

# Talking Disability, Derangement and Desire: Critiquing Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

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## Abstract

When Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* in 1897, he must have had his own reasons. But as the world progressed its own way, the poststructuralist reader has deconstructed the text to interpret a farrago of significations enthused by the difference of the signs inherent within.

What this paper proposes to bring into discussion is the strange fascination that the genre of the Gothic has forever had for certain transgressive features that refuse to toe the line of society-informed bounds of normativity.

The discussion will zero in on how the clous of depravity, derangement and disability—characterised as the three 'D's here, play a pivotal role in creating the rubric of the Gothic in *Dracula*. All these three Ds have had to do with the Other—the Abject, thereby initiating a discourse outside the accepted codes of Normalcy.

This paper takes up the age old favourite of all times—Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, to show how the motifs of transgression set the perfect ambience for the Gothic in there.

**Keywords:** Difference, Gothic, transgression, normativity, depravity, derangement, disability, the other, the Abject.

## Main article:

Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic*, in the chapter titled 'The Uncanny and the Marvellous', says that the fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation of ambivalence is there. In other words, the thrill of the gothic works perfectly well as long as there is a well-calculated gap between the understood and the implied. The aporia that gets created in the process of this hide-and-seek game that the author of the Gothic masters, is what creates the delicious feeling of horror or terror at what Freud would call the *unheimlich*. A German word, '*unheimlich*' is the contrastive opposite to '*heimlich*' which connotes familiar, native or belonging to home. So, '*unheimlich*' is something that is 'non-familiar', 'non-native' and 'not belonging to home'—so to

speak. Just like the intriguing fact that the chiaroscuro of light and darkness scares more than complete darkness, the gap between the explained and the unexplained is what makes a chill run down the spine of the reader.

Talking of the *unheimlich*, Sigmund Freud claimed that the ‘intellectual uncertainty’ of the ‘*Unheimlich*’, the ‘unfamiliar’, that “which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” is the secret to the creation of good gothic suspense. Jacques Lacan too, in his 1962–1963 seminar “L'angoisse” (“Anxiety”), talks of the *Unheimlich* “via regia” and zeroes in on this feeling of abstruse angst that titillates with its aporia as it transports the reader into ‘the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure’. (qtd Vidler 224)

Freud elaborates upon the exact analysis of this feeling of ‘horror’ in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919), by taking up E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* as a test case:

“The Uncanny” derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but --- on the contrary—from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it (Freud 219)

Something that is totally ‘alien or unknown’—as Freud puts it—would rouse awe and wonder, but not the sheer feeling of not dread. It is only the aporia of hovering between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between reality and unreality, that the reader loses his wits.

That is why a dead body gives us the creeps. It is not altogether unfamiliar, for the human form is probably one of the most deeply ingrained sights in our comprehension. Yet life after death – if it may be called life at all—baffles us, as it is unfamiliar to us. The feeling of the *unheimlich* –the uncanny takes over.

Many people experience the feeling (of the uncanny) in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. There is scarcely any other matter, however upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death. Two things account for our conservatism: the strength of our original emotional reaction to death and the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it. (Freud 221).

And if it is the ‘Un-dead’, the creeping feeling of dread envelops the readers’ collective unconscious with the uncertainty of Aporia at the Abject—the Ab-human.

Louis Vax too, in his *La séduction de l'étrange*, remarks that "an ideal art of the fantastic must keep to indecision." (qtd Todorov 44) This is what accounts for what can be called ‘the Negative Sublime’ in the genre of the Gothic. If we really look at the etymology of the word ‘sublime’, we understand that liminality along with the aporia that goes with it, has a lot to do with the understanding of the Gothic.

According to Tsvetan Todorov, the fantastic normally has a three-pronged modus operandi in order to reach the negative sublime: ‘... we shall distinguish three aspects of the literary work: the verbal, the syntactical, and the

semantic...These three aspects of the work are manifested in a complex interrelation; they are to be found in isolation only in our analysis.'(Todorov20)

On the syntactic level the fantastic endows the plot with a good deal of suspense. The aporia of not knowing what comes next, the insurmountable desire to understand the inexplicable is what reaches out to the negative sublime that is the Gothic. The counteractive fear of the unknown vying with the overwhelming inquisitiveness to explore the dreaded is what creates the awe of the Gothic.

On the semantic level, the fantastic creates a fictitious world which is unique to literature. The fantastic in the gothic swings deliciously between a utopia and a dystopia, thereby creating a pseudotopia which forges forth a one-of-a-kind genre in literature.

