Dracula and Theory
A Bite-Sized Introduction to Critical Theory for A Level

Having nightmares about literary theory? Gareth Calway invites you to confront your demons through a series of readings of Bram Stoker’s Dracula.

A vampire is stalking the citadels of English literature. And it’s alive. Critical theory. No text, writer or reader is safe! No context is immune. No exam paper is free of its mark. But don’t run for sanctuary quite yet. This article may yet provide the modern teacher and student with the requisite garlic, stake and crucifix.

First, arm yourself with two complementary bibles of the craft – Terry Eagleton’s Literary Theory and Bennet and Boyle’s Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory. (David Lodge’s anthology Modern Criticism and Theory is another). Eagleton’s is the definitive evaluative history, placing each theory deftly in its social context (though tending to bring in the Marxist cavalry to save them all from themselves at the end, and intriguingly low on actual texts.) Eagleton re-reads many of the other theories as well: Freud’s ‘unconscious’ is socially created (the invisible internalisation of parental/social attitudes from birth) not the usual ‘bourgeois’ private property of the individual. Bennet and Boyle is more student-friendly, compiling a comprehensive sequence of engaging short chapters with headings like ‘Queer’, ‘God’, ‘Pleasure’ ‘Character’ ‘Desire’ ‘The End’ etc. Among the texts explored are The Yellow Wallpaper and The Turn of the Screw which have the virtue of being manageabley short (in the context of already packed A Level schedules) while famously ‘open’ to many different readings. Maybe arm yourself with these too.

And now we are ready to track the creature down.

Why Dracula? Because, starting – like the latest critical theory – with the reader, most readers will know a version of Dracula (a summary of Bram Stoker’s original is provided in the box on this page) and because the differences in the wide range of critical theories may emerge most clearly when applied to one text.

A Marxist interpretation of Dracula

Count Dracula represents the dead, decaying aristocracy in his mouldering castle on the mountain; he sucks the blood of those living in the economically productive modern village below, living in the past but off the present. Lord Arthur Holmwood is his British equivalent, a feudal relic. He is also named after King Arthur who, like Count Dracula, is a long dead, phantom, present-diminishing aristocratic hero-myth bleeding life from real history and the present. The castle ladies – their nobility is explicit – are all vampires who prey upon the living Harker (connected to his friend by the name chimé with ‘Arthur’ but also to Dracula by another name chimé) in a necrophilic parody of life and love. Lucy the pale society coquette is also – like Holmwood – economically dead, a brood mare of noble stock from a dead age, seeking matches with three modern suitors, ‘strong men’ whose transfused blood she will later receive to no effect – and who stays ‘alive’ by sucking the life from babies. Mina by contrast represents both the dynamic, forward –

Brief summary of Dracula by Bram Stoker

A young solicitor Jonathan Harker goes to Dracula’s eerie castle in Transylvania to oversee the count’s purchase of an ancient estate next to Dr Seward’s lunatic asylum in Essex. After various horrifying experiences, Harker finds a ruined chapel containing 50 coffins filled with earth from the Dracules’ graveyard, in one of which the un-Dead Dracula is lying gorged with blood. The boxes are shipped to England. Dracula disembarks at Whitby in the form of a wolf, having murdered the entire crew. He vampirises the society flirt Lucy, now the wife of Lord Arthur Holmwood, and despite multiple blood transfusions from various ‘strong men’ and occult efforts by Dr Seward’s old teacher Dr Van Helsing, she dies drained of blood. She joins the un-Dead until staked through the heart. Dracula stalks Mina for the rest of the book. The young men all try to protect her but the initiative is taken instead by the old foreign metaphysician Van Helsing and increasingly by Mina herself, whose intuitions and hold over Dracula (whose blood she has sucked) prove more effective than the conventional male weapons of guns and science. They seek for the boxes of earth Dracula needs to survive the hours between sunset and sunrise. All but one are neutralised by fragments of the Host. The last, with Dracula in it, is followed back to Transylvania where, after a thrilling chase, the Count is beheaded and stabbed through the heart, at which his body crumbles into dust.
looking, new middle-class proto-suffragette and the essential, life-supporting ‘little woman’ of the Victorian era, full of present energy and drive, embodying the revolutionary/reactionary contradictions of the new capitalist middle class, and the ‘heart of heartless world’. It is she who will provide Dracula with his love object and nemesis.

