

The Real History of Dracula
A Quest Club Paper

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If a picture is worth a thousand words, then I knew the image on my TV screen was worth a Quest paper.

I was watching a YouTube channel with real time views of global sites and cities, when there it was: a live shot of Dracula's Castle, direct from Transylvania. I was so excited! This meant that Transylvania really was an actual region in central Romania and not just the name of a private liberal arts college in Lexington, Kentucky! It also meant that this 600-year-old fortress guarding a gorge in the Carpathian Mountains had to be Dracula's home. After all, the castle attracted tourists for years. Why else would all these people be coming here?

Then, on the Bran Castle website, up popped the following message: "It is desirable that visitors to Bran Castle distinguish between the historical reality of Bran and its character and that of Count Dracula from Bram Stoker's novel. Dracula was and remains an imaginary character." Turns out, Bran Castle, the former home of Romania's Queen Marie in the 1920s, is the only castle in Transylvania. Stoker never visited the area. The castle fit the description in his book because he saw a depiction of Bran Castle in England in the late 1800s.

One big takeaway from my armchair trip to Transylvania was the answer to the question, "What's in a name?" "Dracula" was a nickname given to Vlad the Third, a 15th-century warlord in southeastern Europe, just below Transylvania. In 1431, the King of Hungary bestowed Vlad's father with a knightly honor called the Order of the Dragon or Drac. This designation came with a new surname, Dracul. Vlad the Third, would later be known as "son of Dracul" or, Drăculea, hence Dracula. In modern Romanian, the word "drac" would also be used to call someone the Devil, which was a more fitting reference to Vlad the Third for it was he, Vlad the Devil who was better known as Vlad the Impaler to describe his favorite method of execution.

Thus, at this point, all I had was a real Romanian region, and a real historic castle unseen by a late 19th century author who used it as a home to an imaginary character using a real name. Truly, there were more Dracula details to discover. It was also clear that the reality of the real history of Dracula would be the number and length of the rabbit holes you can travel down. So, we'll try to answer three questions today: "Why Vampires?" "How did Dracula become the world's most famous vampire?" and "With the vampires among us now - what's the price of garlic today?"

The first known reference to vampires appears in written form in Old Russian in 1047 AD. The term for vampire is "upir," which has uncertain origins, but its possible literal meaning is "the thing at the feast or sacrifice," referring to a potentially dangerous spiritual entity that people believe could appear at rituals for the dead. The vampire was blamed for a variety of problems, but particularly disease, at a time when knowledge of bacteria and viruses did not exist. It is now believed that two likely diseases were rabies, whose name comes from a Latin term for "madness," and pellagra, which caused the "4 D's": dermatitis, diarrhea, dementia and death.

The actual term "vampire" made its written debut in 1725. Around that time, the ruling class of the Hapsburg Empire was hearing alarming stories coming out of the borderlands of bodies that had been exhumed and staked and then cremated because townspeople believed the corpses had been terrorizing the local community as vampires. One such account described a man who died, after which several other people died suddenly of what was viewed as "vampirism." The man was exhumed and found with traces of fresh blood on his face, skin and clothes. Assuming he was a true vampire, they drove a stake through his heart, according to their custom, whereupon he let out a noticeable groan and bled copiously.

In his article, *Forensic Pathology and the European Vampire*, researcher Paul Barber notes that gases swelling the body could make a corpse look like it had recently been alive and feeding.

Dead bodies can also make a certain limited number of sounds, and there is considerable reason to believe that the sound described here is that of the body rupturing as the result of the bloating caused by decomposition.

By the mid-18th century, a report from the Austrian empress's personal physician determined the existence of vampires to be a medical impossibility. The report disparaged Slavic communities whose folklore had long considered vampires a real threat. Nevertheless, during the so-called Great Vampire Epidemic, from 1725 to 1755, vampire myths “went viral” across the continent.

Fast forward to the arrival of 19th century – it is a time of Romanticism, of Gothic fiction, and of an explosive planetary event that would connect the real history of Dracula to Frankenstein!

