Killing the "Terrible Monster": Dracula and the Irish Response to British Imperialism

"Then sharpen sabre, pike and skein, And raise again the glorious Green--"
--"A War Hymn"

In Bram Stoker's 1897 novel Dracula, no one can figure out why Lucy Westenra is slowly wasting away. Two doctors investigate the problem: her suitor, Dr. Seward, believes it to be mental illness, and Dr. Abraham Van Helsing thinks that it is a disease of the blood. After determining that neither of these is the cause, the men assume they have exhausted all rational possibilities. While they are able to isolate symptoms, they lack the hermeneutics which would let them make sense of the problem as a whole. This is frustrating for two men whose livelihood depends on solving problems scientifically, and Dr. Seward blames their failure on a weakness in his own cognitive ability, asking "What does it all mean? I am beginning to wonder if my long habit of life amongst the insane is beginning to tell upon my own brain" (130). However, Dr. Seward's problem is less that he is insane than that he is closed-minded. His and Van Helsing's thinking is unnecessarily limited, which prevents their considering the real cause of Lucy's illness, visits from a vampire. Van Helsing, who fortunately has some experience with such matters, changes perspectives and overcomes his blind spot, although not in time to save Lucy.

Critics of the novel--who must also ask "What does it all mean?"--suffer from a similar blindness, refusing to see beyond traditional hermeneutics. On one level, this has meant reading the novel simply as a better-than-average example of the Gothic genre. This is akin to reading Lucy's illness as a disease of the blood: purely one-dimensional, refusing to see outside influences on or referents for the novel, just as Seward assumes that the threat to Lucy's health comes from within her own body. Both Seward and these critics look for the obvious answer instead of a more productive one.

Those scholars who take psychoanalytic or cultural approaches to the novel acknowledge that Dracula could function more symbolically, representing Victorian sexual repression or perhaps Stoker's own sexual fears or preoccupations reflected in the novel. While this approach is certainly valid, it has its limits. Again, Dracula here represents an internal threat,
something lurking in the mind or blood of the author, but the threat in the novel comes from outside Lucy. Indeed, the supernatural element in a Gothic novel such as this usually masks or displaces some more quotidian fear of the novel's society. Bhalla says that "the fear of the night [in Gothic fiction] ...is an intimation that something irrational and unnatural has intruded into the cultural boundary" (9). The ghosts and monsters of the Gothic novel represent some very real threat to the society out of which the novel comes.

A few articles do couch their readings of Dracula in terms of the cultural climate of the time: Daniel Pick and Ernest Fontana use the theories of Nordau and Lombroso to see how the novel represents Victorian fears of criminality and degeneration. Carol Senf reads the female characters as emblematic of the "New Woman" of the 1890s, and John Greenway and Rosemary Jann each discuss the novel in relation to nineteenth-century positivism. Flat-out political readings of the novel are few and far between, however. Moreover, critics who offer these readings suffer from the most ironic blind spot. They are correct in reading Dracula as a threat from the outside, but they fail to interrogate their own assumptions about where the "outside" is.

In Stoker's novel, Dracula is figured more as a political threat than simply as a monster. Indeed, he has all the characteristics of a colonizer, a figure certainly well known to readers in the late nineteenth century. As the title "Count" implies, Dracula is a nobleman whose home is literally a castle. He comes from the line of Szekelys, who have had power in Transylvania for centuries. In telling Jonathan Harker of the group's history, Dracula asks "Is it a wonder that we were a conquering race?" (28). Clearly believing that he occupies a place of power, he says "I have been so long master that I would be master still--or at least that none other should be master of me" (20); he also describes himself as "me who commanded nations" (276). However, his power in his home territory is waning, and, looking for new arenas to control, he turns his attention to England.

