

Fangs on Film: An Exploration of Dracula Adaptations

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In 1897, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* took the literary world by storm and popularized a particularly fascinating creature of the night: the vampire. Despite not being the first published story of vampirism, *Dracula* is by far the most well known and heavily referenced vampire media to date. The Count's mysterious allure was not simply confined to the pages of Stoker's novel but bled onto the stage before finally sinking his teeth into the new and exciting silver screen. In 1931, the first official adaptation of Stoker's gothic tale hit the cinemas. Starring Bela Lugosi as the titular count and directed by Tod Browning, Universal's *Dracula (1931)* became an instant classic. In a strange twist of fate, much like how Stoker's novel was predated by two other works of vampire fiction, the film was preceded by two more adaptations, neither of which were authorized. Currently, the first known cinematic adaptation of *Dracula* is the lost Hungarian film *Dracula's Death* released in 1921 and directed by Károly Lajthay. The more infamous unauthorized *Dracula* adaptation, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* was released in 1922 and directed by F. W. Murnau, years before the transition from silent films to spoken ones in Hollywood. (Pierse, 2017, p.2)

Since then, countless different versions of Count Dracula have graced the screen and we still see his vampiric influence in film today. With both *Renfield* and *Last Voyage of the Demeter* released in 2023 and the Robert Eggers directed *Nosferatu* set to release in late 2024, Stoker's monster is still very much alive in his coffin. For over a century, audiences alike have been fascinated by the Count and each version of him that appears on the screen tells a slightly different tale. Over the course of this semester, I intend to investigate the adaptations of Stoker's *Dracula* and the mythos they have created as well as the changes made from adaptation to adaptation.

The story of Stoker's *Dracula* follows a simple premise: the Transylvanian vampire Count Dracula intends to take over England and claims multiple victims in the process. He moves from his castle, where he resides with his wives, to England and later back to Castle Dracula where scientist Abraham van Helsing kills the four of them. With an ensemble cast of characters, many of which are dropped from adaptation to adaptation, *Dracula* has plenty of room for interpretation by the reader, or director. Although Count Dracula himself stays relatively the same, his appearance has changed and so too has the role of his victims. Real estate agent Jonathan Harker, who travels to Castle Dracula in hopes of an estate deal with the count, has an important role in the narrative as well as the women who fall victim to Dracula. (Weir, 2023) Characters such as Jonathan Harker and his fiancée Mina, who falls under Dracula's spell, have found themselves transforming as more and more adaptations are released. Some adaptations have added heavy romance, while others have focused solely on the terror. *Dracula* (1931) makes some significant changes to the story. The character of Renfield, an asylum patient in the novel, takes Jonathan's place and travels to Castle Dracula, while Jonathan stays home with his fiancée. While van Helsing is still the one to slay the vampire, he is unable to return to Transylvania and instead meets his demise in England. (Pierse, 2017 p. 5) In *Nosferatu* (1922) the one to slay the vampire is not van Helsing but Mina's counterpart, Ellen. She lures Count Orlok, the film's version of Dracula, to her bedside to feast upon her blood and keeps him there long enough for the sun to rise and disintegrate the monster. (Waltje, 2000) Similar changes have been made in the following adaptations, none of which entirely follow the story of the novel but instead building off of the previous adaptations and how they interpreted Stoker's literature.

I would be remiss not to mention the explicit queer history intertwined with vampire fiction, from *Carmilla* (1872)'s sapphic countess to Murnau's own homosexuality being

intertwined with Count Orlok in *Nosferatu* (1922), the vampire is no stranger to the gays. Many queer youth find themselves drawn to the tales of vampires on television and the forbidden love it portrays, despite the mostly grim endings they have. Similarly, we can also apply a lot of the imagery seen in these films with the grim reality of disease, especially with viewings following 2020. (Weir, 2023) Whether dark and disturbing or enigmatic and alluring, versions of Stoker's monster will always find themselves reflecting the fears and realities of the time the adaptation is released.