Again, on a pragmatic level the fantastic plays a seminal part in exciting certain emotions of terror in the reader that would ascertain a flush of adrenalin. And this effect is what makes the gothic so unique.

The Gothic has always taken up some ploys to creates its unique aura of terror. Some of this would be known as the Paraphernalia of the Gothic, while some would be the archetypal Tropes that weave the magic of the Gothic dread.

Moonlit nightscapes, big mansions, dungeons, hidden passages and places, eerie noises at unearthly hours, quite a quantity of blood, omens—all are part of the paraphernalia that work up the gothic text towards the rubric of The 'Marvellous' or 'le merveilleux'.

Similarly, Tropes like violent characters, tempestuous desire, Derangement or Paranoia, abnormality constitute what Tzvetan Todorov in 'The Fantastic' calls the 'Hesitation of ambivalence': 'The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.' (Todorov 25)

And Freud would call this the 'intellectual uncertainty' of The Uncanny (l'etrange) –of the '*Unheimlich*'.

Julia Kristeva talks of the concept of the 'Abject' in her Powers of Horror. The Abject, too, in its ab-human form, creates one of the most powerful tropes of the Gothic.

Now, the cynosure of all that is Abject, all that is Ab-human, all that is *Unheimlich*, with the aporia of 'intellectual uncertainty' at its highest, was written in 1897 by Bram Stoker—the iconic *Dracula*. Bram Stoker does have a number of other works to his credit like *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902), *The Jewel of Seven Star* (1903), *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909) and *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), though *Dracula* showed him popularity like no other work of his.

When In 1897, the novel *Dracula* was brought out by Archibald Constable and Company, (UK), it faced a barrage of variegated reviews. *The Manchester Guardian* said that 'In spite of its absurdities the reader can follow the story with interest to the end. It is, however, an artistic mistake to fill a whole volume with horrors...'

Arthur Conan Doyle, on the other hand, said, "I write to tell you how very much I have enjoyed reading

Dracula. I think it is the very best story of diablerie which I have read for many years.". The Daily Mail said : 'In seeking a parallel to this weird, powerful, and horrible story our mind reverts to such tales as The Mysteries of Udolpho, Frankenstein, The Fall of the House of Usher ... but *Dracula* is even more appalling in its gloomy fascination than any one of these'. And Sir Henry Irving just called *Dracula* 'Dreadful'.

In a poststructuralist world that swears by the Grand Theory Movement, the new-born Reader deconstructs the text of *Dracula* in the hope of forging newer interpretations amidst the unnerving Différance of meaning that stretches out like a black hole.

*Dracula* has been read as a Marxist text. The aristocratic 'Count' Dracula's persistent sucking on the lifeblood of the 'teeming masses' has become the signifier of the Bourgeoisie preying on the proletariat multitude.

Again, Maurice Richardson, Robert Mighall et al have interpreted *Dracula* from the angle of Psychoanalysis and Queer Studies and have read a barrage of Alternate sexuality, Electra Complex, Father-fixation, Pseudo-fixation, Counter-fixation, Homoeroticism in the text.

From the Lacanian point of view, again, the blood in *Dracula* becomes a matheme of desire( $\$ \langle a \rangle$ ) or the *objet petit a*.

Informed by the Fin-de-Siècle Gothic, the Sturm und Drang tradition, the wildly popular Penny Dreadfuls and the French Gothic tradition, *Dracula* is indeed a storehouse of a mélange of features that keeps it unbudgingly on the popularity list for ages. Stoker's *Dracula* is one novel that sure-footedly edges in the goose-bumpy horror of the un-dead through some tropes that I always love to call the 3-D effect: an effect wrought by Desire, Derangement, Disability.

Setting aside the obvious of the reference to 'Death', or the Un-dead, this article proposes to explore the other Ds here.

*Dracula* is one enormous saga of 'Desire'.

The overtures begin with Jonathan Harker's encounter with the vampire 'sisters' in *Dracula* which remains one of the most famous and notorious scenes in horror fiction:

"In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, they threw no shadow on the floor. They came close to me, and looked at me for some time, and then whispered together [...] 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. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain, but it is the truth. They whispered together, and then they all three laughed – such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips. It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses when played on by a cunning hand.' (Stoker 40)