In England, as in his home country, the Count completely controls the space he owns or inhabits: on almost every page of the novel one finds a reference to a locked door to which entry is impossible for one without a key. Usually it is the vampire hunters--Van Helsing, Harker,
Seward, Quincey Morris, and Arthur Holmwood—who are trying and failing to gain access to a space controlled by the Count. They cannot get keys to his property and are forced to burglarize it. Legitimate entry to the space controlled by the Count is impossible, but Dracula has the power to go anywhere he wants to; at one point, Jonathan's wife Mina locks the door to Lucy's room to keep the vampire out, but to no avail.

Dracula also controls the very soil itself. He sleeps in a box of earth, and travels to England the same way. The "horrid cargo" (217) which he brings with him to his new home is comprised of "fifty cases of common earth" (218). Indeed, Dracula's initial foray into the country he wishes to conquer is the purchase of property there. When the vampire hunters investigate the ownership of this house, they are told the owner is "a foreign nobleman" (261); that is, an outsider taking over their home territory. The Count's tie to the land of England must be severed, according to Van Helsing: "we must, so to speak, sterilise the earth, so that no more he can seek safety in it" (232). Here, the vampire hunters are figured as agrarian revolutionaries, resorting to crime and violence to gain access to land and space held by a more powerful figure.

As Dracula figuratively controls the "body" of land, he literally controls the body of Lucy Westenra. Fortunately, Lucy has her three suitors--Holmwood, Steward, and Morris--to defend her interests, and Stoker characterises them as a rebel army, with Lucy the woman worth dying for. When she agrees to marry Arthur, he says, "My life is hers, and I would give the last drop of blood in my body for her" (117). This is nearly required of him, because the Count has drained Lucy of so much blood that she requires transfusions to stay alive. Van Helsing asks for "some one who will open his veins for her...A brave man's blood is the best thing on this earth when a woman is in trouble" (143-4). For "a woman," one could substitute "a country," because Lucy inspires an almost patriotic fervor in her suitors. After watching Lucy lose her blood and then her life, the men who love her make a pact to exterminate whatever has done this to her. They place their lives on the line, not only in the transfusions of blood, but in their willingness to fight Dracula in person. In fact, the situation necessitates an attack at the source, a stake through the
heart, and it is to accomplish this objective that Van Helsing and the other men form their guerilla army to wrest Dracula from his place of power over Lucy and the land of England.

Stoker couches their revenge in militaristic terms. For example, Van Helsing says "We should have ready some plan of attack" (293), and they eventually formulate a "Plan of Campaign" (311), a "strike" (228). When they travel to Transylvania to kill the Count, Stoker says "amongst them they carried a small arsenal" (340). The hunters further resemble an army in their bond of solidarity and brotherhood. Dr. Van Helsing says, "We men are determined--nay, are we not pledged?--to destroy this monster" (226). They have made a "solemn compact" (229) with a clear goal: "[W]e shall not rest until the Count's head and body have been separated, and we are sure he cannot reincarnate" (341). That is, the vampire must be disarmed, prevented from sucking the life out of others as he has done to Lucy. He must not be allowed to colonize any more space or any more bodies.

The terms that Stoker uses to characterize Dracula, Lucy, and the vampire hunters thus suggest that Dracula represents an external political threat which must be fought with military force. Why would Stoker use such rhetorical figures? Presumably, his discourse reflects some real fear that Stoker or his society felt at the time. The question is, who is threatening whom?

Critics who address this issue usually read the novel in terms of a threat to Britain. England is always the center, the inside. In a 1966 article, Richard Wasson suggests that Dracula is a representation of Nazism or Fascism. Franco Moretti writes in his article "The Dialectic of Fear" that Dracula is a capitalist who sucks the blood of the workers, the "foreign threat" of monopoly that England feared (74). Stephen D. Arata's "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization" also examines the political climate in which the novel was written. By the last century of the nineteenth century, Britain's imperial powers were waning. As a result, "[t]he fear is that what has been represented as the 'civilized' world is on the point of being colonized by 'primitive' forces" (Arata 623). In Arata's argument, the "primitive" countries include Ireland, with Dracula representing a potential Irish uprising against England. However, this discussion suggests the novel is written from the English view of the
colonizer/colonized relationship. Arata acknowledges that Dracula may also be a figure of English imperialism, but only in terms of how it looks to the English themselves: "In Count Dracula, Victorian readers could recognize their culture's imperial ideology mirrored back as a kind of monstrosity" (634). But does it make sense that the arrogant, grasping Count, so certain of his right to rule, should represent Ireland, rather than the country which actually did rule much of the globe in the 1890s?

