finding heroes in modern day "villains". This paper will argue this influence by introducing connections with modern "pop" vampires: from the teenage vampires in the *Twilight* saga both the texts (2005, 2006, 2007, & 2008) and the film versions (2008, 2009, 2010, & 2012), to the grown-up fantasies of Charlaine Harris in the *True Blood* saga (both the 13 books published between 2001 and 2012 and the Home Box Office TV series that started in 2008 and, so far is in its 7th season in 2014) and Tim Burton's *Dark Shadows* (2012), the remake of the 70s American Broadcasting Company Gothic soap opera (which ran between June 1966 to April 1977). Bearing in mind the history of the vampire, through a brief account of its constant presence in the contemporary film and television industry, we will attempt to unveil the cultural reasons that bring light to the fact that modern society is out of brave good villains. The presentation will retrieve some theoretical support from Christopher Frayling's analysis of the vampire myth, David Punters' ideas on the modern gothic and Maggie Kilgour's assumptions on the rise of the gothic.

Keywords: *Dracula*, villains, pop-culture, postmodern gothic

Introduction

The theme of vampires has been addressed throughout centuries by literature and other art forms, at times with horror and repulsion, other times with attraction. The year of 2012 has marked the 100th anniversary of Bram Stoker's death and, as a tribute to the author of *Dracula*, this paper revisits the notion of the villain, enumerating and considering the last two centuries of vampire literature and films, explaining the evolution of the notions of horror and fear, which have been altered by the introduction of elements of comedy, and by the transformation of the aesthetics of peril and blood in the post-modern youth culture that has rendered villains into modern heroes.

The Origins of Stoker's *Dracula*

When Stoker's *Dracula* was published in 1897, the myth of the vampire was not new. However, the approach chosen by Stoker, combining history with folklore, enabled the creation of an inspiring gothic novel

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which would be the starting point to the frenzy around the myth of the vampire and the profile of count Dracula. Such profile and Stoker's novel have managed to entertain readers and film audiences around the globe for the past 115 years. Above all, the film industry and its audiences are indebted to Stoker: More than 1,000 films have been produced starring Dracula either as villain, hero, or a clownish character. Also, the tourism of Romania, particularly, the region of Transylvania, owes to the Irish author a number of gift shops starring Dracula/Vlad Tepes as the folklore vampire, at the same time they celebrate him, as a national hero, a man with barbarian ways but, nonetheless, just and willing to fight for his people. In the summer of 1976, the official Communist Party of Romania celebrated the 500th anniversary of Vlad's death: There was also a postage stamp created for the occasion and former president Ceaucescu made a speech about their national hero.

The anti-hero—we cannot consider the Count as a villain, bearing in mind not only his ancestry but also the clear notion that he has a motive—depicted in Stoker's narration is in fact a combination of two princes of Wallachia—a historical and geographical region of Romania, situated north of the Danube and south of the Southern Carpathians—Vlad III and his son, Vlad IV¹, also known as Vlad the Impaler. Vlad III, father of the Impaler, had been known as “Vlad Dracul” or “Dragon”, as a reference to the fact of being a member Order of the Dragon, pledged to fight the Turks from his territories. “Dracul” came to be a synonym for “devil” due to the numerous atrocities attributed to the prince Vlad Tepes, while defending his lands (namely, the decapitation, roasting, and impaling of his enemies). At the time, Stoker was devising the plot for his novel, the British Museum had already four pamphlets about the Princes, one by Bamberg with a woodcut portrait of Vlad the Impaler, which mentions that Vlad converted to Roman Catholicism later in his life. However, none of the pamphlets established the connection of Dracula with the myth of the vampire, and Transylvania. The reason for the inclusion of the vampire myth, which accounts for the popularity of the text, can be traced in the books of Emily Gerard about superstitions and folklore tales that were in vogue before Stoker published his novel, one in particular, *Transylvanian Superstitions* (1885) and that, together with Charles Boner's *Transylvania* (1865), may have given the author some place-name locations and traditional superstitions of the region to incorporate in his “adventure story”. The vampire connection is something created by the west and, ironically, it is believed to have originated in Hungary, giving way to the legend that Vlad the Impaler, the hero who saved the Carpathian region, would rise at sunset from his grave, to watch over his lands. Other sources that have been pointed out as references to Stoker's work are Byron's *Fragments of a Novel* (1819), John Polidori's novella *The Vampyre* (also from 1819), and the epistolary form made popular by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1860) and a little novel from 1887, whose heroin bears the same name as Jonathan Harker's wife, *Miss Mina and the Groom* (1887).

