

Monstrous Literature: The Case of Dacre Stoker's *Dracula the Undead*

Hannah Priest

Abstract

Dracula the Undead describes itself as the 'official' sequel to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This authorisation comes from the fact that the book was written by Stoker's great-grandnephew, Dacre Stoker (with screenwriter Ian Holt), apparently with the blessing of the 'Stoker family'. The book has received a lot of negative criticism, with readers describing it as an 'outrage' and an 'abomination'. Indeed, by most accepted literary standards, the book is not good. Simplistic sentence structure and paragraphing; inconsistent characterisation and character development; and gratuitous sex and violence fill the pages. Moreover, the book's (both implicit and overt) revision of Bram Stoker's original novel, and the adherence to plot elements found in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film, have left some *Dracula* 'purists' less than satisfied. This paper will discuss *Dracula the Undead* as a piece of 'monstrous' fiction. However, the monstrosity of this book does not lie simply in its (subjective) quality. I will examine both the text itself and its lengthy peritexts to explore the ways in which the novel functions as a 'monster' - resisting categorisation, blurring boundaries, revealing something about the readers who approach it. What is at stake (no pun intended) when we identify ourselves as 'Dracula purists'? Can *Dracula* (or indeed any novel) be said to exist in a 'pure' form? This paper will argue that *Dracula the Undead* serves to unsettle the relationships between text, author and reader; furthermore, I will examine the reasons why this book might be considered an 'abomination', and the implications of such a reaction. I argue that this book, like all good monsters, encourages scrutiny of the culture which created it, and of the community which rejected it.

Key Words: *Dracula*, film, Ian Holt, literature, Bram Stoker, Dacre Stoker, vampire.

Published in 2009, *Dracula the Undead* describes itself as the 'official' sequel to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This authorisation comes from the fact that the book was written by Stoker's great-grandnephew, Dacre Stoker (with screenwriter and "well-known *Dracula* historian" Ian Holt),

apparently with the blessing of the “Stoker family”.¹ While some reviews have heaped effusive praise on the novel, the book has also received a lot of negative feedback. Readers have described it as an “abomination” and a “monstrosity”.² This paper will explore the ways in which this novel might be said to function like a monster, and the implications this has for our relationship to literature. As I will show, our response to this work may, in fact, tell us more about ourselves – and our investment in canonical literature – than about Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt’s writing.

To begin, I will give a brief overview of the plot of *Dracula the Undead*. Set 25 years after the events of Bram Stoker’s novel, *Dracula the Undead* follows the fate of the central characters of *Dracula* as they are faced with a new (though, as it turns out, actually old) enemy. It introduces the character of Quincey Harker, Jonathan and Mina’s son, who is determined to become an actor and work with the great Romanian star, Basarab. As Quincey forms a relationship with the mysterious Basarab (and even the less astute reader is able to guess Basarab’s true identity early on), Dr. Seward and Jonathan Harker are gruesomely murdered by the legendary Countess Elizabeth Bathory. Bathory, it seems, was the true villain of *Dracula*; the eponymous villain of Bram Stoker’s work is presented as a soldier of God, mistaken for the killer by the deluded ‘band of heroes’. Drawing heavily on Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 film, *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, this sequel makes much of the love affair between Mina and Dracula, presenting Jonathan and Mina’s marriage as both loveless and sexless. Unable to deal with the fact that his wife lost her virginity to the vampiric count, Jonathan drinks heavily and visits prostitutes. Once the truth about Dracula’s goodness and Bathory’s evil is revealed, Mina is reunited with Dracula, and Quincey discovers that he is, in fact, the vampire’s son. The novel ends with Mina and Dracula’s apparent deaths in Whitby, but, in a sequel-suggesting twist, two mysterious crates are loaded onto the *Titanic* in the final pages.

Obviously, there are no objective or empirical criteria against which we can measure a book’s quality. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify examples of ‘bad craftsmanship’, cliché and stylistic insecurity throughout the novel. Simplistic sentence structure and paragraphing; inconsistent characterisation and character development; both anachronism *and* heavy-handed historical detail; and gratuitous sex and violence (including lesbian sado-masochism) fill the pages.