Marx himself regarded literary texts, once made, as independent of the social and economic conditions that produced them. Marxist literary theorists now read texts as constantly in flux. Marx remains a brilliant psychologist of how individuals and societies reify actions into states, the processes of governance into institutions. Applying his theory to the aristocrat Count Dracula here, we see how society is petrified by institutions long since dead or outmoded.

**A Freudian interpretation of Dracula**

The novel bristles with repressed eroticism, active at night – in dark, dreamy, unconscious states and places. There is of course an endless supply of *inautos* – the death-wish Freud believed each living organism carries within it. There is repressed Victorian female sexuality and forbidden male desire. There is the – hysterical – ‘return of the repressed’, to be stalked through the heart (like the slap across the face hysterical women get in 50s films). There is the repressed homosexuality in the relationship between Harker and Dracula (this man is mine’ says Dracula – and note the Harker/Dracula binary opposition name chime).

The text successfully ‘recovers’ – as in therapy – the female erotic drive denied by Victorian society. Since Victorian biology did not recognise a female sex drive, it was medical practice for a doctor or female nurse to manipulate an ‘hysterical’ woman to orgasm – called a paroxysm – as a way of releasing tension! Don’t laugh too hard – many modern cultures remain uncomfortable with the sexual part of the ‘fair sex’. Stoker’s Victorian text recovers this repressed drive, presenting it as the trauma of the predatory non-passive female vampire. The ‘repressed’ material returns as the exciting but fearful horror that Harker experiences somewhere between waking and sleeping in the hands of his female seducers. Dead girls on top! But even this text never fully recovers the Harker-Dracula attraction, which remains sexually unconscious, but indicated.

**A Feminist interpretation of Dracula**

The traditional binary of Whore and Madonna – the Madonna, not the binary-defying Madonna Ciccone – is there in the friends Lucy and Mina and of course the binary of Dracula’s whores in the castle in opposition to the village ‘virgins’ he preys on. Andy Warhol’s Dracula comes to Victorian England because “only there is it possible to find virgins”. The feminist question remains: exactly why do the reactionary old Transylvanian’s victims have to be virgins? More recent feminist categories of vampires (as we might call lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*) – and dolls (Blanche Ingram in *Jane Eyre*) – or that other feminist category, savages (like Bertha in *Jane Eyre*) abound everywhere in this text. And what are Dracula’s ladies but Mad Wives in the Attic? Harker passively receives these three ‘lady’ vampires in terrified ecstasy – men weren’t meant to be passive; Lucy actively wants three men at once and complain that the pigish Victorian society won’t allow her to. Women weren’t meant to be active. Mina has sucked Dracula’s blood and so is equipped to deal with him in intuitive ways the Empire men aren’t. He would never have been destroyed without her and she is empowered by him and by this destruction of him. It’s all there.

**A Structuralist theory of Dracula**

Everything in human life can be read as a language or system of signs. “Incest is bad grammar” as Levi-Strauss puts it. So if we rewrite the novel as a single sentence, what would be the subject (would it be Dracula, the protagonist of the title?); what would be the object, the verb? What adverbs and adjectives would there be? Is the mood active or passive (e.g., *Dracula is destroyed by the love of a good woman* makes Dracula the subject – very plausibly – but agent grammar detects that the predicate = Mina’s love – is the truly active agent in the story.) Try to place key characters grammatically, e.g., is Van Helsing an adverb of the above? Or should he be the subject of the verb? Is Harker the failed subject, the usurped hero of
his own story? As in all literary theory, no need to force this, just see how much it reveals.

More generally, are human beings (note the gender) processes or states? For instance, if you come back and read this article in a year’s time are you the same reader? Are we nouns or verbs, states or processes, in the ongoing ‘language’ of our lives?