Ludovic Flow, analysing *Dracula* in detail, has come to the following conclusion about Stoker:

¹ According to the entry in the yahoo encyclopaedia (in: <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/Vlad4>) Vlad the IV, 1431? 1476, prince of Walachia (1448, 1456—62, 1476), known as Vlad the Impaler. He was the son of Prince Vlad Dracul (Vlad the Devil) and also called Dracula or son of the Devil. Vlad IV seized the Walachian throne briefly in 1448 and definitively in 1456 with the support of John Hunyadi, whom he had helped against the Ottoman Turks. Ruling with firmness and with cruelty toward his opponents, he created an orderly administration, developed commerce, and strengthened the army. In 1462, however, a campaign against him by the Ottoman Sultan Muhammad II resulted in his deposition. Vlad sought aid from the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus but was instead imprisoned in Hungary for 12 years. In late 1476, Vlad, with Transylvanian aid, regained the Walachian throne only to be defeated and killed by the Ottoman-supported prince, Laiota Basarab.

He is a master of the commonplace style in which clichés flow as if they were impelled by the same pressure as genius. I don't say this lightly. There is a semi-heroic, Everyman quality about his intense command of the mediocre—as if the commonplace had found a champion who could wear its colours with all the ceremony of greatness. When such a man, just once, is thoroughly afraid, the charade stops and what you get is *Dracula*. (Frayling, 1991, p. 79)

The fact remains that it is due to Stoker's profuse exploitation of clichés and stereotypes that the novel has survived throughout one century and has given way to a number of reinterpretations. It is precisely the use of commonplace that draws the attention of popular culture to the character of the count, from novels, stage, and film adaptations, video games, pinball machines, comics, cartoons (even Sesame Street has a count Dracula) and soap operas. It is impossible to list all the paraphernalia around Dracula from toys, to custom suits, mugs, magnets, T-shirts, and bumper stickers saying "I love Dracula" available at gift shops and online, ice-creams (in Portugal, Dracula was resurrected, in the summer of 2012, by Frigo). Therefore, the author will direct his/her analysis to the image of the vampire throughout the years using, when relevant, direct adaptations from Stoker, and focusing on the modern image of the vampire, no longer perceived as an anti-hero, but mostly, as an attractive creature, forever young and undead, capable of deploying the qualities of a modern hero.

From Murnau's *Nosferatu* to Dario Argento's *Dracula*: Film and TV Exploitation of Stoker's *Dracula*

In Stoker's novel the count is introduced as "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" (Stoker, 1897, p. 15).

Contradicting the notion that the true hero is Jonathan Harker, the first character the reader is introduced to, the fact is the title of the text reflects the importance of the vampire, and explains the contradictory feelings the reader experiences towards this anti-hero. This conflict accounts for the success of the novel: Though feared and dread there is an undeniable allure in *Dracula* that Harker himself experiences, not to mention Renfield, Lucy and Mina which stresses the fact that power, even with wrongful intentions, has always attracted attention. Stoker's anti-hero emphasises this aspect, which explains why all characters appear easy preys at the mere presence of the Count. The charisma of Dracula is present in the way, Lucy, Mina, and Renfield cannot reject the animal magnetism the count exerts. Renfield begins to feel a necessity of creating his own preying chain before Dracula's arrival in London and, as the count draws near, his zoophagous feeding habits become stranger and larger, in terms of size (from insects to mice and cats). Though Dracula's victims reject this attraction, they are drawn to him, and experience pleasure when giving or receiving blood. Mina Harker receives blood from all the male characters but only experiences pleasure with the count. Jonathan Harker cannot deny the lust he feels when he is menaced inside the castle by three female vampires:

All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. (Stoker, 1897, p. 36)

As David Punter² (1996) has affirmed,

² There are rumors that a Russian version of *Dracula* was attempted around 1920. If true, it would be the first cinematic adaptation of *Dracula*. However, no copies or records of such a film have survived, and its existence is dubious. There is also a

It is hard to summarise *Dracula*, for it is such a wide-ranging book, but in general it is fair to say that its power derives from its dealings with taboo. Where taboo sets up certain bounding lines and divisions which enable society to function without disruption, *Dracula* blurs those lines. (p. 21)

The first attempt to portray on film the taboo Punter mentions was accomplished by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, with *Nosferatu* in 1922. Murnau tried to use Stoker's story as screenplay, but shortly after the film was released, Florence Stoker brought him to court, managed to put to halt its showing and had the German government retrieve all the copies. This implied that there were few showings in Germany prior to *Dracula*'s moving into the public domain in 1962.

