

## Issues of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Foreignness in 19<sup>th</sup> century British Literature:

### How the Gothic was used as a Disguise for Racial Commentary.

From Frankenstein's creature to Count Dracula, gothic writers often racialize supernatural beings, using them as representations of those "othered" in Victorian society due to their perceived foreignness. Using the Gothic to disguise their commentary allows authors such as Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker to comfortably bring up issues of ethnicity, nationality, and immigration, with many of the actions of their non-native characters being based off of common racial beliefs and prejudices of the time. These convictions reflect commonly held beliefs about immigrants that persist to this day. More so, they disrupt the domestic spheres in the aforementioned novels by compelling the men of the households to take drastic measures to ensure that their homes are protected from what they view as dangerous, foreign influences.

In both of their novels, Shelley and Stoker employ non-native antagonists that embody what it means to be foreign. The use of the Gothic allows for the disguising of any racial commentaries made by either author. Instead of making outright arguments or claims regarding topics such as foreign influence and immigration, their sentiments can be somewhat guarded by the veil of the supernatural and the use of paranormal creatures as metaphors for different populations. Frankenstein and Count Dracula as characters both represent vastly different geographical areas and groups of people. Their characterizations are based upon English assumptions about their argued nationalities. This makes them stereotypical representations, and indicates the bias in their portrayals. More so, the historical context of

the time periods when these novels were written can also be used to determine the reasons for which such prejudices existed.

The Count represents the Slavs/Roma that make up the population of his Eastern European homeland of Transylvania. When describing him, Stoker writes, “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” (24). This portrayal of the vampire is similar to descriptions of the Slavic and Roma populations of the East. The Count’s unusual hairiness, large nose, and ugly visage all make him a caricature of these Eastern European populations. More so, his effeminate nature is indicated in way in which he is seen carrying out tasks that would traditionally be done by women, such as cooking, cleaning, and even performing a sick, distorted mimicry of nursing (300). This seems to be a jab at Eastern European men, and a questioning of their masculinity. Katrien Bollen and Raphael Ingelbien explore this by writing, “Interestingly, Dracula is a paradoxically effeminate seducer, and his effeminacy has often been read as part of a late-Victorian racial stereotyping that connects him with essentialist views of both Jewishness (George du Maurier’s Svengali springs to mind) and Irishness” (408). This also refers to the inherent fear that many Western European men had of foreigners influencing their female counterparts. This anxiety made it so that many such men took drastic steps to ensure that there would be no opportunity for foreign men to interact with Western European women. The Count, who is

quite literally a blood-thirsty vampire who leeches off the lives of others seems to play off of Victorian prejudices regarding certain ethnic groups.

Frankenstein's creature, on the other hand, seems to represent African individuals, especially those who were enslaved and brought to the Western Hemisphere. The creature's beginnings after his escape, including his discovery of religion and process of becoming literate all parallel the experiences of individuals subjected to slavery. The symbolism behind his discovery of light bears resemblance to the experiences of fugitive slaves who escape their poor conditions. Additionally, the way in which the creature was described also mimics depictions of African peoples at the time. This is supported by Howard Malchow who writes that the creature's "dark and sinister" look plays off of the "standard description of the black man in both the literature of the West Indies and that of West African exploration" (91). The creature's revolt against his master, as well as the anger and injustice he feels at being brought into this world further this connection. Malchow describes this in the following statement, "One might, without stretching imagination very far, see in Frankenstein's futile chase after his creature in the Alps or the frozen waste of the Arctic a displaced image of the white planter's exhausting and, in Jamaica, often futile search for the runaway slave in the opposite extreme of the Equatorial Tropics" (104). Another important point is the unnaturalness of Victor Frankenstein's creation compared to the institution of slavery. Both were criticized as being unholy, and the moral transgressions that went into their formation and were the result of the actions of those that upheld those systems. The creature being compares to a slave presents him as a victim in the situation and therefore absolves him of many of his morally questionable choices throughout the narrative.

The differences in the ways that Shelley and Stoker depict issues of foreignness, nationality, and ethnicity also indicates the differences in their views of non-natives and immigrants. Shelley's treatment of her foreign characters is more forgiving than Stoker's. This could be due to authorial bias and the influence of their own personal values, triggered by historical issues and events. This dichotomy of beliefs is especially evident when considering Shelley and Stoker's depiction of the supernatural characters in their novels.

Shelley portrays the creature as somewhat of a noble savage, legitimizing his grievances against his creator and the injustice of his life. The creature, who isn't even the primary antagonist in *Frankenstein*, has his moral transgressions blamed upon the cruelty he was subjected to, rather than any inherent evil within him. More so, Shelley, who was an English writer, presents the Swiss Frankenstein and French De Laceys in a positive manner. Even *Frankenstein's* arguably most foreign character, Safie, is presented in surprisingly positive terms considering her Turkish background. Shelley's sympathy with the creature can also be seen when considering his relationship with his creator. Victor is shown carrying feelings of guilt and regret at bringing the creature to life. He sees most of his loved ones die at the hands of his creation, and his future with Elizabeth, his intended, is ripped away from him. The nature of Elizabeth's death, and the intimacy of strangulation is of particular interest when considering the historical connotations around Black men and their interactions with White women. Nonetheless, Victor's stances toward correcting his mistakes and protecting his loved ones from his creation hold less weight due to his being complicit in the creature's formation. Although the creature, who can be seen as a foreign influence, threatens to, and succeeds in, ruining Victor's domestic life, he doesn't have all of the blame placed upon him.