Text-based theories of Dracula

Russian Formalism and other related text-based theories (that for art’s sake, Practical Criticism, New Criticism, etc.) say: *never mind the context, theory, author, or cultural or anthropological structure* – get your teeth into the text. The text is about itself – signifier rather than signified, Stravinsky’s *Octet* rather than Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*. It is sometimes dubbed the dental theory of literature, extracting from the text. Yet nothing but the text do its work on you, and bring no preconceptions to it. (This may be impossible but it is one thing to accidentally read the text with preconceptions and another to willfully impose agendas.) Practical Criticism was the theory behind the setting of Amy Winehouse for a recent Cambridge exam.

_Dracula_ is therefore to be read as in a language unique to itself. But its particular ‘discourse’ does derive from two broad literary languages:

1. The gothic novel genre (including the supernatural and mythical and the absence of overall reliable point-of-view) in which the novel is central – ‘unreal’ meaning myth and horror and supernaturally-induced extreme mental states.

2. Realism: the book assembles a whole world of documentary Victorian texts each supposedly composed at the moment it appears and only revealing the p.o.v. of that person – at that moment: diaries, travel writing, confessions, letters, ladies’ journals, love letters, scientific reports, metaphysical excuse, newspaper reports, memos, telegrams, travel writing. Mina’s typing up of Jonathan’s diaries. The whole novel is assembled as a series of documentary texts reflecting what the narrator perceived at (and only at) the point of writing: it embodies an almost fanatical, absolute realism.

Two extracts to extract meaning from:

3 May. Biscriitz – Left Munich at 8.35 pm on 1st May, arriving at Vienna early next morning. Should have arrived at 6.46, but train was an hour late. . . . (opening of the novel)

The fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly glistening. There was a deliberate voluptuousness.

which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. . . . (Bedtime in Varna)

The combination of two genres results in a gothic realism, supernatural events placed as realistic a text-world as possible. The first extract is an almost pedantic realism. The second is still realism — the whole passage is placed: it is seen by Harker ‘looking out from under my lashes in an agony of delightful anticipation’ in a state that might be waking and might be sleep (‘a dreamy fear’). However, as the narrator is so uncertain of himself and of what is real, the gothic begins to take over. The animal image ‘lapped’ is probably where practical criticism would start to ‘extract’ a frightening ambivalence; then, the long hypnotic clauses, and their seduced narrator — so different from the imperious certainties of the first sentence of the novel. True to the gothic genre, no narrator is reliable. (Nothing is real . . .)

True to absolute realism, each narrator provides the sole available view at that moment, as in real life. (Everything is real . . .).

Practical Criticism often shies away from large texts because it gets bogged down at the micro-level. A solution is to identify ‘voices’ or ‘discourses’ — of characters, of narrator(s), of particular incidents, of the whole novel, of the ‘author’. A novel typically combines
Structuralism and Narrative

1. Proprian Analysis of narrative functions in Jane Eyre and Dracula
(There are no right answers, only possibilities.)

Jane Eyre:
• Hero – Jane
• Villain – Mrs Reed (who stands behind all the other blocking villains, John Reed, Mr Brocklehurst, that deprive Jane Heir of her inheritance)
• Donor – The uncle who leaves her the fortune
• Helper – Helen Burns? (Christian model of fortitude and morality, unto death). And/or St John’s sisters? – who rescue her from death. And/or, more controversially, Bertha? – see Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic – her unconscious, repressed, fiery, living self (a dialectical contrary of the serene but deathly Helen Burns?)
• Princess – Rochester
• Dispatcher – Miss Temple (her beloved teacher and mentor, her training sends her off to – ultimately – Rochester)
• False Hero – St John, (note he is a saintly John, a saintly brother-bully, a return of John in holy clothes)

Dracula
• Hero – Harker or Mina?
• Villain – Dracula?
• Donor – Van Helsing?
• Helper – Van Helsing / Mina?
• Princess – Mina? Harker? Even Dracula?
• Dispatcher – Harker’s employer? Van Helsing? England?

2. Todorovian structuralist analysis:
• Equilibrium: little clerk Harker and little wife Mina in little England –
• Displacement: Dracula / Transylvania invades West (via Harker)
• Final resolution: Dracula destroyed.
• New equilibrium: Mina empowered.

