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Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

Dracula (1897), Bram Stoker

Fiona Subotsky

Bram Stoker (1847-1912) came from an Irish medical family whose influence is not hard to detect in his most famous work, *Dracula*, which sadly did not bring him the fame and fortune which his older brother William Thornley achieved. The latter was not only President of the Irish College of Surgeons and knighted, but held appointments at the two major Dublin asylums – the Richmond Hospital and St Patrick's. He was even a member of the Medico-Psychological Society for a while, and thus was well-placed to advise on the activities and thought-processes of the doctors in *Dracula*.

Dr John Seward, MD, is the well-to-do owner of one of the largest private asylums in London, where he resides, unaware until well into the story that the vampire count has his sanctuary next door in the ancient mansion of Carfax, with its dusty chapel full of 'earth-boxes'. Seward, refused by the beautiful Lucy, takes an interest in the special patient Renfield, feeling proud at his novel diagnosis of 'zoophagous maniac'. He underestimates his patient's dangerousness, however, and is severely assaulted, after which Renfield is put into a strait-waistcoat and 'chained to the wall in a padded room'. Seward's medical practice otherwise seems to comprise making his rounds and giving narcotics, such as morphine and chloral, to himself, his friends and his patients. He dictates his notes into a phonograph, which supplies much contemporaneous material for the narrative. When Lucy falls mysteriously ill, with a strange lassitude and pallor, Seward calls on his old teacher from Amsterdam, Professor Van Helsing, who has not only medical but legal and philosophical qualifications. The approach of the two doctors of the mind is contrasted: Seward is a materialist and an admirer of Ferrier. Van Helsing, who is interested in the work of Charcot and Lombroso, extends their ideas into the realm of the supernatural suggesting that hypnosis is but a short way from telepathy and that Dracula is a kind of un-dead 'throwback' with an infantile and criminal mind. Despite their differences they become an effective team, their medical skills being called on first to revive Lucy with blood transfusions, and then to bring Renfield round from a head injury with a craniotomy. Again, Van Helsing takes things further, using the contents of his capacious medical bag for variously breaking and entering, and of course for 'staking' Lucy-as-Vampire and cutting off her head. However, as they chase Dracula across Europe, and into Transylvania, so the scientific and technical approach is less and less evident, and the power of ancient lore comes into its own.

Vampirism does seem in this novel to be some sort of disease. Medical commentators and others have interpreted the story as referring to specific infections, consciously or unconsciously: the appearance of the thousands of rats has suggested the plague, 'un-deadness' and Stoker's mother's tales of early experiences have suggested cholera, mentions of blood, pallor and sudden changes have suggested tuberculosis, the biting has suggested rabies, and last but not least the sexualised and bloody transmission and the possible cause of Stoker's death have suggested syphilis. Dr Van Helsing, in an up-to-date manner, recommends 'sterilisation' of the earth-boxes to prevent the spread.