However, the ‘monstrosity’ of this book does not lie simply in its (subjective) quality. The criticisms which could be levelled at the writing style and technique of the two authors could equally be applied to the work of many other novelists. So what is it about this book that moves readers to reject it as an ‘abomination’ and an ‘outrage’? Why do reader reviews suggest that we should “stake and burn” this book?³

One of the main problems readers appear to have with *Dracula the Undead* lies in its (both implicit and overt) revision of Bram Stoker's original novel. For example, though the events of Stoker's novel apparently take place in 1893, *Dracula the Undead* resituates them to 1888 in order to associate the vampiric murders with Jack the Ripper (who, it transpires, was Elizabeth Bathory all along). As I have noted, the authors also alter the central character - changing him from abject monster to misunderstood saviour - and follow the late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century trend for vampire romance in depicting Dracula and Mina as lovers. The book itself contains lengthy peritexts - an afterword by Dr. Elizabeth Miller and a co-written Authors' Note by Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt - in which these alterations are laboriously explained. Miller argues that the change in date is "necessary", and suggests that it is "without question" that Bram Stoker knew of the Jack the Ripper case.⁴ The implication here is that Stoker's novel may well have been informed by the Whitechapel murders, even if he did not realise it himself. Miller also argues that the name of Elizabeth Bathory has been "inextricably connected with Stoker and his novel", despite the paradoxical fact that there is "even less evidence of a connection with Stoker and his book".⁵ Throughout their exegeses, Miller, Stoker and Holt seem to be at great pains to absolve *Dracula the Undead* of any "cannibalization and bastardization" by recourse to their claim that 'it's what Bram would have wanted'.⁶ Indeed, the Harper Collins paperback edition reprints Bram Stoker's handwritten notes upon which this sequel is ostensibly based.⁷

The claim that the authors are somehow writing the sequel that Bram Stoker himself would have penned has been roundly mocked and derided by readers. Customer comments on Amazon regularly refer to Bram Stoker "spinning in his grave".⁸ One reader refers to it as a "literary rape"; another as a "misinterpretation" of Stoker's original novel.⁹ These criticisms, however, point more to readers' relationships to *Dracula* than to any shortcomings in the sequel. And it is here, I would argue, that the monstrosity of Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt's book begins to take shape.

Though there is no explicit mention of a sexual relationship between Mina and Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel, the passage in which Mina is found drinking Dracula's blood has been noted by a number of scholars and writers as being fraught with ambiguity. Seward, Van Helsing, Arthur Holmwood and Quincey Morris burst into the Harkers' bedroom to find Jonathon unconscious and Mina feeding from Dracula:

With his [Dracula's] left hand he held both Mrs Harker's hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast, which was

shown by his torn-open dress.¹⁰

This scene can be read in a number of ways: it is at once a grotesque inversion of breast-feeding, the climactic ‘invasion’ of Western civilised modernity by Eastern medieval ‘other’, the terrifying revelation of the permeability of body and self. Yet the “white nightdress”, stained with blood, also has connotations of a wedding night defloration of a virgin. As her blood-smeared dress is revealed to the assembled company, Mina realises she is now “unclean”, and that she is inextricably tied to the man who has rendered her thus.¹¹

Dacre Stoker and Holt use this episode as the basis for their Mina/Dracula love story, as Francis Ford Coppola had previously done in his 1992 film. Both texts remove any ambiguity from the passage and present it as a straightforward sexual consummation. Yet if the original passage is so ambiguous, how can we safely label *Dracula the Undead* a ‘misinterpretation’? How can there be a ‘true’ interpretation against which this can be measured?

It is interesting that many reviewers define themselves as “Dracula purists”.¹² This implies that there is a ‘pure’ reading of *Dracula* from which the authors of *Dracula the Undead* have strayed. But can a novel truly exist in a ‘pure’ form? Terry Eagleton argues that “there is no reading of a work which is not also a ‘re-writing’”.¹³ Literature, he argues, is a “notably unstable affair”.¹⁴ Thus, *all* readers (unconsciously) do what Dacre Stoker and Holt have done - they read, rewrite and reinterpret literature according to their own social and cultural experiences. That this is the case with the Mina/Dracula storyline can be seen by the wealth of vampire literature and film that has followed Stoker’s 1897 novel. With the exception of F.W. Murnau’s 1922 *Nosferatu* (and a few, lesser-known, others), cinema has consistently recast Dracula as a romantic or sexually seductive lead. From Hammer’s semi-orgasmic victims succumbing to Christopher Lee’s dapper vamp, to the comedy horror *Love at First Bite* (1979), ‘readers’ of Dracula have seen something sexual in the bite of the vampire. It need hardly be added that this interpretation of Stoker’s monster has also given us Angel, Lestat and Edward Cullen. It seems that *everyone* thinks that vampires are sexy - even Bram Stoker left an unsettling hint that Dracula’s relationship with Mina was sexual - so why is it so wrong when Dacre Stoker and Holt follow suit?