A context-based interpretation of Dracula

There are many contexts, including other texts. One social-historical context might be:

Dracula was published in 1897, two years after Oscar Wilde’s conviction for sodomy (homosexuality as such was never illegal and male-female sodomy was equally criminal) and with Jack the Ripper very much in the air. The long puritanism of the Victorian age was collapsing into a fin-de-siecle feast of scandals, moral crises, Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, depictions of female evil, soft porn and the decline of the Victorian (Empire, male) hero. Britain had becomes a parasitic economy at the heart of a great Empire, no longer the engine energising and creating it. The foreigner Van Helsing and the not-so-little woman emerge as the crucial antagonists of Dracula rather than all the eligible Empire males, the gun-toting cowboy, the scientist, Harker’s well-meaning dull middle class emissary or Lord Arthur’s Great British upper-class twit.

A reader-based interpretation of Dracula

Dracula was written for Victorians not A Level students. But ‘Victorian’ generally meant male, and invariably middle class. Dracula is the vampire, the others are ‘lady vampires’. The author tacitly assumes a male reader, a gentleman like the author, as many male Victorian authors did.

But the text itself, like all texts – and a writer’s unconsciousness? – is much more class- and gender-free. The little woman (but also new woman) proto-suffragette Minas of the Victorian world read it too and read it differently, maybe with her at the centre. A Martian

several languages (voices, discourses) within its overall language. The famous episode in which the three beautiful and very active female vampires seduce the passive Harker mixes the language of romance, eroticism and horror in disconcertingly equal measure.

A writer-based interpretation of Dracula

Just as there can be no literature without a reader, there can be no reader without a text and no text without a writer. Bram (Abraham) Stoker – 1847-1912 – was a Dublin-born London-based literary Irishman, part of the brilliant expatriate literary scene that included Wilde, Yeats and Shaw. He was first a civil servant and then Sir Henry Irving’s theatrical secretary and tour manager. Irving was a charismatic Shakespearean actor of the kind who took the late Victorian scene by storm, replacing the previous mannered style. Stoker, a romantic (he asked his mother for stories to be sent to him from and about ‘Romantic Ireland’), not only hero-worshipped the American poet Walt Whitman, sending him fan mail, but was also hypnotised (literally and metaphorically) by Irving. Stoker was never able to resolve his lifelong obsession with his employer. In 1878, he married the same woman whom Oscar Wilde proposed to, Florence, and may have shared Wilde’s reasons to find a respectable Victorian cover for socially unacceptable sexual orientation. It is certainly possible to find in the text evidence of repressed homosexuality. There are obvious limitations to this kind of literary criticism – which used to be the only one considered – because fiction is not autobiography, on any level; but the writer’s own life and characteristics may still help us ‘read’ his text.

Stoker’s cultural exile from Ireland’s own national literature – (London was the colonial capital of Ireland at the time, a subjugation that later Irish writers, led by Yeats, deliberately replaced with a nationalist literature) – is also perhaps important in Stoker’s writing. Some of the critique of England and Empire Englishmen in it – the intellectual and spiritual superiority of the foreigners Dracula and Van Helsing – is arguably influenced by Stoker’s Irish perspective, even if semi-consciously.
would read it even more differently, though perhaps not very productively. An actual believer in vampires will read it differently from one who understands vampires as myth. A 'queer' reading (the term will need to be carefully introduced as a specifically literary critical term at A Level) will be different again.

Consider the queer/feminist reading that all social categories and desires are ultimately homosocial — that patriarchy values the bonds between men rather than between women, or between men and women, quite independently of any sexual relation. A game of golf with the boss, or a bonding drink with the lads or another odyssey film is mainly, a female text is chick lit or girly and a man who goes out with his girlfriend on a football night instead of the lads is a bit of a ‘pouff’). 'Queer' and 'feminist' readers among many others might deconstruct such homo-social assumptions, among many other assumptions.