Arata assumes the novel is written from the English point of view, but this results from an Anglocentric bias which is not borne out by circumstantial or textual evidence. Bram Stoker was Irish, born near Dublin in 1847 and educated at Trinity College, and thus would probably not have written from an English perspective. A recent article in The Economist reports that the undergraduates at Trinity have formed a Bram Stoker society, claiming him for Ireland. The article also points out that vampire lore had its origins in Ireland as well as in Eastern Europe. Moreover, Ireland was not only Stoker's country of origin but also that of another famous vampire writer, Sheridan Le Fanu, whose Carmilla supposedly inspired Stoker's novel.

Particularly since Le Fanu wrote a similar novel at about the same time, one wonders what there was in Irish culture which inspired thoughts of bloodsucking. Since Irish literature "was, from the outset, heavily implicated in the world of politics and militarism" (Kiberd, 279), a precedent exists for reading Dracula in terms of the Irish politics of the 1890s. At this time, Ireland in its entirety was still a possession of the Crown. The issue most debated in the governments and periodicals of the period was the two-fold Irish question: whether Ireland should be given "Home Rule"--that is, have her own Parliament, either subsidiary to or independent of the English one--and whether Irish tenants should be allowed to purchase the land they farmed.

At the time of the novel, Ireland had a sort of feudal system. Prior to the 1880s, the possession of land had been reserved either for noblemen who rented portions of their ancestral estates or for English aristocrats who had taken over plots of land. Tenant farmers lived on the land (although the landlord often did not) and they sold their harvest to pay the rent. In the 1880s
and 1890s, debate over the fairness of this practice came to a head. These decades saw more than a little anti-British and anti-landlord activity in Ireland, particularly as practiced by the Fenian rebellion. The Fenians began under the moniker IRB, which stood either for "Irish Republican Brotherhood" or "Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood" (Garvin 5). This group was founded on St. Patrick's Day, 1858, by a man named James Stephens. The group was unequivocally "nationalist and separatist" (Garvin 34), and their goal was complete liberation of the Irish motherland from the British usurpers: "The root of all their behavior was their certainty that England would never surrender dominion unless confronted with superior Irish force, ultimately military" (Brown 154). While they directed their hostilities more towards British rule in general than toward landowners, they depended on "chronic agrarian discontent" to further their cause (Garvin 9). The Land League, a sub-group of the Fenians, was formed by Michael Davitt to address the other half of the Irish question, land reform.

Bram Stoker was not isolated from this debate. According to Clive Leatherdale's biographical information on Stoker, he was a member of the National Liberal Club--the Liberal party being in favor of Home Rule. In his biography of the actor Henry Irving, Stoker describes himself as "a philosophical Home-Ruler,' yet one who was opposed to the extra-Parliamentary activities" (Leatherdale, 60). Stoker's predecessor, Le Fanu, was also an Irish Nationalist. Moreover, Stoker was well acquainted with British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone, who was sympathetic to the Irish cause. In 1870, Gladstone had introduced and passed a bill that gave tenants the opportunity to buy land from their landlords, and in 1886, he introduced a bill that would have given Home Rule to Ireland in the form of a separate Parliament in Dublin ("The Political Position," 166). According to Peter Haining, the editor of a collection of Stoker's short stories, Ireland was "a topic which Bram Stoker...was happy to discuss with [Gladstone] whenever the opportunity arose around the supper table" (71). It is fair to say, then, that Stoker was well-informed on the "Irish question," although he died in 1912, before Ireland won her independence from England, and thus never saw Home Rule become a reality.
Given Stoker's position as a Nationalist Irishman, it thus makes more sense to read Count Dracula, not as a figure of a hypothetical Irish uprising, but as a figure of the very real oppression of the Irish by the English. Even beyond the circumstantial evidence of Stoker's birthplace and political persuasion, the very rhetoric of his novel suggests that he was re-writing Irish revolutionary texts. Stoker could be said to speak for his culture when he figures the Count as a usurper, an invader, and a controller—the "King-Vampire" (357)—against whom rational discourses are useless. Dracula can only be stopped with physical force, through armed insurrection, and putting a stake through Dracula's heart can be read as figuratively killing off British rule. It makes perfect sense that Irish revolutionary writing should share the rhetorical conventions of the vampire novel: revolution requires a rhetoric of blood.

