

## **A Balkan Gothic: Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' and the Balkan Identity**

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### **Abstract**

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Until the 19th century and the national awakenings of the Balkan peoples the West viewed them merely as Christian Turks. However, even when the various Balkan states were created the notions of the West about the Balkans did not alter much. So, this essay's aim is to describe the image of the Balkans in the Westerners' mind. More specifically, this image will be analyzed, not through historical data, but mostly through the contemporary literature of the time, and more precisely, the Gothic Romance genre. Additionally, the focal point of this essay will be Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' and the way the Balkan identity is represented through the various prejudices and notions of a Victorian, British citizen, whose audience is consisted of other 'Westerners'. Finally, the Balkans of literature will be compared to the actual situation in the end of the 19th century-the beginning of the 20th, as far as the Western efforts to impose their control over the Balkans is concerned.

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### **A. The Historical Background of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

From the late Middle Ages, the 15<sup>th</sup> century that is, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century, what today is called the Balkans, was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire. As a result Europeans were not really concerned about the Balkans, other than their being the outer limit of the Ottoman Empire in European terrain. Any thoughts that they might have had about the Balkan populations was limited to the notion of Christian Turks. However, during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all that changed. (Todorova, 1997).

First of all, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Christians in the Balkan Peninsula experienced 'national awakenings' and, thus, formed different nationalisms which resulted in revolutions against the Ottoman Empire.

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This placed the Balkans, especially the southern and eastern Balkans<sup>2</sup>, in the European Powers<sup>3</sup> center of attention, since all of them, more or less had interests lying with the Ottoman Empire's fate. About the northern parts of the Balkans, which belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, nationalism started to take roots there too, especially after the revolution of 1848 in Hungary. What is more, the national awakening of the Slavs in some provinces of the Empire was partly caused by the Magyarisation process, as also attested in Transylvania, where the Romanian nationalism appeared. (Goldsworthy, 1998).

So, the above mentioned issues were known to the Europeans and, as a result, the public opinions were divided in two, either for or against these revolutionary efforts. However, given that romanticism was a very strong influence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sympathy for the revolting populations took substantial dimensions. An example for this is philhellenism, which peaked as a phenomenon in the 1820's. (Todorova, 1997).

In addition, various facts, such as the slaughter and persecution of the Bulgarians by the Ottomans in the 1870's, were presented in the 'western' newspapers of the time and drawing a great deal of attention .

All the above, combined with romantic notions and stereotypes of the time, such as the image of the exotic, oriental, but at the same time barbaric and uncivilized Turk, resulted in exciting the imagination of the Europeans for the East and the Balkans in extension. An outcome of this was travelling towards eastern destinations. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century such journeys would have been lengthy and difficult, however the invention of the railways provided a, relatively, comfortable and faster means of travel. (King, 2004).

Travelers, writers, even early anthropologists, visited the Balkans and then put their experiences into paper, to be shared with the rest of the European public.

These early accounts of the Balkans have contributed in shaping the public's opinion as to the perception of the unity of the Balkans as a whole and as to what is the Balkan Identity.

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<sup>2</sup>In today's Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania.

<sup>3</sup>Mostly the British Empire, the Russian Empire, France, Prussia and the Hapsburgs (Austrian Empire).

Some of the stereotypes that surround the term Balkan are evident in these early works and, of course, are, even subconsciously so, compared with the western European perceptions of what is civilized.

As a result the Balkan is presented as an 'other', but this time, in contrast to the case of the Turks, an 'other' who at the same time is a Christian, and, in a way, another kind of a 'European' at close proximity. The latter is quite evident in the writings of early anthropologists, who tried to interpret the 'Balkan situation' using the theory of the stages of civilization, thus considering the Balkan populations as live figures of their western, uncivilized past.(Todorova, 1997).

