

THE CONTRIBUTION OF “DRACULA UNTOLD” TO THE EVOLUTION OF BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PROTAGONISTS

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Abstract

Byron’s “Fragment of a Novel” was one of the English pioneer novels featuring the vampire theme. It remained unfinished, but served as a starting point for John Polidori, his physician and friend, in the creation of “The Vampyre”. This novel generated the thematic elements linked with one of the most famous revenants in literature. Since then, his descendants have been the main characters of many novels and media interpretations, imbuing popular culture in various guises and appearances. Bram Stoker’s “Dracula” was based on Polidori’s vampire novel, and it is considered to represent “the greatest and most influential vampire novel ever written”(Frost, 1989, p.52) This essay aims at critically analysing the evolution of the protagonist and discovering how the one portrayed in the film has diverged from Bram Stoker’s legendary Dracula. The conclusion will be based on the type of deviation and transformation with regards to their manifestations in both the novel and the film.

Key words: *Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, adaptation, protagonist, deviance*

Introduction

Bram Stoker’s “Dracula” has lived to see more than two hundred film adaptations, thus creating a new genre. Its cinematic life started with Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s “Nosferatu” in 1922, continued among many others with the successful “Bram Stoker’s Dracula” by Francis Ford Coppola in 1992, and led to the latest adaptation “Dracula Untold” by director Gary Shore. The ‘original’ narrative, naturally, undergoes various modifications producing new readings. The adaptations of a novel inevitably lead to either increasing or decreasing certain features and values from the ‘original’. In this essay I will discuss the aspect of the development of the central figure in “Dracula Untold”, the film adaptation of Stoker’s novel “Dracula”, compared to its prototypical character.

It is essential to assert that the 'original' novel and the film being discussed here have a dissimilar, and hence, incomparable plot, as well as the remaining characters. This is evidently stressed in the title of the film as it undertakes to tell the story of Dracula as it has never been told before or from a completely different angle. Unlike Stoker, who transferred most of the action from Transylvania to modern London, the film goes back to Count Dracula's historical story in the 15th century by setting it in the kingdom of Wallachia. Stoker's Dracula is a nobleman, a Count, which is not paralleled to the film's protagonist, who is a prince of a kingdom in the Gothic surroundings of southeast Europe. The film's protagonist is the Wallachian prince Vlad the Impaler, who had been taken by the Turks as a janissary, where he grew up and was trained to become a ferocious warrior, hence his name "the Impaler". After having faithfully served the Turks, he comes back to rule his land and people.

The Narrators

The novel's composition is rather complex as it is a compilation of letters, diary entries, newspaper articles and records of medical cases. Most of the information on Dracula is presented through multiple points of view involving Jonathan Harker, Mina Harker, Dr. Seward and Lucy Westenra. Apart from these, the other characters' voices, including Dracula's, are merely recorded in the novel; their point of view is absent. This is vital for the objective meaning of the text since most of the information about Dracula is inferred by the reader or is exposed to subjectivities. Speaking of his origin, Dracula tells Harker: "...one of my own race who as Voivode crossed the Danube and beat the Turk on his own ground! This was Dracula indeed!" (Stoker, p.29). This leads Van Helsing to assume that the "Undead" they are hunting "must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula, who won his name against the Turk" (Stoker, p.344). Not only is the fact about Dracula's origins wrapped in mystery and lacks preciseness, but also other facts about him presented in the novel are circumstantial deductions of the group which is trying to trace and kill Dracula. This essay, however, will not focus on the objectiveness of the narrators of the story: it will take their opinions and impressions as facts in the narrative and consider them in order to track similarities and differences with the protagonist in the film adaptation "Dracula Untold".

The film's protagonist is presented at the beginning of the film in a narration by a child's voice, his son. This also seems to pose questions on the realistic presentation of the events. It is inevitable to contemplate why the director has chosen to tell the story from a child's point of view instead of a grown-up character. At the end of the film, the other surviving character was the priest, but his portrayal of the story would mean affirmation that vampires, considered by the church as superstition, actually exist. The child narrator, just like the multiple points of view in the novel, points to the possibility of subjective rendering the events. Children often imbue their reality with fantasy elements or to a certain extent live in a fantasy world or their own.

The Protagonists

Dracula from Stoker's novel has been physically described in detail, starting from Harker's impressions from his first encounter with Count Dracula in his castle:

“His face was a strong, a very strong, aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils, with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion. The mouth, so far as I could see it under the heavy moustache, was fixed and rather cruel-looking, with peculiarly sharp white teeth. ... , his ears were pale, and at the tops extremely pointed. The chin was broad and strong, and the cheeks firm though thin. The general effect was one of extraordinary pallor.”