1816 was a global climate crisis triggered by the April 1815 eruption of the Mount Tambora volcano in Indonesia. It remains the most powerful eruption in recorded human history, causing global cloud cover and creating a "Year Without a Summer." As the world was entombed in this volcanic winter, a famous group of five persons gathered along Switzerland's Lake Geneva at the Villa Diodati, a location that would become the birthplace of modern horror and science fiction.

The participants included Lord Byron, the celebrity poet who hosted the group at this rented villa; John Polidori, Byron's 20-year-old personal physician and aspiring writer; Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley), the 18-year-old daughter of English writers and philosophers Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin; Percy Bysshe Shelley, the writer and poet who had recently eloped with Mary; and, Claire Clairmont: Mary's stepsister and Byron's mistress, who was pregnant with his child.

Stuck inside the villa for days by "almost perpetual rain" and apocalyptic thunderstorms, the group entertained themselves by reading German ghost stories. Inspired by these tales, Lord Byron challenged his guests to each write a ghost story. Mary Shelley struggled for days to find a

subject until a late-night discussion about galvanism (using electricity to reanimate life) triggered a "waking nightmare". She saw a "pale student of unhallowed arts" kneeling beside a creature he had stitched together—the core image of what would be her masterpiece, *Frankenstein*, that would be published in 1818.

Lord Byron began and then abandoned a vampire tale called "Fragment of a Novel" and focused on an apocalyptic poem called *Darkness* about the sun being extinguished. John Polidori took the abandoned fragment by Lord Byron and expanded it into a story of a character called Lord Ruthven. In doing so, he invented the "aristocratic vampire," a suave predator that was a thinly veiled, unflattering caricature of Lord Byron himself. When *The Vampyre* was published in 1819, it was erroneously attributed to Lord Byron, which made it an instant bestseller across Europe.

Despite his protests for credit, Polidori struggled to escape Byron's shadow. Polidori died in 1821 at age 25, likely by suicide, just as his creation was becoming a cultural phenomenon. In Polidori's novella, *The Vampyre* is a confident aristocratic gentleman with purely evil intentions under the surface. He seduces his way through high society and charms everyone he meets at least initially. Thus, the modern image of the vampire is born. Before Polidori, vampires were a foreign entertainment, a possible medical mystery, a folk legend. After *The Vampyre*, the threat of this monster is real and immediate. The vampire could be in your parlor right now.

After Polidori, vampire stories became much more familiar. In 1845 and for two years running, you could read *Varney the Vampire*, a landmark Victorian Gothic horror penny dreadful by James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest. The tale was serialized in pamphlets totaling 232 chapters over 109 installments. Readers were introduced to a more sympathetic, tragic vampire in Sir Francis Varney, but one who now possessed new traits, such as fangs, puncture wounds, superhuman strength and hypnotic powers.

After nearly 667-thousand words, *Varney the Vampire's* story concluded in 1847, the year that Bram Stoker's story began. Stoker, was born in Clontarf, Ireland, three miles from Dublin.

According to Jarlath Killeen at Trinity College Dublin, "His father, Abraham Stoker senior, was a respected, civil servant. His mother, Charlotte Thornley, was known to be reform-minded, and possibly superstitious." Biographers suggest Bram heard his mother's folktales and tales of horror while he was bedridden with an unknown illness until the age of seven. After his recovery, Stoker attended Trinity College, Dublin, where he became interested in the theater even as he pursued mathematics, graduating in 1867 to take a position with the Irish Civil Service.

The call of the stage for Stoker was such that he agreed to be an unpaid drama critic for the *Dublin Mail*. This led to a timely encounter with the esteemed actor Henry Irving. In December 1876, Stoker gave a favorable review of a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* featuring Henry Irving who then invited Stoker for dinner. A friendship began and Stoker would later move to London to become Irving's personal assistant and business manager at the Lyceum Theatre which Irving owned, a role that continued until Irving's death 27 years later.

Speaking of relationships, in 1878, Stoker married Florence Anne Lemon Balcombe. Fun fact: she had the choice of marrying either Bram Stoker or Oscar Wilde. Stoker had known Wilde from their student days and had proposed Wilde for membership in the university's Philosophical Society while Stoker was president. At the time, Florence was twenty. Stoker was thirty-one years old, and Wilde was only twenty-four. Wilde was upset at Florence's decision, but Stoker later resumed the acquaintanceship and Stoker and Wilde remained friends. To complete the family circle, the Stokers had only one child, a son Noel, born in 1879.