This opportunity to visit the south-east, and especially the Balkans, was seized by writers of popular fiction. The most influential and widespread type of literature at the time was the Gothic romance novel. After the Industrial Revolution, Western Europe had 'discovered' science and rationalism, thus becoming somewhat unattractive and unfit for the supernatural and romances. This turned novelists' attention to a vast area, which was not only widely unknown to the European public, but also exciting and untouched by modern civilization. (Goldsworthy, 1998)

## **B. Balkan Gothic: Bram Stoker's Dracula**

The influx of popular fiction writers in the Balkans resulted in a massive number of published novels, whose plots were placed in the general Balkan area. Some famous examples include Lord Byron's romantic poems about Greece, 'The Prisoner of Zenda' by Anthony Hope, Agatha Christie's 'The Secret of Chimneys', Horace Walpole's 'The Castle of Otrando' and the romantic gothic novel 'Carmilla' by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, one of the first novels to launch the 'vampire' in literature.

The common element in these novels is that, even though, they are placed specifically in the general Balkan area, the names of the countries used are fictional. Ruritania, Herzoslovakia, Styria<sup>4</sup> are a few names of such fictitious countries, which, however, sound rather genuinely 'Balkan'. This latter fact, the placement of the plots' settings in a familiar, but simultaneously imaginative place, is possibly a literary technique to excite and horrify effectively and from a certain distance.

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<sup>4</sup>Styria is an actual province in Austria, but in the novel it is used with a supernatural setting.

Undoubtedly, the most notorious and beloved piece of the Gothic Romance novel is Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which was published in 1897. The apparent protagonist of the novel is Count Dracula.

The background for this character was semi-historic, the Prince of Wallachia, Vlad (Tepes) III, also known as Vlad the Impaler or Dracula, which means son of the Dragon.

Vlad the Impaler (1431-1476) became notorious even during his lifetime, firstly for his success in the battlefield against the Turkish soldiers, thus getting his nickname, Impaler. However, he was also known in Europe because of printed stories about him that circulated through Europe and Russia in the 15th, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17th centuries. An oral tradition favorable to Vlad the III started in the 15th century in the area of modern Romania, a tradition that partly influenced both the German and the Russian stories. Stories about Vlad can also be found in some Byzantine and Turkish sources as well as in the memoirs of pope Pius II. Yet the former stories were the most widespread and contain the most well-known elements of the *Dracula* tradition. The German, Russian and Romanian stories about Vlad all differ in the way they portray him. The German stories presented him as a bloodthirsty tyrant and a madman. Furthermore, they were used for propagandistic purposes against Vlad the III by Saxon merchants, with whom he had many disputes. Hungarian king Mathias Corvinus was also instrumental in the creation and circulation of these stories. In these stories, Vlad was responsible for many kinds of unneeded torture and violence against different peoples. In contrast to this view of Vlad, the Russian stories portrayed him as a just and righteous, albeit cruel, but mostly his cruelty was justified because it was a means to protect his kingdom. However, the role of these stories as propaganda seemed to fade quite quickly, and they were absorbed into the normal literature of the time (Leatherdale, 1995, McNally and Florescu, 1994).

Bram Stoker had studied extensively, both historical and contemporary travel sources about the Balkans before writing *Dracula*. Some examples for this are Emily Gerard's book about Transylvania, called 'The Land beyond the Forest' (1888) and an article called 'Transylvanian Superstitions' (1885), also written by her. Additionally, he used William Wilkinson's 'Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia' (1820) and 'Magyarland', by 'A Fellow of the Carpathian Society' (1881), among others. All the above research was mentioned in Bram Stoker's notes, where one encounters, also listed books about folk beliefs in the Balkans. (Goldsworthy, 1998).

A common characteristic of these books, however, is that they were written, mainly, by British officers, such as army or administrative officers, or even, by their wives.

