Dracula: The Dream Book Of Victorian Culture

Dracula, written by Bram Stoker in 1897, is the dream book of Victorian culture that mirrored the unconscious fears of the threat that the foreign 'other' posed to social stability and Western superiority. Overall, the novel can be interpreted as an insight into late-Victorian society and its rampant paranoia during the period. This is achieved through various themes explored in the novel, such as xenophobia, the fear of moral decay and Dracula's dichotomy, that will be discussed below.

Dracula parallels the distorted perception of superiority that the West had of themselves over nations of the East due to their development of imperialism. However, the idea of reverse colonisation threatened to pull apart the Western identity. The relationship between Harker and Dracula mirrors the image of the coloniser and the colonised. Burns draws from Kaplan's post-colonial theory of 'the imperial gaze' - 'the observer may think they are in control of the process of observing, but when the object of their examination is looking back at them, they see the fragility of their situation.' The imperial gaze denotes the fear the English had of reverse colonization and the instability of their power. Harker is surprised by Dracula's interest in English culture as he finds ' a vast number of English books' in Dracula's library. Dracula's interest in western culture serves as a mask for his sinister intentions towards England. By extension, Dracula embodies the Eastern threat and possibility of reverse colonisation.

The concept of possession originates from the symbolism of blood in Dracula, reflecting the xenophobia of Victorian England. Blood symbolises the fundamental life force of humanity and is utilised as a metaphor for purity and one's identity, as highlighted by Van Helsing in chapter 16 -"Those children whose blood she suck … more and more they lose their blood and by power over them they come to her." Lucy assumes the role of the evil 'other' force that has been contaminated by Dracula. By sucking on the blood of the innocent child, she forcefully possesses the soul of the future generation and corrupts it. Lucy represents the Victorians fear of interracial mixing, as they wanted to preserve the purity of the distinguished English lineage and social hierarchy.

Another fear of the Victorian era, as depicted in Dracula was the fear of atavism. Atavism is the inevitable degeneration of moral values once an evolutionary peak of progress has been reached in society. Max Nordau and Lombroso's theory of degeneration in 1876 argued that if humans could evolve, they could also devolve to become biologically less superior. Count Dracula embodies Lombroso's 'Criminal Man', the profile of a degenerate, as described by Stoker in Jonathan Harker's initial encounter with the count, 'His eyebrows were very massive'…'with bushy hair that seemed to curl at its own profusion.' (23) This is consistent with Lombroso's description in Criminal Man, "the eyebrows are bushy and tend to meet across.' Furthermore, Dracula's 'long, sharp, canines' (29) fit the degenerate criteria of having 'irregularities in the form and position of the teeth.' The animalistic portrayal of Dracula characterises him to be inhuman and uncivilised. In this sense, he is different and the distinction of civility between the people in the West and the East is made. Dracula is also portrayed as having a 'strong-aquiline nose.' The depiction of the aquiline nose, often associated with upper-class tyrants and firmness, highlights the Count's power. Metzdorf argues that Dracula can be concealed in society and 'looks more like a human being than the monster that he was,' The

potential prospect of foreign threat is heightened because the atrocities that Dracula commits is hidden by his ability to blend in. ‘ A stranger in a strange land, he is no one,’ Dracula subverts the stable category of identity because of his dichotomy of being human and subhuman. In London, he is not noticed as a threatening figure because of his lack of social status in England. However, his supernatural features and abilities imply otherwise. Simultaneously, both these dimensions of Dracula give him versatility- his power is able to dominate over any setting.

Dracula and Jack the Ripper are not profiles commonly linked together. However there is a degree of similarity between the notorious serial killer and the publication of Dracula 9 years after. The Star (London 1888) reports the Ripper as, ‘the ghoul-like creature stalks through the streets…is simply drunk with blood.” Similarly, Stoker depicts Dracula as a bloodthirsty vampire lurking the streets “preying on the bodies and souls “(209.) Gothic melodrama that was rampant in the media set a precedent for the form of Stoker’s writing, which manifested the psychological horror in the subconscious minds of Victorians. Another critic, Burke, proclaims that Dracula conjures many preconceptions that surround the Ripper: they have similar identities as a foreigner, a degenerate and a sexual predator. Stoker did not purposefully recreate Jack the Ripper’s persona, but rather, as Burke puts it, ‘The shadow of Jack’s crimes permeated his consciousness.’In spite of this, the similarities between the Ripper and Dracula are overlooked because the background and motives of the two killers are different. Dracula is an aristocrat who kills cultured ladies with tact while Jack rips apart drunken prostitutes in the slums of London. The horrifying portrait of the Ripper set up an underlying paranoia within London during the Victorian era and established the prevalent xenophobia.

For the reasons above, Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula portrays the distorted perception that foreigners threatened Western society. This xenophobia stemmed from the paranoia people felt in this era due contextual events such as Jack the Ripper and the increasing infiltration of foreigners into Victorian society. Ultimately, this is why the novel can be interpreted as a mirror to fears of the late-Victorian society.