In Murnau's expressionist adaptation of Stoker's text, the story has moved from London to Bremen, and the names of the major characters were altered (Count Dracula became Graf Orlok, played by Max Schreck). Murnau's Orlok is far from being the male seducer that attracts the audiences and accounts of the first showings tell about the horror the audience felt when he appeared on screen. However, the charisma and the magnetism were already noticeable. Once in the public domain, under its English title *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terror* (1922), the film was re-released on 8mm and is currently available and considered as one of the greatest films of the silent era.

In 1931, Tod Browning's *Dracula* was played by Bela Lugosi, an immigrant from Hungary that barely spoke English and was given the role in the film after several actors have refused the part. The film was an adaptation of the play written by Hamilton Deane for the Broadway stage. The script was based on John Balderston's revision of the Deane's play. In Tod Browning's film, Dracula's London residence is placed in Carfax "Abbey". It also provides answers for some of the questions Stoker left unexplained and it enlarges the role of Renfield, who is the one who first travels to Transylvania in search of Count Dracula. After closing the deal on the sale of a property in England, he is ravished by Dracula's three vampire brides, which confers meaning to his insanity and his strong bond to the Count. *Dracula* opened on Friday the 13th, in February 1931, and run for eight days. In spite of the lack of publicity and the total absence of reviews, *Dracula* became the largest source of revenue of the year for Universal. As far as the main character is concerned, Bela Lugosi fulfils the role of an unsettling male figure and became a horror icon as Dracula, responsible for many viewers' sleepless nights.³ With Bela Lugosi, Dracula kept the aura, still inspiring horror above all other emotions. It was with Terence Fisher and *The Horror of Dracula*, released in 1958, that the image of the count began to turn from sheer horror to attractiveness. The Dracula films produced by Hammer introduced the sexual element, already present in Stoker's novel but minimised by other directors. Christopher Lee, who plays Dracula, has a mesmerising presence and his victims thought unwillingly, and the camera, along with the horror also shows the pleasure. Hammer's Draculas also bear a close proximity with Stoker's text. As Punter (1996) points out: "The Hammer Draculas have a sense of historical depth. ...All the vampires, male and female, in Hammer's films are sexually attractive, sometimes to the point of caricature..." (p. 110).

This element of caricature, which can also be encountered in Stoker, introduces another key element to the

Hungarian version from 1921, released in 1922. It was first shown in Hungary and the copies and records that testify to its existence were lost during World War II.

³ Tony Scott's 1983 film *The Hunger* featuring Catherine Deneuve, Susan Sarandon and David Bowie pays tribute to Lugosi in its opening sequence, set to Bauhaus' Goth-Rock classic "Bela Lugosi's Dead".

study of main character as anti-hero/hero: the moment fear was able to be blended with parody; the audiences started to perceive Dracula differently and that contributed to the general acceptance of the evil character. Throughout three decades, Hammer has released nine films about *Dracula*: the one from 1958 above mentioned, known simply as *Dracula* in the UK and as *The Horror of Dracula* in the USA; *The Brides of Dracula* (1960) also directed by Terence Fisher with Peter Cushing as Van Helsing; *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966) directed by Fisher: Dracula, played by Christopher Lee who is resurrected, preying on four unsuspecting visitors to his castle; *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968) directed by Freddie Francis, still with Christopher Lee in the main role; *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970) directed by Peter Sasdy with Christopher Lee as Dracula; *Scars of Dracula* (1970) directed by Roy Ward Baker and starring Christopher Lee; *Dracula AD* (1972)⁴ directed by Alan Gibson, again Christopher Lee in the main role and Peter Cushing as Van Helsing; *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1973) also directed by Gibson with the same cast, and *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires* (1974), directed by Roy Ward Baker and Cheh Chang (though the latter is uncredited) introducing John Forbes-Robertson as Count Dracula but still with Peter Cushing as Van Helsing. These nine films use Stoker's characters and, though their quality is distinct, they account for the interest of Stoker's story and the amount of interest that the Dracula myth elicited. With the Hammer productions of Dracula, fear and horror started to encompass laughter and comedy.