The scene is replete with sexual longing, preternatural fear, a lascivious bloodlust and forbidden libidos that smack of Freudian ideas about repressed instincts. It is a scene that has inspired many a filmmaker to recreate it in all its bizarre glory. Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), Terence Fisher's *Horror of Dracula* (1958), Philip Saville's *Dracula* (1977), John Badham's *Dracula* (1979), Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)—all have crafted their own versions of the scene. But none of these versions show the uncanny women and their laughter accompanied with that 'intolerable tingling' of 'water-glasses' that Stoker is so careful to mention. He lingers over and returns to this description each time the 'sisters' and vampirised women are mentioned:

'It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water-glasses when played on by a cunning hand.' (Stoker 40)

The inexorable connection of insatiable desire with the Gothic has marked numerous other works too. One remembers the unforgettable lines from Byron's *Don Juan* XVI. 1017-1024:

But still the shade remain'd: the blue eyes glared,  
And rather variably for stony death;

Yet one thing rather good the grave had spared,  
The ghost had a remarkably sweet breath.  
A straggling curl show'd he had been fair-hair'd;  
A red lip, with two rows of pearls beneath  
Gleam'd forth, as through the casement's ivy shroud  
The moon peep'd, just escaped from a grey cloud. (Byron 747).

Again, in *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis, Ambrosio's lustful excesses with Matilda and overpowering desire for the innocent Antonia went a long way on creating the Gothic aura. Without these, the plot would lack its motif of gothic degeneration and inexorable ambience of fear and apprehension.

Same is the case with the erotic menace of Ann Radcliffe's villains. Phillippe, Marquis de Montalt plans to first seduce and then kill Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), thereby contributing to the gothic trope of the excess of emotions and passions.

Coming back to *Dracula*, one finds desire explored in a way that is as subtle as it is titillating. Among other things, blood becomes a symbol for desire in *Dracula*. Thus, when Dracula draws blood from Mina and Lucy and attempts to draw blood from Harker, it could well be construed as a post-structuralist signified connotation for desire. Again, the Three Sisters, similarly, wish to drink from Harker's blood and that reeks of their un-dead desire for the young and vulnerable male that has landed in their midst willy-nilly. On the other hand, Arthur, Seward, Van Helsing, and Morris must all give Lucy blood transfusions, as Dracula is consuming enormous quantities of Lucy's blood. There again, Dracula feeding on Lucy's blood has a strangely erotic insinuation. Blood in *Dracula*, stands as objective correlative of desire. Dracula's stealing of women's blood in

the night is a thinly-veiled indicator of his desire to "take" from them, to "pollute" them in a manner not unlike sexual assault.

Thus, apart from the signification of violence, the drawing of blood has a reference to sexual desire and sexual violence too. In fact, the flushing of cheeks, or "ruddiness," was considered a sign of sexual arousal in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries quite commonly. And Dracula draws upon that reference with glib alacrity.

Moving on to the next D in line, ie. 'Derangement'.

Derangement or madness is the monster that lurks inside our own minds, our subconscious, our *id*. Its very intangibility means that it cannot be fought. Its irrational nature makes it nearly impossible to understand or comprehend. Perhaps this is why insanity crops up as one of the most common themes in Gothic literature that invokes the *Unheimlich*.

Madness in early Gothic literature tends to be depicted as a correlative in connection with the moral failings of the protagonist or the antagonist.

In Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), the titular clergyman is described as being "worked up to madness" right before he murders a woman. His madness is usually mentioned in conjunction with his rage or lust, and it drives him on to perform acts of violence he presumably never would have considered before.

Again, Madness also comes up repeatedly in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), with Melmoth seeming to spread it wherever he goes.

Thus, Madness or Derangement becomes a conjunction to the already gothic overtures of violence in the matrix of the work.

Incidentally, one author who takes the use of derangement and paranoia to a point *non pareil* is Edgar Allan Poe. One of the best examples of this is Poe's 1843 short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart."

The story ironically begins with the first-person narrator affirming his own sanity repeatedly: "How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story." (Poe 1)

Yet, as the story progresses, the layers of derangement keep unfolding. And by exploring derangement in and from a first-person narratological perspective, Poe gives the reader a very up-close experience of the horrors of madness while at the same time, like in Stoker's *Dracula*, blurring the line between victim and villain, prey and predator.

Another author who used derangement for the gothic affect to the tee was H P Lovecraft. Almost all of H. P. Lovecraft's short stories find the protagonist slowly descending into the murky depths of insanity as he confronts horrors beyond his comprehension.

Lovecraft's Arkham Sanitarium, which appears in his 1937 short story "The Thing on the Doorstep" is one chilling invention that the readers of the Gothic are not going to forget in a hurry. The story shows the narrator,

Daniel Upton, musing on how lots of people will consider him insane or mad after he came to the sanitarium and shot his friend who had been staying there.