As a result, all of those accounts of the Balkans are, rather, biased since they contain notions of British superiority, annoyance by the different customs and circumstances, such as non-punctual train timetables. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker, a British solicitor, does complain about the punctuality of trains or more precisely the lack thereof: 'It seems to me that the further east you go the more unpunctual the trains. What ought they to be in China?' and 'Left Munich at 8.35 p.m. on 1<sup>st</sup> May, arriving at Vienna early next morning; should have arrived at 6.46, but train was an hour late'. Here, it would seem that Harker has a somewhat patronizing and disapproving tone, perhaps, befitting of the stereotype of the Victorian-era British citizen. (Leatherdale, 1995, Stoker, 1897).

So, it seems, Bram Stoker used some actual facts about Transylvania, and he even based his central character on an actual, historical person, although he never mentioned anything about impalements or torture in the novel that would indicate how much he knew about Vlad the III's infamy. However, he manipulated his research findings in order to serve his purposes more adequately. For example he changed both the origin and the ruling place of Count Dracula. The historical 'Dracula', Vlad the III lived and ruled in Wallachia, but Bram Stoker placed him in the most remote parts of the neighboring Transylvania, the Borgo Pass<sup>5</sup>. (Goldsworthy, 1998). One of the most famous parts of the novel is the one where the English solicitor, Jonathan Harker, travels through Transylvania. What he described was a country of extensive forests, mist-shrouded mountains, howling wolves and gloomy castles. Transylvania, placed in the remote and borderline periphery of Europe, is also placed by Bram Stoker in the mental periphery of Europe as well, in a kingdom where superstitions and demonic creatures, such as werewolves and vampires, are still both widespread and, very much indeed, real. (Leatherdale, 1995).

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<sup>5</sup>The Borgo Pass lies in the borders of Transylvania with Moldavia.

However, the most interesting alteration is Count Dracula's origins. In Bram Stoker's book *Count Dracula* explains his origins to Jonathan Harker thus: 'I am a Boyar'... 'We Szekelys have a right to be proud for in our veins runs the blood of many brave races, which fight as the lions fight... the Ugric tribe bore down from Iceland .... What devil or what witch was ever so great as Attila, whose blood runs through these veins?' So, first and foremost Dracula describes himself as a Szeckler.

Szecklers were frontiersmen, who defended the Austro-Hungarian borders against the Ottomans and as a reward they were autonomous and owned land in the region of these borders. They were related to the Hungarians, spoke the Hungarian language and were Christians as well. However, they also claimed ascendancy from the Huns, and so it not surprising that Dracula claims to have the 'blood of Attila running in his veins'. So Count Dracula has, supposedly, mixed blood in his veins, he is European, but also Hun. This Szeckler identity, double in its nature, both familiar and alien, is given to him so that he sounds exotic, but, nonetheless, European. (Goldsworthy, 1998, Stoker, 1897).

Additionally, in the same speech to Jonathan Harker, Dracula talks about attempted invasions of 'the Magyar, the Lombard, the Avar, the Bulgar and the Turk' in his land. Also, Dracula himself calls his land 'a whirlpool of nations', and when Harker reaches Transylvania, he encounters Slovaks and Czechs, in other words Slavs: 'Here and there we passed Czechs and Slovaks, all in picturesque attire, but I noticed that goiter was painfully prevalent.' (Leatherdale, 1995).

Bram Stoker, explains, through Harker, at the very beginning of his novel the different components that comprise Transylvania's population. 'In the population of Transylvania there are four distinct nationalities: Saxons in the South, and mixed with them the Wallachs, who are the descendants of the Dacians; Magyars in the West, and Szekelys in the East and North. I am going among the latter, who claim to be descended from Attila and the Huns. This may be so, for when the Magyars conquered the country in the eleventh century they found the Huns settled in it.' (Stoker, 1897).

Of course, at the time Transylvania was, really, inhabited by Romanians, Hungarians, Saxons, Gypsies, even Jews and Armenians, although, limited numbers of Serbs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Greeks and Ruthenians, Ukrainians that is, were living in the area as well.

This information is given by Harker in the form of a travel account with ethnographic references, something quite common for the Victorian era traveler, and as is the case with the comment about the thyroid problems in Transylvania's population, Bram Stoker wanted his narrative to sound as realistic as possible.(Leatherdale, 1995).

