



## Bram Stoker, Dracula and Whitby

Fleur Speakman

**B**ram Stoker's novel 'Dracula', published in 1897, influenced numerous novels, films, plays, and at least one ballet. Gothic horror novels with a vampire theme had already proved popular in England in the 18th century, though the blood-sucking vampire had apparently much earlier antecedents in folklore, particularly in Ancient Egypt, Asia, and many other regions throughout the world.

Born in Ireland in 1847, Stoker, who suffered poor health in childhood, was entertained by his mother with supernatural stories from her native Sligo, in which the vampire is likely to have featured. After studying mathematics at Trinity College, Dublin, Stoker became a writer initially of non-fiction, then added theatre reviews and two novels with an Irish setting to his literary output. One of his reviews impressed the celebrated actor-manager Henry Irving, and their friendship resulted in Stoker becoming Irving's business manager for 27 years. In 1890, after an exhausting but unsuccessful tour of Scotland by the theatrical troupe, Irving suggested a month's holiday for Stoker on the coast, recommending Whitby. Stoker was enchanted with the stunning setting of the town - viewed from the West Cliff where he had lodgings in the Royal Crescent.

Inspired by Whitby, Stoker started work on a

new novel, initially set in Austria, with Count Wampyr as its central character. The Gothic literary tradition of eerie castles, huge forests, unknown customs and a foreign language helped to increase the tension of the supernatural terrors unleashed on the reader. But Stoker realised that Whitby itself could provide the perfect backdrop for much of the drama, with its amazing windswept headland, ancient ruined Benedictine Abbey on the site of the 7th century original, and spectacular 199 steps up to St Mary's Church on the East Cliff. Haunted by bats in the evenings and with some atmospheric worn gravestones, there was even a convenient local legend of a white lady flitting by one of the Abbey windows. A number of other tales were related to him by local folk and by seafarers who put in to port.

Researching in Whitby library, Stoker found details of the exploits of a 15th century prince called Vlad Tepes, who impaled his enemies on wooden stakes. Vlad was known as 'dracula', meaning 'devil' in the Wallachian language, but it was also an admiring surname to denote conspicuous courage, cruel actions and cunning. These qualities were later embodied in Stoker's shape-shifting Count Dracula.

Stoker's first version of his story was a play, a vehicle for Irving, called 'The Undead'. But Irving

remained unimpressed. Six years later, after much additional research, Stoker produced his novel 'Dracula', though he never actually visited Transylvania, where much of the action is set. The finished story is in the form of letters, diaries, newspaper cuttings and even a ship's log – all giving different viewpoints. A mysterious boat, the Demeter, arrives in Whitby in the fog, without passengers or crew but with a dead sailor lashed to the mast, while a strange black dog jumps ashore from the wreck and vanishes - actually a disguised Count Dracula. In reality, an actual Russian ship had run aground on Tate Sands below the East Cliff with a cargo of silver sand some years before; Stoker's ship too had some silver sand as cargo.

A key character in the novel, Doctor Van Helsing, scientist and psychic doctor, uses a blend of modern science, coupled with religious artefacts and bulbs of garlic, to defeat Dracula. Stoker is also careful to paint a repellent picture of the sleeping vampire: “it seemed as if the awful

creature were simply gorged with blood; he lay like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion”. Once caught, Dracula suffers death by the traditional stake through the heart and decapitation.

Particularly fascinating is the novel's use of contemporary technology to further the plot, such as a phonograph with wax cylinders and a portable typewriter able to produce carbon copies. It is noteworthy that Mina, quite a courageous period heroine, skilled in shorthand and typing and in making transcriptions from the phonograph, helps to clarify key happenings. But her role is clearly subservient to the male patriarchy - the men of action. The novel's sub-text is of particular interest. Dracula's hold over the two key female characters, aided by his “deep-burning eyes”, suggest his powerful mesmeric sexual attraction. His repeated blood-sucking forays, by biting his victims' necks, doom them to become vampires, preying forever on others and totally under his control.



## Find out more

Ruins of Whitby Abbey, Whitby YO22 4LT

Whitby Ghost Walks,  
<https://www.whitbywalks.com/>

Whitby Goth weekends, twice per year,  
<http://www.whitbygothweekend.co.uk/>

'Dracula' by Bram Stoker (1897, many subsequent editions)



*Whitby Abbey at dusk, East Cliff, Whitby*



*Abraham "Bram" Stoker*



*Bram Stoker's stay at 6 Royal Crescent, Whitby*



*Whitby Harbour from East Cliff*