Level 2 First Place

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Bram Stoker's Muse Had An Irish Brogue

Bram Stoker's 1897 masterpiece *Dracula* is one of the best known gothic-horror stories and it has ignited a popular cult-following, inspiring countless books, films, and theater productions. In ancient times vampires were a popular topic to tell tales about. The continued theme appears throughout history and cultures. Even today, vampires have been reimagined in stories all around the world. One especially popular culture that takes vampires into their history is Romania. Many believe the Irish born Stoker found inspiration for his showpiece in Romanian mythology and history. However, since writers often find inspiration for their works based on what they know, it is more plausible that the muse that whispered in his ear had an Irish brogue and not a Romanian accent. Stoker’s magnum-opus was likely inspired by his childhood experiences and the mythology of the Emerald Isle.

Abraham (Bram) Stoker was born in the town of Clontarf in North Dublin, Ireland on November 8, 1847. He was one of the seven children of Abraham Stoker and Charlotte Matilda Blake Thornley (“Bram Stoker”). The renowned author spent the first seven years of his life bedridden with a mysterious illness and captivated by the ghastly supernatural stories his mother spun to entertain him. His Mother’s stories provided vivid details about the horrors of the cholera outbreak that ravaged her native town of Sligo, Ireland in 1832. The incongruity of Stoker’s mother recounting such macabre stories about the horrific circumstances faced by cholera victims to her son, who was also bedridden and facing death, seem bizarre. However, it is clear that the cholera epidemic not only had a deep effect on her life, but that it also left an indelible mark on her son and his writing.

Bram Stoker’s imagination took flight with the morbid accounts spun by his mother. Bram himself said, “I was naturally thoughtful, and the leisure of long illness gave opportunity for many thoughts which were fruitful according to their kind in later years” (“Fitzsimons”). Stoker used details from his mother’s accounts when writing *Dracula.* For instance, Thornley describes the devastating number of cholera victims whose skeletal bodies roamed the Sligo countryside, the many victims who would be buried alive, and the overpowering stench of the dead bodies (O’Hara, Leonie). In the novel, which Stoker originally titled “The Undead'', Dracula’s pale, spectral character is described as being dead, but yet living, praying on the blood of human victims to survive; and the places associated with the vampiric count are described as having a rotting smell (Stoker, Bram). It is clear to see how his mother’s stories, combined with his own mysterious illness, are reflected in Stoker’s seminal work. Stoker’s childhood illness provided another fount for him to draw from as he fashioned his literary character's fascination with blood. For many centuries bloodletting, the practice of cutting a vein and letting blood flow freely, was a common practice in Europe. It was the prescribed cure for a plethora of conditions from seizures to plague (Cohen). The young novelist’s perplexing illness would have been treated with bloodletting, and he would have experienced the familiar lightheadedness associated with blood loss. In the book, Dracula’s victims would fall into a woozy, trance-like state after the vampire would drain them of their lifeforce. The similarity in his likely blood loss experience and that in the book is uncanny. Stoker’s life experiences in Éire, from his mother’s frightful tales to his mystifying illness, would furnish abundant material as he later penned his acclaimed bestseller.

As Stoker grew he would have been enthralled by the tales of blood-thirsty and undead creatures that abound in Irish mythology and folklore. The Irish call the undead the Neamh-Mairbh (O'Hara, Leonie). Stoker, like countless other Irish youths, would have been familiar with the details of such stories, so it is not surprising to see them reflected in his book, *Dracula*. There’s the story of The Dearg Dur, a beautiful girl from the area of Waterford, Ireland. Her greedy father forced her to marry an abusive chief, and after wasting away she returned from the dead to take her revenge on all who had wronged her, causing fear throughout the land. She lured young men with her beauty and sucked all their blood (O’Regan). But out of all the scary Irish stories about the Neamh-Mairbh, the one about the Abhartach has the clearest parallels to Count Dracula. There are several variations to that legend from County Derry, but all share the same key elements of a creature risen from the dead who terrorizes innocents and drinks their blood; and that the creature must be killed in a specific manner, or he will not perish. According to the lore, the Abhartach was a dwarf chieftain that possessed magical powers. As he was cruel to his people, they wished to see him dead, so they sought the help of Cathain, a neighboring chief. Together they attempted to kill Abhartach several times (E.I.). Everytime they believed they had killed the dwarf and buried him, he would return from the dead and ruthlessly demand blood from his subjects. In a state of utter desperation they consulted a Druid, or in some versions, a Christian hermit. The townspeople learned that the only way to kill the undead Abhartach was to drive a sword made from the wood of a yew tree, and to bury him head first into the earth (E.I.). In his book, Stoker mirrors many of the key elements of the Irish vampire into the characters in *Dracula*. After Lucy Westenra falls victim to vampirism, she is killed in a specific way that involves a sword through the heart and the cutting off of her head (Fitzsimons). Similarly, Count Dracula is hunted down, beheaded and a sword is driven through his heart (Stoker, Bram). These methods are the traditional ceremonial steps to vanquish vampires. The similarities between the end of the vampires in Dracula’s story and the end of the mythical Abhartach are easily discerned. The richness of Irish Neamh-Mairbh folk stories is clearly echoed in the pages of Stoker’s *Dracula,* showcasing how *Dracula* is distinctly an Irish thriller.

It is easy to understand that your environment shapes you, that your experiences forge you, and that writers write about what they know. So it is no surprise that a gifted Irish author like Stoker drew inspiration from his motherland and his life. His experiences and surroundings converged to provide the fertile ground that spun a tale that transcends time and cultures. Ireland inspired and nurtured her native son to craft a legend that continues to frighten, fascinate, and intrigue countless generations around the world.

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