However, what one could not fail to notice, is that Bram Stoker points out through Harker the 'Balkan Condition'. To be more specific, with all the above details about both Dracula's bizarre origin and the multi-ethnic population in Transylvania, Bram Stoker refers to the problem of the origin of the Balkan population and the Balkan identity in general. Conquered by the Ottomans and having experienced many invasions from many different tribes, such as the Huns, the Slavs and many others, the Balkans were certainly European, but then spoiled in a way, maybe even 'impure' in the eyes of the 'purely' Western-European British gentleman. Basically, the Balkans are presented as an 'Other' in European land, constantly in contrast to the 'normal', western European.

Later on in the novel, Dracula travels to England and attacks the British in their own land. The unholy, impure vampire corrupts and pollutes, in a way the puritan, Victorian-English population. Bram Stoker might have chosen a Balkan origin for his blood sucking vampire in order to articulate the Western Europeans' fear, among others, of the Balkans and the threat that they possess in terms of not only cultural, but also political instability in Europe. According to a contemporary writer's, Charles Woods<sup>6</sup>, view it was proven by history that the 'Near East', the general area of the Balkans that is, has been both the apple of discord and the center stage of wars and it constitutes a constant danger for peace. Moreover, Dracula, as a symbol for the Balkan Identity, is considered a threat because he, too, is European. As Harker noticed when he first encountered Dracula, the Count could speak excellent English and later on in the novel, when he arrives in England he boasts that he does not seem foreign to the English. What is the most dangerous element of this kind of 'other' is that he can pass completely unnoticed because he can disappear into the background, exactly because of his European origin.(Goldsworthy,1998).

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Charles Wood was a British writer and a member of the Royal Geographical Society. He travelled extensively to the Balkans and Asia Minor and was used a special correspondent by several British papers. The above mentioned quote is taken from his article 'The Danger Zone of Europe' (1911).

Furthermore, recent studies suggest another dimension of Dracula's demonization, which is seen as a reverse colonization. To be more specific, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a great deal of invasion novels had been published in England and one plausible interpretation suggests that the British see in Dracula and other monsters the monstrosity of their own colonialist behavior, reflected back at them.

Finally, in the end of the novel, it so happens that an Englishman (Harker), a Dutchman (Van Helsing) and an American (Quincey) slaughter Dracula with symbolically charged weapons: a kukri (symbol of the British imperialism) and a bowie knife (traditional American hunting knife). Basically, as it is the case with real-life political situations, in the novel as well, it takes more than one Great Power to 'extinguish' the Balkan threat. Let us not forget that during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Western Powers interfered a lot in the Balkans in order to 'restore order' in the area. In reality, order in these cases meant western control. The independent Albanian state was to be governed by Dutch, and the problems in the area of Macedonia were to be solved by the means of an Italian governor with five more officers, each one a representative of the five Great Powers (Murszteg agreement<sup>7</sup>, 1903-1908). (Goldsworthy,1998).

In conclusion, Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', seems to be a highly representative of its time work of literature. The eerie gothic atmosphere is intertwined with ethnological and political notions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian-British society, thus embroidering reality and fantasy in a unique and inexplicable setting. Furthermore, various Western European prejudices against the Balkan peoples are reduced to supernatural causes: their, alleged, semi-wild, uncivilized nature is demonstrated as beastly and demonic, not only in the intellectual, but also in the physical sphere. However, Dracula still has another side, which resembles that of the Europeans', as he, and his people, is partly European. This association constitutes a great danger in the Westerners' eyes, for what would happen if the Balkan threat out-influenced Western-European civilization. So, Dracula has to be vanquished for the order of things to remain intact.

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<sup>7</sup>The Murszteg agreement was signed between the Great Powers and the Ottoman Empire as an intervention in Macedonia, because it was claimed by all the surrounding Balkan states.

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