Finally, a deconstructionist interpretation of Dracula

Deconstruction as a literary theory suggests that all Western texts are written and read within the cultural assumptions of the West. They are organised around a phallocentric principle that privileges certain constructs and binary oppositions: god-devil; man-woman; madness-sanity; life-death; good-evil, etc. (Compare the sprawling mass of the world wide web — which contains these assumptions but does not privilege them — with the Bodleian or the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which does.) What are the organising principles of Dracula? They include the following binaries:

- East / West
- Man / Woman
- Good / Evil
- Death / Life
- Love / Hate
- Selfish / Selfless
- Sex / Celibacy
- Chastity / Promiscuity
- Vampire / Living Man
- Wolves and rats / Humans
- Coffins, spiders, earth, creepy castles / Civilised rooms
- Blood / Semen
- Blood / Milk
- Madness / Sanity
- Christ / Devil
- Normal / Dedant
- English / Weird
- Light / Darkness
- Day / Night
- Moon / Sun
- Dawn / Dusk

The grain of the text takes sides on all these, ranging its characters, narratives and discourses along one side or the other. But all of these (at least as they are perceived by readers) are constructs. Deconstructing them, removing the privilege from such precepts, allows us to read 'against the grain' of the text, to see and reposition, the opposite elements subordinated by the text.

Take two incidental/accidental elements and read them against the grain of the text. For example: (1) the paprika — which Harker notes as an element of the Hungarian diet as he travels to Transylvania — is exotic, though he disdains it; and (2) Mina's typewriter.

'Paprika' connects with the wild, foreign, un-English,
spicy, romantic scenery of the mountains beyond the
forests (the literal meaning of Transylvania) and is
'Eastern'. So is the wild, moonlight, the wolves 'singing',
the crimson blood, blue fire, the supreme individuality
of the Count: Rich, exciting, heart-stopping life, though
presented in the text as 'death'. The typewriter empowers
Mina and shapes the very text she is in, but it is
mechanical – an emblem of the automated, factory-
driven, mass-produced society and psychology she
narrates, the little woman / faithful wife of the Victorian
hearth. It is drinking the crimson blood of Dracula that
empowers her, not the typewriter, which only dutifully
reports her story. The dominant symbol of parasitic
sucking is presented by the text as a threat from the East,
whereas in economic terms it was the West that was the
parasite, sucking the lifeblood, labour and raw produce
of the world into its vacuum / heart. Reading against the
grain of the text reveals this, present but concealed there.

Reading any text without any assumptions reveals
meanings it itself is silent about. A basic assumption of all
societies, and even most animals, is that babies should be
protected by adults. Babies should be breast-fed, not
have their blood sucked in a horrific reversal of this by
anti-mothers. Aristocratic lady-vampires feed on the baby
brought to them by Dracula, as does Lucy later. Let us
deconstruct this text. The text advances the fundamental
principle that babies should not become nourishment for
adults. It conveys horror at the reversal of this precept
certainly on a literal level and perhaps symbolically too).
But those same 'lady' vampires also dominate an
extraordinary passage of interwoven romantic/horror/
pornographic writing in which Harker experiences an
ecstasy of sexual passivity at their hands (and tongues!).
The anti-mother is also the anti-blushing bride. A
deconstruction of the text offers us a woman liberated
from her (and Mina's) child-rearing, faithful, hearth-angel,
husband-supporting role. Not passive, not self-sacrificing,
not the domestic servant, or sexual object, of the male, or
the child, but the reverse – and how very exciting she
is. Harker is in dreamland, for all his horror.

Reading against the grain of the text actually enriches
it, because a text can never be pinned down, even if the
writer, reader or context want it to be. Perhaps the
vampire is a living corpse not because such a thing is
really desirable but because society has turned women
into corpses (madonnas, sexless mothers, Lady Bertrams,
dolls) and the act of reviving them only seems horrible
to the society that has slayed them? In fact, in literature, she
is as exciting as she is disturbing, the return of the
(repressed) whore in the wife in the bedroom?
On Deconstruction

A definition of deconstruction is almost a contradiction in terms. It is easier to grasp it in action. Deconstruction amounts to surrendering the role of judge or definition-maker. Deconstruction attempts (unsuccessfully but tenaciously) to evade the logocentrism - the 'givens' and ruling ideas - of western culture. Like the sprawling world-wide web, though it contains these logocentric principles, it does not privilege them, nor is it organised by them.