(pp. 26-7)

He has been depicted similarly by Mina later on, when she also stresses the red colour of his lips, his pale complexion, the crooked nose, the sharp white teeth and the red scar on his forehead (p.411). The repetitive use of red and white colour in the description of his face seems to point to a certain characteristic which is uncommon to the other characters. It leads to Dracula's differentiation as “the Other”. As Halberstam (1993) puts it: “Faces and bodies mark the Other as evil so that he could be recognized and ostracized” (p.338). In the quest for Dracula, Van Helsing characterizes Dracula as “a child-brain”, “that is the true criminal who seems predestinate to crime, and who will of none other. This criminal has not full man brain.” (Stoker, p. 489). Their discussion points to the idea of Dracula's degeneracy and genetic inclination towards criminal behavior. The evil in him is presented as inborn and innate.

Dracula from the film bears some first-sight physical resemblances with Stoker's Dracula, in the sense of being tall with dark scruffy hair, as well as his distinctive eyes and the high rounded forehead. His face to some extent complies with the notion of paleness, though more due to the contrast with the dark hair rather than being extremely pale. What the character lacks is the scar on his forehead, but the physical scarring has been transferred to his back as either the result of the battles he has been as a janissary of the Turks, or as part of the training to become one. However, these bodily marks disappear as soon as Vlad drinks the vampire's blood and turns into a vampire himself. The reversal of symbolism is evident in the film compared to the novel. In the novel, Dracula is physically marked with a scar, depicting him as “the Other”, whereas in the film, Dracula's scars vanish as soon as he steps into the sphere of “the Other”.

Another mark which is presented in the novel as an indispensable indication of the “Undead” is the absence of a shadow. Stoker's Dracula does not cast a shadow, and his reflection cannot be seen in the mirror, he is weakened in the

presence of garlic and a crucifix, and destroyed by a stake. In the novel, Count Dracula states that mirrors are objects of human vanity. (Stoker, p. 38) As J. Gordon Melton proposes that the mirror has been seen in folkloric tales as showing the “person’s spiritual double, the soul” and that confirmed the continuity of life. (2011, p. 466) Hence, the absence of a reflection affirms the absence of life, that is, confirms that the creature lacks soul or belongs to “the Other”, the Undead. In addition, the shadow, which is artistically seen as a dark shape, represents the double of the body. The object lacking a shadow is deprived of its soul. The film, however, managed to avoid this symbol. Its absence could have various interpretations: a possible ontological explanation could be that the existence of Dracula’s soul is not questioned. Since there is no mirror to check the existence of the soul, there is no necessity to prove that it exists. It is obvious that it exists.

The crucifix is another symbol of the vampire’s destruction which does not affect the protagonist in the film. It has been used in the final scene by the priest in order to defend Prince Vlad’s son from the blood-thirsty vampires. The effects of it are shown on the vampires, but not on Dracula himself. This could be explained by the fact that Prince Vlad was not turned into an eternal Dracula yet; he is granted three days, in which if being strong enough to resist blood-sucking, he would turn into human again. This intermittent period of being neither human, nor eternal vampire, however, is applicable to the other vampires, but still they are affected by the cross. A more acceptable explanation lies in the character of Prince Vlad: he is presented as a person with extreme moral strength based on positive human values such as love and loyalty to his family and land. These heroic values are rooted in his character; they are the reason for him trading his humanity for the strength of a hundred vampires by drinking the blood of the vampire in the cave.

Both media, the novel and the film, bestow the protagonist the ability to transform. Stoker’s Dracula is able to change his form into a giant dog or a wolf, a bat or mist. In Mina Harker’s journal Dr. Van Helsing explains:

“He can transform himself to wolf, as we gather from the ship arrival in Whitby, when he tear open the dog, he can be as bat, as Madam Mina saw him on the window at Whitby, and as friend John saw him fly from this so near house, and as my friend Quincey saw him at the window of Miss Lucy.”
(p. 342)

Auerbach attributes these “animality” features as well as the fact that he had hair on his palms to vampires’ origins as hybrid monsters of folklore (1995, p.86). In the film, however, the ideas of transforming into a wolf, mist or possessing hairy palms have been eluded. His protean nature is vividly displayed by imploring dramatic special effects of Dracula summoning millions of bats, and himself immersing into the gale-force bat flock which helps him destroy the Turk’s numerous army. In the film, special focus has been put on Dracula’s astounding physical strength after having consumed the blood. Though, what is obvious is the fact that he never uses his powers as a general destroyer of life or an invader. The

sole purpose of him transgressing into the area of the “Other”, the Undead or vampire, and employing the strength and abilities that come along with this change, is to protect his people, his kind against the aggression of the Turks.