The answer to this question is twofold. Firstly, while literary theorists have long denied the existence of ‘pure’ texts or singular readings, our experience of reading fiction does not always agree. We read novels as complete products, imagine that we know what the author meant to say, argue against alternate readings, feel a shiver of distaste when we see an ‘inaccurate’ or ‘inauthentic’ adaptation. We lose ourselves in this fiction of

completeness and temporarily deny the ‘instability’ of literature. Dacre Stoker and Holt’s lengthy Authors’ Note rips away this fiction (albeit probably not deliberately) and reveals - like a magician explaining a trick - that all readings are, in fact, rewritings.

As is quite often the case at this conference, I must refer back to the etymological root of *monster* - the Latin *monere* or *monstrare* (to warn or to show). As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place”.¹⁵ I suggest the monstrosity of *Dracula the Undead* comes from the fact that it shows us something that we would rather not see - it says something we would rather leave unspoken. It shatters the illusion of literature, and leaves us questioning the boundaries we have created.

This is also apparent in the negative reaction given to the authors themselves. Dacre Stoker is a Canadian pentathlete with no previous writing experience; Ian Holt is a former actor and screenwriter. Holt’s only other writing credit is for the 2005 film, *Dr. Chopper*, the synopsis of which reads: “Five young friends head out to the country for a weekend at the family cabin and run afoul of a group of motorcycle riding madwomen led by the sadistic, knife-wielding plastic surgeon Dr. Fielding.”¹⁶ More than most debut novelists, Stoker and Holt have had their credentials as ‘writers’ questioned; they have also been accused of writing ‘fan fiction’. And, as we all know, there is a place for fan fiction - the internet. We do not expect to see it on the shelves of our bookstores. If a pentathlete and straight-to-DVD hack ‘n’ slash screenwriter can pen a piece of ‘fan fiction’ and have it nominated for the Best First Novel category of the Thriller Awards, what does that do to our concept of ‘literature’? To return to Cohen’s definition of monsters:

[T]hey are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.¹⁷

I would suggest that *Dracula the Undead* is a dangerous book. It carries with it the unsettling suggestion that we might have been wrong - maybe *anyone* can write a novel. Maybe there is no distinction between novelists and ‘ordinary’ people. Maybe there is no distinction between fan fiction and literature.

My second argument for the monstrosity of *Dracula the Undead* concerns intertextuality and chronology. Monsters frequently trouble temporal categories. The very idea of being ‘undead’ defies the ‘human’ life cycle; moreover, monsters burst anachronistically into ‘our’ time (from prehistory, from previous centuries, from the future). *Dracula the Undead* also troubles our notion of the progression of time. As a ‘sequel’ to *Dracula*,

one expects the novel to ‘follow’ on from the events of its predecessor. While this is undoubtedly the case, the novel also makes explicit and implicit reference to texts written after Bram Stoker’s novel. Thus, we have Sergeant Lee, Lieutenant Jourdan, Dr. Langella and Inspector Huntley - all named for actors who portrayed Dracula in the late twentieth-century.

More striking than this, however, is the obvious influence of film and television. Consider this example - where Mina kills one of Bathory’s henchwomen:

In the second that it took for the Woman in White to reach her, Mina lost control of her body. [...] Mina watched her own hand grab Holmwood’s broken walking stick and hold it in front of her like a spearman meeting a cavalry charge. The vampire was moving too fast to check her momentum: She impaled herself through the heart on the sharp, broken end of the walking stick.¹⁸

The sudden rush of defence, the improvised weapon, the self-impaled vampire: this scene seems to owe more to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* than Bram Stoker’s novel. Mina even offers a sardonic quip as the Woman in White dies: “Didn’t your mistress warn you? I’m Dracula’s adulterous whore!”¹⁹ Elsewhere, fight scenes take on a ‘bullet time’ quality inspired by *The Matrix*, and Inspector Cotford examines a crime scene with the meticulous detail of an episode of *CSI*. And it is impossible to read the final confrontation between Quincey and Dracula, as the young hero attempts to kill the dark lord, only to discover in the final seconds that he is, in fact, his father, without thinking of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader.