Like Dracula, the British aristocrats invaded the body of Ireland, albeit the body politic. The "blood" they suck out of the country is both literal—the blood of Irishmen killed in agrarian and other violent rebellion—and figurative, in terms of the money that goes out of Irish hands into English pockets as rents and taxes. In his 1912 pamphlet in favor of Home Rule, L. G. Redmond Howard says "The awful drain of the life-blood of the country during these years before 'tenant right' was made a first principle of land laws...can hardly be imagined...It was this nation-agony which brought forward the Fenian movement" (34). Here, Howard explicitly links vampirism and armed rebellion, just as in the novel, where the band of vampire hunters forms specifically to avenge Lucy's death from loss of blood.

A Frenchman sympathetic to the plight of the Irish explicitly refers to the landlords as "vampires" in his 1887 book (Grousset 311), because rent paid to these foreigners is not reinvested in Ireland but goes out of the country. Similarly, nationalist writer Thomas Davis laments the tax money which England demands: "You raise five millions a year from us, and you

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1That Dracula comes to conquer England is not incompatible with reading this novel as a treatment of English colonialism in Ireland. From the first page, the novel establishes that Dracula's domain is separate and to the east, and that he travels from east to west across water to infiltrate a foreign domain. When the vampire hunters are trying to locate the Count after he has returned home, Mina Harker deduces that water is the only route he could logically have taken between the two areas. The spatial relationship between the two countries, Transylvania and England, is the same as that between England and Ireland. Stoker has merely displaced the axis a little to the east.
spend it on English commissioners, English dockyards, English museums, English ambition, and English pleasures" rather than spending it on Ireland (238). As Grousset says, "What country would not be worn threadbare by such usage?...Which individual, submitting to such periodical blood-lettings, would not succumb to anaemia?" (18). Ireland's body [politic] is completely drained by England: "John Bull [is]...bleeding them to death without mercy" (Grousset, 299). He points to "12,000 landowners, of foreign origin, possessing almost the whole of the island" (303), just as Dracula is the "foreign nobleman" who buys land in England. Van Helsing says that "[t]he Count may have many houses which he has bought, "although he does not actually live in any of them" (281); he is thus the absentee landlord, and as Thomas Emmet says, "those who own the land of the country, and the root and source of all the miseries and oppressions of the Irish nation has been the confiscation of the soil of Ireland" (148).

Much real blood was also shed by Irishmen for the sake of their beloved country. In the novel, Morris dies in the effort to kill Dracula, becoming a martyr to the cause as a result of his love for Lucy. This parallels the Irish rebels' devotion to their motherland: Kiberd says that Irish literature has a tradition of viewing land as "a woman, to be worshipped, wooed, and won" (283).

