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# *Dracula, from History to Cinema*

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## *Summery*

The goal of my paper is to present Dracula as the 'real king' of the Eastern Europe culture. Vlad of Wallachia was a real character who lived in Transylvania between 1431 and 1476. His nickname "Dracula" comes from Romanian "Dracul" and means "Dragon". After his death, Vlad earned the surname Tepes (Impaler) because of he was used to impale his enemies. From this character, Bram Stoker derived material to write his masterpiece *Dracula* (1897). The book is composed by different diaries written by people who faced the monster. This was the beginning of the vampire legend that fascinated a large audience, from children to adults. But the real myth of Dracula comes from movies. Famous 'vampire' actors had been Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, but we find good examples also in Coppola's *Dracula*, *Blade*, *Underworld* and *Twilight*. Finally, we should remember famous TV series as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood*.

## *Key-words*

1. Dracula
2. Bram Stoker
3. Vlad Tepes
4. Bela Lugosi
5. Christoper Lee

## *Draft-paper*

This paper needs to describe Dracula as fictional and historical character. It is divided into three parts. Firstly I will introduce Bram Stoker's Dracula as literary character. Secondly, I will discuss Stoker's sources on historical Dracula, or Vlad Tepes of Wallachia. Finally, I will analyze most famous Dracula's movies for cinema.

My first step will be to give a definition of Gothic fiction:

"A mode of narrative fiction dealing with supernatural or horrifying events and generally possessed of a claustrophobic air of oppression or evil" (Dinah Birch & Katy Hooper, Edited by, *Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 290).

In this sense, famous gothic tales are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) Robert Luis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1829), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). But the gothic novel could not exist without vampire fiction as John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). Obviously the most important tale on vampires is Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The tale results from mixing different sources as diaries, notes, etc. taken from different people as the young solicitor Jonathan Harker, his fiancée Mina, her friend Lucy Westenra and Dr. John Seward, an asylum superintendent. The main character is Dracula, an Eastern European vampire who has to suck human blood to survive. Being a demon, Dracula has incredible powers by which subduing the people. Jonathan Harker travels to Dracula's castle in Transylvania for business, but the Count entraps him. Then the vampire decides to go to England to have Mina, Jonathan's fiancée. To save her, Stoker introduces the character of Van Helsing, a doctor expert on vampirism. A part of the novel turns around Van Helsing's chase against Dracula. At the end, the Count returns in Transylvania but there Van Helsing kills him. Obviously, *Dracula* is a novel, but Stoker used a historical character to write his masterpiece.

My second step will be a brief reconstruction on the historical Dracula. When Bram Stoker published his masterpiece (1897), a tradition on the vampire has already been created. His first source could be the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1888) where the vampire was described as a blood-sucking ghost or a soul of a dead man who sucks the blood of living people to survive. His second source could be an article titled 'Transylvania superstition' (1885) by Emily Gerard, a novelist who had lived in Transylvania. She explains the Romanian term "drakuluj" means "devil" while "nosferatu" (from Romanian "nesuferit" = plaguesome) means "vampire after death". But the most important source used by Stoker was probably William Wilkinson, a retired diplomat from Eastern Europe who wrote a book on Wallachia and Moldavia. In Wilkinson's book Stoker discovered the term "Dracula" that means "devil" but also "courage, cruel actions, cunning" in Wallachian language. This is right if we think to the historical Dracula or Vlad Tepes who reigned between 1431 and 1476. Tepes (the Impaler) was a nickname Vlad earned after his death because of his preferred method to kill his enemies, the impalement. His other name, Dracula, was because he was a knight of the Order of the Dragon (Dracul in Romanian language, from ancient Greek δράκων and Latin *draco* = dragon, serpent) to defend the Cross against Turks in Eastern Europe. Vlad developed his sadistic tendencies probably because he spent a part of his childhood in Turkish court. When he returned to Wallachia, he discovered his father and brother had been assassinated by boyars, Wallachian nobles. So, when he earned his throne in 1456, he used the impalement against his father's assassins, personal enemies but also common criminals. Impalement was also a psychological weapon he used threatening Turks. Vlad was initially successful against Sultan but, at the end, he was defeated and killed in battle. However, he earned a sinister fame for his atrocities only after his death. We have German and Slavic manuscripts, Turkish chronicles and Romanian oral narratives on him, but his portrait is not clear. Vlad had described as a cruel psychopathic tyrant or as a hero, so it is impossible to see the truth. Today we know something more on him because of the Radu Florescu and Raymond T. McNally's book titled *In Search of Dracula* (1972) where they reconstructed Vlad's life. So we have seen differences between the historical Dracula and the literary one. But we have also a third Dracula, the movie character.

So my third step will be to give you an idea on most important movies had been realized on Dracula. In my opinion, they are essentially three: Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and Fisher's *Dracula* (1958). Murnau's *Nosferatu* is a masterpiece of the German Expressionism. German actor Max Schreck played Graf Orlock, the first cinematographic Dracula. He is deformed, pale, without hair, pointed ears and teeth. A black coat and long nails completed his disturbing look. And the effect is great. Murnau captured the real Dracula's essence because his *Nosferatu* represents the horror you can find in Stoker's book. This vampire is not beautiful. He has no gentle manners to seduce women. He is only a monster with a mission, to destroy the others' life. Ten years after we find a completely different movie directed by Tod Browning (1931). In this case Bela Lugosi plays Dracula and his interpretation is the opposite of Max Schreck's one. Lugosi was a handsome man with aristocratic manners. His Dracula is a gentleman with a great look. And Lugosi's eyes had a powerful magnetism able to seduce everybody. Browning's fantastic direction is responsible to have "created" this kind of Dracula. But also Lugosi's interpretation is superb. In a time where special effects did not exist, only the actor's experience could make the difference between a bad and a good movie. Terence Fisher's *Dracula* (1958) shows this point in a clear way. The Count is played by Christopher Lee, probably the most famous Dracula in the history of cinema. This movie is different from Murnau and Browning's ones because Lee was able to show a new face of Dracula, the seductive power of the evil. His interpretation represented probably the best cinematographic transposition of Dracula ever made. Other movies had been produced after but, in my personal opinion, they did not surpass these three masterpieces.

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