This essay claims that the major deviance from the character of Dracula in Stoker’s novel to the protagonist of the 2014 film “Dracula Untold” is his ideology. Stoker’s Dracula is an imperialist, who endeavours to colonize another civilized world “the not-Undead” by making them his own kind. Stephen D. Arata asserts that he represents not only a physical threat, but also a cultural and a racial one (1990, p.630). Similarly, Judith Halberstam maintains: “Like Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula’s designs upon civilization are read by his enemies as the desire to father a new race.”(1993, p. 347) She contends that in Stoker’s “Dracula” vampires are a “race and family” who invade in order to diminish and destroy the English as a nation by transferring “degeneracy and blood lust” (p.340)

The film’s protagonist, on the other hand, displays an opposite ideology. He is the defender of his people. His main goal is to preserve his race and his land. This is evident in two instances: first, against the invading Turks, when he exchanges his weak human life for the strength of the vampire body in order to ward off the attack; and at another point when the vampires that he has created in order to destroy the invader, become themselves the threat against his race of humans. In this situation, Dracula remains the defender of the human race, despite being in a state of temporary vampirism. His inner self, nature and beliefs have persevered. Against the second evil, he performs the most astonishing physical deed: by opening the overcast sky off the clouds, defying nature itself, does he succeed in destroying the blood-thirsty creatures, which he has created. Thus, the character has been attributed powers which transcend the supernatural in the sense that these powers of creation, life and death, can only be ascribed to God.

By the end of Stoker’s novel, Dracula is defeated. He is staked and thus physically destroyed. However, the act of blood transfusion, which appeared previously in the novel, when Lucy was too weak and all men gave blood to help her recuperate, bears a symbolic significance of mixing blood. The circle begins with Dracula having drunk from Lucy’s blood, and Mina from Dracula’s. Dracula’s purpose to mix the blood of humans with the blood of the “Undead” has been accomplished, and the boy according to Halberstam “reincarnates the dead American, Quincey Morris, and the dead vampire, Dracula”. (1993, p.350) Upon the choice of the boy’s name Stoker notes: “His mother holds, I know, the secret belief that some of our brave friend’s spirit has passed into him. His bundle of names links all our little band of men together. But we call him Quincey.” The fact that his name has been coined from the names of all the men which helped sustain his mother’s virtuousness creates irony by undermining the fact about Dracula’s blood that flows in the child’s veins. Another aspect of the vampire’s blood-drinking besides nourishment, as stated by Stevenson is procreation. He maintains that vampires can “satisfy these needs simultaneously”. (1988, p. 142) In Dr. Seward’s journal, Mina explains her encounter with Dracula. After having sucked

blood from her neck, he opened his shirt and cut a vein on his chest with his sharp nails and made her drink his blood. She further gives Dracula's account of the effects of these actions: "And you, their best beloved one, are now to me, flesh of my flesh; blood of my blood; kin of my kin; my bountiful wine-press for a while; and shall be later on my companion and helper". (Stoker, p. 413) To Count Dracula this equals a wedding ceremony denoted with the phrase "flash of my flesh", which echoes the words from the Genesis when the woman was created out of man. And beyond that, they become "kin" indicated by Count Dracula. Another distinct feature of Count Dracula in the novel is the fact that he does not perform it only in order to regain strength, he is not only bloodthirsty- he is thirsty for blood. The single moment when he manages to refrain is with Harker at the beginning of the novel, which Atilla Viragh explains with "Dracula's yearning and ambition" to go to London and Harker being the person to assist the fulfillment of this longing. (2013, p. 233) Opposite of the bloodthirsty vampire from Stoker's novel, stands the figure of the valorous prince from the film, who does not yield to the temptation to drink blood neither from the Gypsy offering him a cup of blood, nor from his wife in their intimate scene. He succumbs to the act in the end, when his wife is facing death, and not willingly since he replies to her plead to take her blood with: "I cannot take your life". Facing the consequences of becoming an eternal vampire, the prince chooses to save his son's life, and hence to provide for the continuation of his royal lineage and his kingdom's survival.

Conclusion

To summarise, the protagonist in the film has greatly deviated from Bram Stoker's Dracula in the novel. Despite their close physical resemblance, since both are depicted as having an appearance inherent to vampires, Dracula underwent a major transformation. Dracula in the novel signifies bloodthirst, whereas the other is resistant to blood throughout the film. Arguably the most noticeable divergence can be seen in terms of their ideology. Bram Stoker's Dracula is portrayed as an evil, bloodthirsty, degenerate, a threatening force, which seeks to imperialise the humankind. In contrast, Dracula in the film proved to be a dedicated protector, defender and custodian of the human race, which is lucidly illustrated towards the end of the film. Not until his wife is dying and the life of his child is threatened, did he succumb to the blood-thirst. Once again, this highlights his heroic nature and willingness to sacrifice, in order to rescue the lives of others. In conclusion, the film "Dracula Untold" contributed to the evolution of Bram Stoker's Dracula in the sense that it offered a different angle/perspective of engaging with the ideological role that Dracula plays. It re-imagined his ideology, personality and spirit.

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