This seems to be a commentary on Shelley's part, holding the master's responsible when their captives turn against them.

Stoker, on the other hand, is much different in his approach to the non-native characters in *Dracula*. The Count, unlike Frankenstein's creation, has no redeeming qualities. He is portrayed as a blood-thirsty, malicious, un-holy individual, whose only aim is to pervade the purity and wholesomeness of Western Europe, and English society in particular. These beliefs parallel similar ones about non-natives, especially immigrants, who were believed to be leeching off of the countries they migrated to without offering anything of value to said nations. Dracula's cruelty and moral transgressions make the crusade that the "Crew of Light" who fight against him that much more valid. Stoker shows these men battling against a foreign enemy in order to protect Lucy Westenra, and later Mina Harker, both of whom are prime portrayals of the ideal English woman. Throughout the course of the novel, The Count is a constant disruption to the domestic sphere of the characters. Not only does he hold the power of influence over the women in the novel, he is also responsible for Lucy's death and therefore the end of Arthur's domestic life with her. Count Dracula, and thereby Stoker's depiction of foreign individuals, holds a much more sinister tone. The Count's lack of redeeming qualities furthers Stoker's evident disdain towards foreigners, or at least those from Eastern Europe.

There seems to be a line between what degree of foreignness is perceived as being acceptable by Shelley and Stoker. The foreign characters that hail from Western Europe or America are treated much differently than those that come from Eastern Europe, Africa, or Asia. Those from the former regions are allowed to get away with far more in both novels than those from the latter, and are not as stereotyped and demonized in terms of their characterizations – they are allowed more dimension and individuality. The underlying

assumption being that those who come from cultures that are significantly different from Victorian society are indelibly different and unable to become upstanding citizens in the countries they immigrate to.

Stoker's depiction of which kinds of foreigners are acceptable and unacceptable is evident. Stoker uses Professor Van Helsing and Quincey Morris to represent individuals that he believes would fall in the former category. Both the Professor and Morris are distinctly non-native. Through their clear accent, over-emphasized characteristics, and divergence from accepted social norms of the time, one can be certain they are not English. Nonetheless, they both hold very important roles in the narrative, and are one of the main factors in Count Dracula's demise. Van Helsing's superstition and spiritual beliefs are treated as an important advantage, rather than a hindrance. Morris' boisterous, slightly uncultured nature is considered charming, instead of uncouth. Stoker's treatment of the Professor may be due to the fact that he is Dutch, and therefore still Western European. Similarly, with Morris, who is American, he is still accepted because he has English blood and Western European roots. Bollen and Ingelbien further this argument by stating, "Stoker's Van Helsing, on the other hand, largely refrains from criticizing his English allies or the country he operates in. Crucially, his Dutch nationality means that he is no real counterpart for the Transylvanian Dracula—instead, it aligns him with the composite Western identity that defines the Crew of Light and stretches from the more advanced countries of Northern Europe (including England) to the United States, represented by the ebullient Texan Quincey Morris" (414). Stoker's treatment of these characters varies significantly from his descriptions of the people of Transylvania, who embody the trope of the impoverished, uneducated, rural workers. From the differences in his portrayal of the Slavic and Roma peoples to that of the Professor and

Morris, it seems that it is at the junction of Eastern and Western Europe that Stoker draws the line of acceptable and unacceptable foreignness.

This phenomenon of the degrees of acceptance can also be seen in *Frankenstein*. Although Shelley is much more nuanced in her views of where the lines are drawn, even she explores these boundaries through characters such as Safie. Although the Turkish character is portrayed positively, her Muslim, male counterparts aren't awarded the same treatment. Her virtue and wholesomeness is treated as a consequence of her mother's Christian influence, rather than any inherent assets or qualities. Although she is more accepting of differences in nationality and ethnicity, Shelley portrays a very stereotypical, limited view of what it means to be Muslim. Shelley writes of Safie's mother, "She instructed her daughter in the tenants of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet" (93). Her focus on religion as an indicator of the morality of individuals shows that Shelley uses faith as a determiner of acceptance amongst foreign individuals. Although her criteria are different from those of Stoker, both authors clearly discriminate between non-natives, looking at their differences, whether they be creed or race based, to determine if they are worthy of approval.

Shelley and Stoker's treatment of their non-native characters, and the basis of their characterizations on the common beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices of the time reflects the degree of discomfort Victorian society had with anything considered too foreign. More so, it furthers the argument of "degrees of foreignness" that are considered acceptable, and differentiates between non-natives based on their religion or ethnicity. These convictions had a great impact on the domestic spheres of the time, influencing the types of interactions Western European women were allowed to have, and shielding them from any possible

foreign influence. These types of beliefs allow for the continuation of xenophobia and fear of immigrants that still continues to be a significant issue in most Western nations, and impacts public opinions and policies on immigration throughout the world. By understanding the nuances of “otherness”, it becomes possible to begin reversing some of these convictions and the damage caused by their impact.



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