The positive thing about deconstruction is that it encourages us to read texts without assumptions. There is no 'great tradition' of accepted canonical texts, no assumption that, say, a 'man' can be defined against his opposite 'woman,' or that 'realism' as a literary form reflects anything other than its own constructs and signs. Deconstruction shows us that the opposites by which we (and all our constructions and structuralisms) perceive reality are arbitrary. Not wrong, but man-made. Deconstruction is a universe without an assumed God at its centre, or rather a universe where whatever God we put there is 'deconstructed'.

Deconstruction eludes definition, almost by definition. In one way, you could say that Marxism is a comprehensive deconstruction of capitalism - but it is not deconstruction because it sets up an alternative phallogocentric system in its place. Feminism deconstructs patriarchy and insofar as it does not replace it with another phallogologos (and it comparatively doesn't) can claim to be a type of deconstruction. But insofar as it still insists on the binary opposition of man and woman (and it doesn't always), it cannot.

Jacques Derrida wrote his first papers on deconstruction during the May 1968 Paris revolution. For about a month Paris students, philosophers, academics and workers took to the streets chanting and writing up slogans like "be realistic, demand the impossible" and "sous le pave, la plage" (under the pavement, the beach). This ferment was unlike any previous social revolution in that (a) it did not emerge from economic crisis but from affluence and (b) it put philosophy and art onto the streets and the barricades. It combined sixty political utopianism with the situationists' impulse to take art out of the gallery and the library and shock bourgeois society with it in real life situations (ostensibly to wake up the workers from their dulled dream of material contentment in the process): it stopped art being a commodity and made it an experience and a challenge again.

The May days deposed De Gaulle, the president and chief patriarch, the 'father of the nation' for a month - father of the nation (we might put it) as fathers were presidents of each family, and every French institution had its authority figure. The philosophy of "you're a utopian or you're a schmuck" - the very French, very philosophical sense that there was no point being a philosopher unless you demanded a better world - took active and physical form. The unusual feature was that these philosophical arguments did not just rage in the university. They were fought out in the surrounding streets as protesters negotiated baton charges and tear gas.

Derrida made the point that everything in our society is underpinned by phallogocentric assumptions - not just literature, everything: the state, the family, the economy, the university, the workplace. Derrida's deconstruction theory may be seen as the professorial expression of the 'hippy' (both political and psychedelic) left, the academic case for changing institutions by changing people's heads (kicking out the cops in the head).

So, in 1968, Derrida's writings challenged patriarchy and the structures of power - the very foundations of Western culture - in France. The Paris revolution at one stage had the Western world fearing another French Revolution like 1789. Then it petered out into nothing as quickly as it began. But its thinkers, philosophers like Derrida and Michel Foucault, were taken up in the mid-70s as visiting professors - notably in America, where they had far-reaching influence on political thought and action which continues today.

Teaching Theory at A Level

Some - or all - of this may seem over-complicated, even abstruse. A common objection to Critical Theory is that the average student and teacher has enough to worry about reading the texts themselves let alone peering through a range of ingenious critical binoculars interposed between them and the texts. QCA has acknowledged this insofar as it has not universally imposed Critical Theory as a study in itself though it always mentioned it - and recommended knowledge of, e.g., intertextuality. It has now gone further in, for example, the AQA B spec, where aspects of literary theory are actually studied explicitly.

In any case, the Assessment Objectives include various reading and writing contexts (what used to be 'background') on an equal footing with the texts on all specs. Examiners have large bundles of marks reserved for them. Besides which, 'reading without theory' is itself a reading theory - often a blind form of Practical Criticism and/or writer-based theory that acts more like prejudice than insight. The point, as with all reading, is that none of these theories is 'right' just an enriching and informing route to one's own reading. Most importantly, as with the contextualised readings (audiences, representation, institutions, ideology) of technical codes in Media Studies, they offer a modern way of reading that students enjoy.

Gareth's interactive online AQA resources 'Perspectives on Literary and Linguistic Theory' are published by Hodder Education at http://www.alevel-english.co.uk; in the extension area.