Stoker was admitted into Wilde's literary circle of artistic and prominent figures. Stoker had close associations with Arthur Conan Doyle, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Walt Whitman, and Mark

Twain. The presence of these literary individuals reminds us of the context in which Bram Stoker's writing took place in the late 1800s. He knew of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The War of the Worlds*.

Another novel of the period was *Carmilla*, by Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu. *Carmilla* tells the story of young Laura, who lives in an isolated Austrian castle. When the enigmatic Carmilla arrives after a carriage accident, the two girls form an intense friendship marked by romantic advances and unsettling mysteries. As young women in nearby towns begin dying from an unknown illness, Laura experiences disturbing nightmares and her health mysteriously declines.

Carmilla is a horror story as cultural commentary, using vampires as a medium for the message of change as the close of the century was approaching. As writer J. A. Hernandez explains it, "Horror as a genre constantly changes with current events, wrapping common fears into stories and reflecting them back at society." One of the deepest fears in Victorian society at the turn of the century was women's empowerment. Le Fanu used a lesbian vampire as a metaphor for forbidden sexuality and the perceived threat of female empowerment in Victorian society.

According to his son, Bram Stoker always claimed the inspiration for *Dracula* came from a nightmare induced by "a too-generous helping of dressed crab at supper" - a dab of blarney the writer would dish out but no one took seriously (like Ebenezer Scrooge dismissing Marley's ghost as "an undigested bit of beef"). While the nightmare aspect may be valid, Stoker's notes suggest the story may have its genesis in a disturbing vision or reverie - this exemplifies the way truth, falsehood, and speculation always conspire to distort *Dracula* scholarship.

Something in the Blood, David J. Skal's 2006 biography of Bram Stoker, sets the story:

It is an undisputed fact that Stoker spent at least seven years working on Dracula, from conception to publication, but this leads to several unsupported assumptions. First, that it was his masterwork largely because he spent seven years on it, and that the book is renowned for the endless care Stoker took in its crafting. Second, that a work span of seven years indicates unusually painstaking and authoritative research. In reality, Stoker initially had trouble recognizing the essential elements that would make his tale click. The reason Dracula took seven years to write was that Stoker had great difficulty writing it, especially cutting through the overload of his own imaginative clutter. The process was twisted, arduous, and constantly interrupted. He stopped to write other books. He questioned himself. He censored himself. He had second, even third thoughts about almost everything. In the end, he wondered if the book would even be remembered.

It was with this as backdrop that, in March 1890, Bram Stoker first jotted down a few notes on a scrap of paper: “old dead man made alive – waxen colour – dead dark eyes – what fire in them – not human – hell fire.” - a simple beginning to what Stoker called his “Original Foundation Notes and Data for His Dracula.” There are more than 100 pages of outlines, plot ideas, and research notes, compiled by the author over the seven years he developed the book. (These notes changed ownership several times after Stoker’s death until they were acquired by The Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia in 1970 where they remain available for public viewing.) Stoker’s notes include giving his vampire new characteristics, including the ability to shape shift (to change form to a wolf or a bat), to travel as mist, to see in the dark, and to be repelled by garlic and crosses.

Readers would note a structural difference in *Dracula* - Stoker wrote the story as an epistolary novel, a literary genre told through documents—typically letters, diary entries, newspaper accounts or reports—rather than a traditional, continuous narrative. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker are two other examples of the style.

Here is an important piece of real Dracula history - Bram Stoker's own success did not start with *Dracula* the novel, but with a British play based on that novel. The website crimereads.com recounts how eight days before the novel went on sale in 1897, the Lyceum Theatre, for which Bram Stoker was the business manager, performed a theatrical adaptation that Stoker had written himself. Sylvia Starshine, the editor of the play's first published edition, suggests this was to protect against unlicensed theatrical versions directly adapting the novel, profiting from the ideas; if anyone did write a similarly themed vampire play after *Dracula* hit the bookshelves, he could then bury the other work on the grounds of copyright infringement.