As for *Dracula*, references to insanity in *Dracula* appear in at least three different contexts. One is the struggle of sane characters to avoid panic in varying degrees of success in the face of vampiric threats. Most of the characters find themselves fighting Panic While Fighting Dracula.—a panic that tends to rob them of the equilibrium of mind. When Jonathan Harker first realizes he's a prisoner in Dracula's castle, he says : "a sort of wild feeling came over me" and reflects that "I think I must have been **mad** for the time, for I behaved much as a rat does in a trap."(Stoker 40) This of course was his psychological response to imminent danger. He later prays that he won't succumb to the strain of being incarcerated in the Count's castle: 'Great God! merciful God! Let me be calm, for out of that way lies **madness** indeed.'(40) Harker thus, steels himself against panic.

Again, in another incident, a *Demeter* helmsman, when he realises that Dracula is a supernatural monster and that he's been killing the crew members, goes in search of the Count. The incredulous captain first "fear(s) his reason has given way," then decides he "is **mad, stark, raving mad.**"( Stoker 94)

Unlike Harker, who manages to hold on to his sanity, the helmsman in desperation throws himself overboard, and the captain assumes that "it was this **madman** who had got rid of the men one by one."

Again, when Dr. Van Helsing announces that Lucy Westenra has become a vampire, Dr. Seward cries out in disbelief: "Dr. Van Helsing, are you **mad**?" To which, Van Helsing replies in the negative, remarking: "madness were easy to bear compared with truth like this."

Another kind of madness that *Dracula* as a text toys with is the problem of treating the clinically insane (refer to Renfield)—**the Clinical Maniac**. Dr Seward does not explain why Renfield was sent to the asylum nor his background. We do not know whether he has a family or loved ones. This then stokes up a gloom of aporia, thereby stoking up the *unheimlich*. The most central example of mental illness in the novel thus, is, of course, Seward's patient Renfield. —the "official" madman in *Dracula*. The zoophagous (live animal-eating) Renfield traps and consumes flies, spiders, and sparrows, believing that each increases his power and life force as his snacks move up the food chain.

Later, he attacks Seward and laps up his blood from the floor, claiming that "the blood is the life!"

This again, read deconstructively, signifies a clear **subversion of the words of the Christ in the Bible:**

'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for your souls upon the altar; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.' (Leviticus 17:11)

Again, in *Genesis 9:4* one finds: 'But you must not eat meat with its lifeblood still in it'. (Genesis9:4)

One here tends to remember the Eucharist or the Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ during the Last Supper, gave his disciples bread and wine during the Passover meal, and commanded his disciples to "do this in memory of me" while referring to the bread as

"my body" and the cup of wine as "the new covenant in my blood" (Corinthians 11:25) to remember both Christ's sacrifice of himself on the Cross.

Thus when on seeing the Dr Seward's disgust, Renfield tells him that eating flies is 'very good and wholesome; that it was life, strong life, and gave life to him', one finds an uncanny contrapuntal reading of the scriptures.

And then, there is the third kind of derangement in the convoluted psychology of Dracula himself.

*Dracula* proposes a faceoff of sorts between normativity and sanity.

The madman is also known as the 'lunatic', which word comes from the same root as the word lunar – from Old French *lunaire* and from Latin *lunaris*: relating to the moon. Notably, throughout the novel, Dracula is also related to the moon. Following Renfield's dying confessional, Mina is found feeding on Dracula on a night when the 'moonlight was so bright'

Also, when relating the story of how Dracula entered his cell, Renfield describes how 'the Moon herself has often come in through the tiniest crack and has stood before me in all her size and splendour'

*Dracula* initiates a discourse on "sanity" and "insanity," on "wellness" and "illness."

In *Dracula*, "insanity" and "illness" are both treated rather in the same way—through confinement, a theme which recurs throughout. The novel draws out late-Victorian cultural attitudes toward illness and madness—that is, any socially-aberrant behavior is "mad". Interestingly enough, women were believed to be more prone to this behavior than men. In any case, both illness and madness require that the patient be removed from society.

This then brings us to the motif of next 'D' of Disability.

Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things* opines that "the history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness)"(*The Order of Things xxiv*).

This of course was a legacy of the growing influence of Enlightenment thinking which initiated a shift from the religious and superstitious notions that disability and disease were expressions of divine wrath. Very few educated writers would dare to draw connections between malformed bodies and the supernatural any longer as doing so would imperil their claims to intelligence and up-to-date education, would ally them with the masses, who had not yet been exposed to and therefore were uninitiated to the Enlightenment way of thinking.