The book Speeches From the Dock, published in 1892, consists of farewell speeches made by Irish rebels before their executions at English hands. The speeches themselves date from the previous century, but the introduction comes from the same decade as Stoker's novel, and it too uses the rhetoric of blood. The compiler, D. B. Sullivan, says that a death sentence would "consign [rebels] to a bloody and ignominious death, to leave their bodies mutilated corpses from which the rights of Christian burial were to be withheld" (9), their fate thus resembling that of a vampire's victims. Sullivan says of Wolfe Tone, one of the martyrs, that "his enemies were impatient for his blood" (21). Here "blood" refers simultaneously to Emmet's life ("The blood is the life" [Stoker, 136]) and to the Irish Nationalist spirit. The English take away both and are thus vampires, blood-suckers, in the eyes of those they colonize; the English executioner is referred to as "General Butcher of Ireland" (81).
Thus, Stoker and the revolutionaries are writing the same text. And in killing the vampire at the end of the novel, Stoker even goes further with his discourse than the Fenians had been able to. His novel not only echoes the tensions in his society, but it also provides a safe and effective way to eradicate the threat, to re-inscribe the boundaries of a society which has been infiltrated by an outsider. Moreover, the vampire novel offers a socially acceptable way to air such revolutionary sentiments in a climate that would not have been particularly receptive to outright cries for the destruction of the Crown. Julian Moynahan suggests that the Gothic novel often works in such insidious or subversive fashion: "A peculiar distinction of the Gothic literary mode...is its ability to convey in language that is often oblique, symbolic, or allegorically encoded, truths, feelings and desires which the official culture and 'regular' literature take too little notice of or else deliberately suppress" (44). Stoker's novel thus performs some cultural work, a more important function than many of the novel's previous critics have allowed it. It is particularly ironic that cultural critics, ostensibly engaged in unmasking hidden forces of oppression in fictional texts, should overlook the potentially subversive nature of Dracula.

Even though Stoker's real-life politics were more conservative, the outcome he depicts in the novel would have satisfied the most radical Fenians, since their goal was complete obliteration of the colonizer. Emmet says the Fenians "would accept no compromise in their determination to bring about a complete separation of Ireland from England" (112). Fenian songs from the period characterize this necessary action as a "strike": "Awake, ye sons of Erin, see/The day and hour draws nigh,/When you must strike for liberty,/And swear to win or die" (Stephens 17). The rebels are exhorted "To strike--to strike the wished-for blow" (26), to put the stake through the heart of the English vampire. Like Dracula, the English are utterly evil, "at hell's command" (Stephens 55). Solidarity is required to fight this common foe, as was the case for Van Helsing and the others2. "Fenian Song" warns the rebels, "Let no sectarian strifes arise,/To mar your union now" (18).

2The nationality of the rebels in Stoker's novel is important in establishing where the center lies in the colonizer/colonized relationship. Quincey Morris hails from America, and thus represents the American support on
Significantly, Stoker's rebels kill Dracula while he lies in his box of earth; they assert their power in the very arena he tried to control in order to exorcise the hold he had over the land. Their plan is to "place a branch of the wild rose on" Dracula's box in order to keep him from getting out during the murder attempt (315). In the Fenian songs, the rose is a symbol for England, contrasted to the Irish shamrock. This re-affirms the idea that in killing Dracula, the men are killing England; they are confining him to his own land, the land of the rose. The moment of the killing is cathartic: after Morris plunges his knife through Dracula's heart, "the whole body crumbled into dust and passed from [their] sight" (363). Not only do they liberate Mina and the others that he "colonized," they obliterate him. This is more than the Irish rebels could hope to accomplish--they could never wipe England completely off the map--but at least Stoker has done so figuratively in his novel. In constructing his vampire as a foreign colonizer and creating a rebellion to vanquish him, Stoker provides a locus for his society's anxiety over English imperialism as well as a way of figuratively exorcising it.

which the Fenians depended. Van Helsing comes from the Netherlands; in the 1890s, his countrymen were contending fiercely with the British over land control in Africa. Both rebels thus represent countries who have a reason for defeating England, and it does not make sense to consider the rebels in any way associated with England itself.
Works Cited


*Sophens Fenian Songster*. NY: Murphy, 1866.