It is also in the end of the 1960's and the beginning of the 1970's that Barnabas Collins appeared as the tortured immortal on television, the ABC show *Dark Shadows* (June 1966 to April 1977). With poor ratings in 1967, the Gothic soap opera added a new character to avoid being cancelled: Barnabas Collins, the 175-year-old vampire searching for his long lost love and seeking revenge. Played by Canadian actor Jonathan Frid, Barnabas was so successful and audiences were so drawn to him that, by the time *Dark Shadows* ended in 1971, he was virtually the star of the show. Barnabas Collins introduced a new step into the evolution of the anti-hero: Instead of being perceived as a ruthless killer, searching for youth, he was an undead Romeo doomed to an eternal search for his love. Barnabas inspired fears but also a new emotion that would prevail from the 1970's onwards: pity for his tormented unbeingness and his anguish and remorse. In 2012, Tim Burton, transformed the series into the film *Dark Shadows*, starring Johnny Depp as Barnabas Collins. Though it is unmistakably a Burton piece, he captures the essence of anguish and humour of the vampire and his desire to establishing his ancient lineage and the quest for his long lost love.

If one doubts the influence of *Dark Shadows*, one just needs to think of Francis Ford Coppola's big-budget Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, released in 1992. The film opens with Transylvanian war hero Vlad Dracula (played by Gary Oldman) embracing undeadness after discovering that his wife Elisabetha (Winona Ryder) has committed suicide. Oldman's handsome Dracula inhabits a post-*Dark Shadows* world where, as the movie's tagline states, Love Never Dies. By emphasizing the eternal love aspect of the plot, Dracula gains a new element that is not obvious in Stoker's novel: a kind of romantic, erotic resonance quality. In the Coppola's film Mina appears to be more in love with Dracula than her husband. His death is almost a heroic one and can be perceived as an act of love: Mina kills Dracula to release him, from his eternal torment and to free herself from a doomed love triangle. The myth of Dracula, (of which the myth of Don Juan is a variant) brings again that Romeo mixture noticeable in *Dark Shadows*.

⁴ This was set in the present, being the "present" 1972. This film is a parody, with the granddaughter of the last Helsing to kill Dracula as the main character. She is a hippie, and her group ends up resurrecting Dracula, who plots his revenge.

This vision of romantic love associated with the undead is the root of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* (2005, 2006, 2007, & 2008). Much like Stoker (who claims that the idea for *Dracula* was sketched after waking from a nightmare), Meyer's first book, *Twilight* (2005) came to her in a dream:

I woke up (on that June 2nd) from a very vivid dream. In my dream, two people were having an intense conversation in a meadow in the woods. One of these people was just your average girl. The other person was fantastically beautiful, sparkly, and a vampire. They were discussing the difficulties inherent in the facts that A) they were falling in love with each other while B) the vampire was particularly attracted to the scent of her blood, and was having a difficult time restraining himself from killing her immediately. (Retrieved from <http://stepheniemeyer.com/twilight.html>)

Meyer's vampire protagonist, Edward, lacks the depth and the mystery of Stoker's: He is no longer the cruel rapist who sucks blood to feed because he has been tamed by society's code of conduct. The twilight saga is not about the absence of soul, because modern society has come to embrace the freedom from the culpability of sin. The blow on Catholicism, consisting on the refusal the existence of soul in an afterlife, thus erasing sin and remorse, in terms of religious belief and replacing them with a code of ethics determined by each society, gives way to this new dysfunctional triangle: A 17-year-old human, in love with an ageless young adult vampire, caught in a triangle with a werewolf friend. The main character, Edward, is a new hero: The problem for the average reader or viewers of the Saga is not whether the vampire will be extinct but the opposite: Will the girl attain a vampire condition herself, so they can love forever, since death will never do them part? Unlike Stoker's, Meyer's vampires can walk in the sun but avoid the rain (since they start to glow) and live among the humans and the werewolves. The main characters go to high school and, if it were not for the fantastic oddness of a human loving a vampire, the plot would be similar to any other adolescent series. To the young readers, the target of Meyer's four books, Edward and Jacob are youth icons: Girls either prefer one or the other, depending on being attracted to the fair skin and cold blooded young vampire, or a tanned, hot blooded young werewolf. One can say that vampires are definitely cool to the 21st century youth. The merchandise around the film exploited their star pop qualities, creating specific memorabilia items for each "team": The vamps and the weres. Some teenager girls' dream is to encounter a true vampire and to live undead forever. In Meyer's case, the sexual orientations have been dropped in favour of a complete heterosexual milieu and Edward becomes similar to Prince Charming in a fairy tale.