It is as the book prepares for publication that the real history of Dracula becomes surreal. In his original preface, Bram Stoker claims that many of the characters are real people, and that the book is to serve as a warning of a very real evil. London at the time is recovering from a spate of horrible murders in Whitechapel (Jack the Ripper) and with the killer still on the loose, the publishers couldn't print such a story without running the risk of generating mass panic.

The editor calls for changes. Stoker is told that *Dracula* would be published as fiction or not at all. When the novel is finally released, the first 101 pages have been cut, and numerous alterations have been made to the text. According to University of Virginia Professor Stanley Stepanic, Stoker deletes about three chapters at the start of the novel to save space, streamline the story and reduce the cost of printing. The primary remains we have of these missing pages is a short story published by Stoker's widow, Florence, that appeared for the first time in a 1914 short

story collection, “Dracula’s Guest and Other Weird Stories.” As an added twist in this tale, according to a 2018 *Time* magazine article, in the 1980s, the original *Dracula* manuscript is reported to be discovered in a barn in rural northwestern Pennsylvania. Believed lost for decades, the document is subsequently purchased by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and remains in his private collection. The manuscript begins the story on page 102 with Jonathan Harker’s journey on a train. How did the document end up in a barn in northwest Pennsylvania? It’s a mystery wrapped up in a horror story somewhere out there on the Internet.

But there’s more. Three years after Bram Stoker published *Dracula*, Valdimar Ásmundsson, the founder, owner and editor of a newspaper in Iceland, decided in 1900 to serialize the novel and that he’d handle the translation himself. But, allegedly, Ásmundsson took more than a few liberties and created a very distant cousin of the book into Icelandic. His “translation,” *Powers of Darkness*, is a total reinvention of the original text. The Icelandic version of the Count is much more political. Dracula is a fierce believer in social Darwinism and he leads an international conspiracy that tries to overthrow Western democracy! The story is more erotic and way shorter than the original. Most Icelanders had no idea about this until a scholar from the Netherlands retranslated it in 2014. Although *Dracula* scholars knew about the existence of *Powers of Darkness* as far back as 1986, they didn’t know it was a different story.

Meanwhile, back in 1897, when *Dracula* appeared, British press like *The Athenaeum* claimed that Stoker’s skill and imaginative conceptions were not sufficient to make his book high literature. Other news outlets were more enthusiastic, with the *Pall Mall Gazette* insisted that:

Mr. Bram Stoker should have labelled his book “For Strong Men Only,” or words to that effect. Left lying carelessly around, it might get into the hands of your maiden aunt who believes devoutly in the man under the bed, or of the new parlourmaid with

unsuspected hysterical tendencies. “Dracula” to such would be manslaughter. It is for the man with a sound conscience and digestion, who can turn out the gas and go to bed without having to look over his shoulder more than half a dozen times as he goes upstairs, or more than mildly wishing that he had a crucifix and some garlic handy to keep the vampires from getting at him.

Dracula attracted little attention from scholars until the latter 20th century when more attention began focusing on Stoker’s novel as commentary on cultural anxieties in the late 1800s.

Research areas included reverse colonization, the 19th century’s rise of the "New Woman," and the use of the vampire metaphor for introducing students to principles of Marxist thought.

Fun Fact: Vampire studies are offered at many colleges and universities today. At Indiana University’s Department of Slavic/East European Languages and Cultures you can sign up for SLAV-T 230: The Vampire in European and American Culture. It is a three-credit course taught by Professor Jeffrey Holdeman. You’ll explore the eastern European origins of the vampire and how the vampire in its look, nature, vulnerabilities, and threat has changed over the centuries, from premodern belief systems to European literature to cinema and games, to subcultures today.

Remember the “production” of *Dracula* at the Lyceum Theatre before the novel was published? Though the book was only a moderate financial success in its day, a critical copyright battle would completely change *Dracula*’s fate and catapult the character into literary renown. In 1922, a German studio adapted the novel into the now classic silent film “Nosferatu” without paying royalties. Despite changes in character names and minor plot points, the parallels were obvious, and Bram Stoker’s widow sued the movie studio into bankruptcy.