These borrowings from ‘later’ texts jar with the reader. Even though we know that *Dracula the Undead* was written in 2009, a novel set in 1912 should not make intertextual reference to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It unsettles the relationship between *Dracula the Undead* and Bram Stoker’s novel, by calling attention to cultural productions of the intervening years. However, though we may dismiss this intertextuality as clunky anachronism, I would also argue that it forces us to question what would comprise ‘correct’ chronology. In an essay on *Beowulf*, Ruth Waterhouse argues:

Although intertextuality assumes relationships between one text and others, it does not presuppose that those relationships are only linear and chronological. If for an individual a more recent text is a starting point for the exploration of older texts, that intertextuality is as relevant as any other.²⁰

To only allow *Dracula the Undead* relationships with *Dracula*, or older texts, would be to impose a “linear and chronological” intertextuality that is at odds

with the ways in which readers are likely to encounter the text. For instance, it is doubtful that a reader of *Dracula the Undead* will be familiar with Stoker's novel, but not with *The Matrix*, *Buffy* or *Star Wars*. As Dacre Stoker and Holt argue themselves: "We know there is a *large* segment of Dracula fans that have only seen the movies and have never read the book[.]"²¹ Thus, the non-linear intertextuality of *Dracula the Undead* mirrors and reveals the experience of readers, uncomfortably suggesting that its relationship with late twentieth-century culture is "as relevant" as its relationship to Bram Stoker's nineteenth-century novel.

In conclusion, when I argue that *Dracula the Undead* is a piece of monstrous literature, this is not a comment on its merits, quality or 'accuracy'. Rather, the book functions as a monster, revealing (often in a somewhat heavy-handed way) our own preconceptions, prejudices and fears. It unsettles the relationships between author, text and reader, and encourages scrutiny of the culture which created it, and of the community which rejected it. Dissatisfied readers have suggested that this monster be at best ignored, at worst destroyed.²² But, as we all know, the monster will always return. So I will end with a final quote from Cohen which might serve as a warning: "Each time the grave opens and the unquiet slumberer strides forth [...], the message proclaimed is transformed by the air that gives its speaker new life."²³ The film of *Dracula the Undead* is due for release in 2012 - and who knows what sort of abomination this might be?

Notes

- ¹ D Stoker and I Holt, *Dracula the Undead*, Harper Collins, London, 2009, back cover; p. 401.
- ² See various product reviews for *Dracula the Undead* on Amazon.com, viewed on 12 August 2010, <<http://www.amazon.com/Dracula-Undead-Dacre-Stoker/product-reviews/>>.
- ³ See various product reviews for *Dracula the Undead* on Amazon.co.uk, viewed on 12 August 2010, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/000731034X/>>.
- ⁴ E Miller, 'Afterword', in Stoker and Holt, pp. 391-98, p. 394.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 396.
- ⁶ Stoker and Holt, p. 407.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 418-19.
- ⁸ See various products reviews on Amazon.co.uk and Amazon.com.
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ B Stoker, *Dracula*, BCA, Chatham, 1993 (1897), p. 307.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 309.
- ¹² See various products reviews on Amazon.co.uk and Amazon.com.
- ¹³ T Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Anniversary Ed., Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA and Oxford, 2008 (1983), p. 11.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁵ J J Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses), in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by J J Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 3-25, 20.
- ¹⁶ Synopsis of *Dr. Chopper* (2005), on *The Internet Movie Database*, viewed on 12 August 2010, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0469899/>>.
- ¹⁷ Cohen, p. 6.
- ¹⁸ Stoker and Holt, p. 272.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 272.
- ²⁰ R Waterhouse, 'Beowulf as Palimpsest', in *Monster Theory*, pp. 26-39, p. 27.
- ²¹ Stoker and Holt, p. 408.
- ²² See various product reviews on Amazon.co.uk and Amazon.com.
- ²³ Cohen, p. 5.

Bibliography

Cohen, J.J., 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses), in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by J.J. Cohen. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 3-25.

Eagleton, T., *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Anniversary Ed.). Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA and Oxford, 2008 (1983).

Stoker, B., *Dracula*. BCA, Chatham, 1993 (1897).

Stoker, D., and I Holt, *Dracula the Undead*. Harper Collins, London, 2009.

Waterhouse, R., 'Beowulf as Palimpsest', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by J.J. Cohen. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 26-39.

Hannah Priest completed a PhD in Medieval Literature at the University of Manchester in 2010. She is currently organizing an international conference on female werewolves, and has published articles on werewolves, fairies, medieval romance and contemporary fantasy fiction.