One could easily argue that the existence of *Dracula* adaptations doesn't matter, that film is film and fiction is fiction. Another could argue that the film adaptations are far more important than the novel, with how they have changed and adapted the mythos and reflected experiences of the time. Another argument someone could make is that the book is the most important part of the research, as without it there would be no movies to come from it. Lastly, you could take the middle ground and argue that both are equally as important culturally and analytically.

When one argues in the importance of *Dracula* on film, they tend to look into the most prominent appearances the Count has made and analyze those from film scholar lens. Examining the appearances which have made an impact on the adaptations to follow, or simply just examining the devices used in film to tell the terrifying tale, scholars argue that adaptations on the screen provide a great deal of information to be learned. Due to the near impossible nature of the novel to adapt, changes are bound to be made in order for it to be seen on screen. With the vampiric mythos building film by film and the genre of film itself evolving over the years, the very nature of *Dracula* adaptations is one that is ever changing with the times. "Films that belong to the same genre are like the links of a chain, yet any generic type of film will also mark its difference from its predecessors. These films remain aware of their heritage and draw on

earlier examples by modifying and reinterpreting certain aspects that are generically coded, with differing results.” (Waltje, 2000, p.3)

Conversely, arguments in the literary importance of Stoker’s classic find themselves criticizing the changes made for the screen. For example, with the exception of *Nosferatu (1922)* and its successors, many adaptations of *Dracula* depict the count as a handsome and alluring man, while the novel portrays him at first as an unsettling older man who gets younger upon arriving in England. Despite Stoker’s writing, Bela Lugosi’s likeness is the most referenced and represented visual of *Dracula* in media. “Stoker added so much detail and depth to the plot in *Dracula* that it made a highly engaging and realistic read at the time; however, this made it difficult to adapt faithfully in other media.” (McCarrick, 2020)

While both sides of the argument acknowledge the importance of *Dracula* in literature and pop culture, they disagree on what is really the more important aspect of the tale. The evolution of the story and its principal characters is bound to happen as the decades pass. With the modern understanding of *Dracula* and associated vampires so far removed from the source material, I would personally argue that they both have equal importance in the mythology and media they have inspired. From his portrayal by Adam Sandler as a goofy father in *Hotel Transylvania (2012)* to Japan’s dark *Hellsing (1997-2008)* manga, Stoker’s character has transformed into a symbol of vampirism that continues to change and adapt with the stories told around him.

Although I cannot pinpoint a certain event or time period that sparked my interest in vampires, I was always a fan of the macabre even as a kid. Needless to say, vampire media lured me in and my fate was sealed after I read *Dracula* for the first time. As a queer college student, the intertwined homoerotic history behind vampiric media has always interested me. The

vampire, being a monster most commonly featured in heteronormative media having such a strong queer history and such intense ties to the community makes me want to learn more about them. Similarly, being raised with a mother who loves true crime and horror movies as well as history, this is something that is so incredibly fascinating to me, and the people around me.

While it may seem like something niche and unimportant to the bigger issues currently plaguing the world, *Dracula* is something a lot of my friends and family are interested in and like to talk about. In fact, I am fortunate enough to have friends willing to sit and watch the adaptations with me on the weekends.

Personally, I find myself agreeing that, while both the books and movies are incredibly important to both the literary and filmic representation of vampirism, the movies themselves have contributed greatly to the lore in ways that are not prevalent in the book itself. Both visually and mythologically, the vampire has changed drastically after being invited onto the screen and its rise in popular culture can similarly be attributed to the counts appearance in film.

My interest in the topic itself comes with preconceived ideas and notions about the books and movies that I am sure will change over the course of this project. Although I think I am capable of researching this with an entirely open mind, I will have to use targeted research questions to probe into certain aspects of this topic such as the opinion regarding the books and opinions regarding the movies. In addition to using peer reviewed journal articles and theses, I also will be researching with the help of less professional online articles from both literary and film critics and enjoyers. By researching with both the scholarly articles and non scholarly opinions as well as my own viewings and re-reading *Dracula* I feel as though I will be able to put together a comprehensive research essay.

From the evolution of characters to the changes in mythos, there is no lack of things to research when it comes to *Dracula*. With an issue so niche yet written about extensively in the scholarly field, undergoing this project is something I look forward to over the course of the semester.

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