In the case of Charlaine Harris' novels, the *The Southern Vampire Mysteries/Sookie Stackhouse* (the 12th and the last book of the saga was published on May 2012), they also enact the strangeness of multiple love triangles between the heroine, Sookie Stackhouse (played by Anna Paquin), a telepathic human waitress with a fairy grandfather, and other fantastic creatures: Namely vampires—who came out of the closet, not to face daytime, (which unlike Meyer's but like Stoker's work remains off-limits, unless they want to encounter a true death) thanks to the discovery of *True Blood*, a synthetic Japanese drink that substitutes human blood—werewolves, werpanthers, weretigers, fairies, and other metamorphous creatures with different sexual orientations.

The novels gained a new impulse due to Alan Ball's screen adaptation for HBO (Home Box Office) of the *True Blood* series, in its Season 5 (Season 1 aired in June 2009 and the first episode of Season 5 was aired on 10th June 2012) and the popularity of the saga is such that it is HBO's most watched show with an average of 12.6 million viewers per episode. This kind of popularity has only been achieved by another anti-hero series, *Dexter*

(2006-2013), the 21st century modern bloody vigilante. Alan Ball's adaptation, like Harris's novels, no longer exploits the horror but takes advantage of another mundane reality-life in a fictional all-American small town, in the State of Louisiana, called Bon Temps—to introduce violence, sex and love as integral pieces in the life of Sookie and her quest for true love. Ball has transformed a bizarre freak show of fantastic creatures into a sexy atmosphere, where Sookie dwells between the love of a powerful Nordic vampire Viking (played by Alexander Skarsgård) and first love, former soldier for the South, during the American Civil War, vampire Bill Compton. The character of Eric represents the modern day anti-hero: Sexy, powerful and dangerous with a particular sense of humour and his TV character has attracted legions of fans. The element of horror is completely dismissed, in spite of the bloody scenes and the violence displayed in every episode, leaving us to conclude that there are no brave good villains left and the perception of fear has travelled a long route from Stoker to Harris. Nonetheless, the motivation to trespass the boundaries of normality and common decency has endured throughout the last 115 years adjusting to new paradigms, as the boundaries become less strict and more tolerant in terms of our ability to tolerate displays of violence and strangeness. The capacity to feel horror is much more connected with visual and sound effects than with the plot itself.

To conclude this list, we must add the most recent version of *Dracula*, from 2012, by Italian horror-master Dario Argento who unveiled his own version of Stoker's novel, this time in 3D, starring Rutger Hauer as Van Helsing, Asia Argento as Lucy, and Thomas Kretschmann as Dracula. In the writing credits, Argento acknowledges Bram Stoker (book), Enrique Cerezo, Stefano Piani, Antonio Tentori and himself for the screenplay. The film's première occurred in Cannes and it was met with harsh criticism. The protagonist, from what can be observed in the trailer, is still an attractive man who entices his victims.

Conclusion

According to Maggie Kilgour (1995), "...the gothic villain is frequently an example of the modern materialistic individual taken to an extreme, at which he becomes an egotistical and wilful threat to social unity and order..." (p. 12). The gothic anti-hero deployed in modern and contemporary narratives, films and TV series has been rehabilitated into a sort of pop star, enabling reader and viewers to respond to a primeval desire of escaping from mundane reality, dreaming while awake (unlike Stoker and Meyer) with cold-blooded "heroes" who will open the doors of eternal bliss on earth, where fantasy, beauty, sex, and money determine the ultimate yearning of modern audiences. Rosemary Jackson's (1981) words "Fantasies are never ideologically 'innocent'" (p. 122) remain true in contemporary society, as they were in the 19th century. The disadvantage can be a desensitisation towards aggression but, as Karl French (1996) recalls, the golden age of cinema, where no explicit violence was portrayed, took place in the midst of two World Wars. The main purpose of this paper was to enumerate relevant moments of the presence of the myth of the vampire, and the changing of perspective in the role of the count Dracula as pure evil. If in 1987, Stoker's *Dracula* was a product of a necessity, to escape the established repression, nowadays the different adaptations and recreations have become a parody feeding pure entertainment to gothic pop culture.

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