To prevent more plagiarism attempts, Florence Stoker decided to establish copyright over the stage version of “*Dracula*.” In 1927, the American publisher and play producer Horace Liveright

mounted a Broadway production featuring a revised and streamlined script that American audiences loved. Its star was a rising Hungarian immigrant actor named Bela Lugosi. "Dracula" enjoyed 261 performances on Broadway and then went on a national tour to rave reviews. Most appealing was Lugosi's thick-accented, creepy demeanor, even though he never said the oft-misquoted line, "I want to suck your blood!"

Then Hollywood beckoned -- Dracula was a perfect vehicle for the monster films so lovingly produced at Universal Studios. The director Tod Browning, who specialized in weird movies about monsters, the occult and "freaks," urged the studio head, Carl Laemmle Jr., to cast Lugosi. Laemmle at first demurred and wanted a bigger name to play Dracula. Fortunately, Lugosi was in Los Angeles with the touring company of the play precisely at this time. After Laemmle saw him, Lugosi put on his continental charm and lobbied as hard as he could for the role. Bela finally got the part after accepting the measly salary of \$500.00 a week, which was about 25 percent of the going rate for a lead actor. The 1931 film took only seven weeks to shoot. In the years since, "Dracula" has been commended by the Library of Congress, the U.S. National Film Registry and the American Film Institute as one of the best horror films ever made.

The reel history of Dracula, as in R-E-E-L, should be its own Quest Club paper. I U Professor Jeffrey Holdeman owns a collection of about 600 DVD titles of vampire movies from around the world that has taken 15 years to acquire. Plus, just since the beginning of this year, headlines from the big screen included the new movie "Dracula: A Love Tale" directed by Luc Besson, and word that Ryan Coogler's vampire horror film *Sinners* made history for the 2026 Oscars by earning 16 nominations, the most ever for a single film. The small screen will be home to a new vampire comedy show on CBS called *Eternally Yours*. The stage is reeling with announcements that a musical adaptation of the 1987 horror classic *The Lost Boys* is coming to Broadway, and

that Emmy, Tony and Grammy winner Cynthia Erivo is playing all 23 characters in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in performance at London's West End Theatre.

But back in the real history of Dracula, spelled R-E-A-L, there is the work of Georgia Institute of Technology researcher John Edgar Browning who studies the "real vampire community," people who really consume human and/or animal blood. It is done out of a need that, according to Browning, derives from the lack of subtle energies their bodies produce. Organizations such as the New Orleans Vampire Association and the Atlanta Vampire Alliance warn members about the serious health risks and advise significant safety precautions, such as obtaining blood from properly screened donors. As Browning notes, "Indeed, human vampires don't simply live among us— they are us, in almost every detail... Some of us work with vampires every day or pass them on the street without ever knowing it. But, to understand real vampires, how they think and how they act, we must understand our own reactions to them."

And to further that understanding, perhaps a road trip is in order? There is news coming from eastern Europe that the world's first vampire theme park is on track to open next year! Dracula Land, a gigantic Romanian resort hub, features six thematic areas that will take you from Transylvania to London to New Orleans as you explore the demons and ghouls of folklore from around the world, escape Dracula, and train to be a vampire hunter. All true!

Dracula has stayed on bookshelves since Day One in 1897. The book has never been out of print and has been translated into at least 30 different languages. The novel was even distributed free of charge to American soldiers in World War Two in a special 'Armed Services Edition' paperback format to fit in G.I. trouser pockets.

The Real History of Dracula – A Quest Paper
Bruce Haines March 6, 2026

The vampire is one of the most popular and enduring images in the world. Nina Auerbach, the late University of Pennsylvania professor who taught courses on Victorian literature, horror, and film, and who wrote the 1995 classic, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, has said, “Every age creates the vampire that it needs.” This explains Dracula’s “shape shifting” from Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee to Robert Pattinson and now Caleb Landry Jones.

The vampire is used by authors and artists to send out a horrid scream, a societal critique, or a mental and medical challenge. It is the continued storytelling and reimagining of the vampire legend that allows vampires to live forever! Thus, the real history of Dracula lies in the mind of the beholder.

Oh, and, as a public service - garlic is 79-cents for a single bulb or five for \$2.49 at Kroger.

Thank you.

Resource List

Books

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