But the same adherence to the Enlightenment ideology ushered in the process of asserting that the human who deviated from the scientific ideal of the normative body was a new and 'rational' kind of monster. So the Other—the Subject—was born. Disability was more often than not linked to abnormality. And this non-normative disability in turn was often linked to immoral behavior.

One would remember here how Alexander Pope, who suffered from serious curvature of the spine, short stature and malformation of his ribs as a result of Pott's disease that he developed in adolescence, in 1716, had tricked

the shady bookseller Edmund Curll into drinking a dose of emetic in the Swan Pub. To provide justification for his own virulent attack on Pope, John Dennis, in his pamphlet, *A True Character of Mr. Pope* (1716), connected Pope's malformed body to his somewhat twisted behavior. There, Dennis proposes that Pope's physical abnormality is a congenital expression of his evil character, and that both, therefore, are legitimate targets for a moral critique, therefore, transforming Pope into an extreme example of proto-Gothic monstrosity.

Again, the popular image of Richard III came from Shakespeare, who described the king as a "poisonous hunch-backed toad" in his 1593 play. Shakespeare's Richard III had a hunchback and a withered arm. In Act I, Scene I, Richard dolefully claims that his malice toward others stems from the fact that he is unloved, and that he is unloved because of his physical deformity. Interestingly, in a digitally-driven age, a new three-dimensional model of King Richard III's spiralling spine shows his true disability: adolescent idiopathic scoliosis, which of course had nothing to do whatsoever with depravity or disposition.

Again, in *Memoirs of a Coxcomb* by John Cleland (1751), Sir William Delamore, the narrator, watches the disabled character Buralt and understands that if he himself continues with his own unhealthy sexual relationship with the older Lady Travers, he will end up like Buralt:

"...it is hardly possible to figure to one's self a more ghastly spectre than what this wretch exhibited, wrapped in a kind of blue coat, that sat on him yet less loosely than his skin, which was of a dun sallow hue. His eyes goggled from sockets appearing sunk inwards, by the retreat of the flesh round them, which likewise added to the protuberance of his cheek-bones. A napkin in the shape of a night cap covered all his hair, (except a platted queue of it, and some lank side-locks) the dull dingy black of which, by its shade, raised, and added to, the hideousness of his grim meagre visage." (Cleland, 75)

In "*AIDS and Its Metaphors*," Sontag explains the psychological associative slippage by which fear of the illness (or disability) translates into fear of the ill (or disabled) person and 'The victim thus replaces the condition, becoming the figure of mystery and murder'. (Sontag 64)

Thus the "stigmatization of certain illnesses" leads "by extension" to the stigmatization of "those who are ill"

Again, this trope of disability as deviancy is insinuated in *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, too, where the invisible internal pathology of the title character—her infertility comes up as a triumphant banner of her lies. It can be argued that this invisible physical defect, representing a failure to serve the patriarchy, is the secret evil that makes a monster out of Rebecca in the novel, as though reinforcing her badness with her inability (read disability).

And such human, yet inhuman, monsters are seized upon by the Gothic mode. The Abject and the Ab-human slides into a transgressive centre stage with the genre of the Gothic that celebrates otherness and revels in the bizarre.

David Punter notes how transgressiveness is the ultimate goal of the Gothic: "Gothic is able, because of its freedom from the law, to play"... "Gothic is therefore all about supersession, about the will to transcend, and

about the fate of the body as we (the subject) strive for a fantasy of total control, or better, total exemption—from the rule of law” (Punter 24)

Transgression then is certainly one of the goals of the Gothic. To showcase the daring propensity to cross the line instead of toeing it—to subvert borders instead of minding them—to dabble in non-normativity rather than slipping passively into the beaten track has always been the maverick pleasure of the Gothic. Transgression—be it in the form of depravity, or derangement, or disability of the characters has always been treasured in the Gothic, thereby, stoking up the matrix from shock to delight, from outrage to *jouissance*—often within the same text. The Gothic text celebrates the joyful liberation of the monster while simultaneously recoiling in fear.

This ambiguous response to its own monsters, on the other hand, results in the continuing debate regarding the politics of the Gothic: Does the demonization of the human Other indicate repressive tendencies? Does the liberation of the monster indicate regressive tendencies in the id?

And when one deals with dynamic texts like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, all the contrapuntal ambiguity of horror transcending into *jouissance* balls up into one million dollar question:

Why do we love Dracula so, when we ought to hate him for his transgressions?

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