Dracula: vampires, perversity and Victorian anxieties
Article by Greg Buzwell
The vampire is a complicated creature: caught between life and death, at once alluring and horrifying. Greg Buzwell considers the way the novel reflects the fears that haunted late 19th-century society – fears of immigration, sexual promiscuity and moral degeneration. The vampire has always been a contradictory figure: on the one hand a repellent blood-sucking creature crawling from the grave, and, on the other, a strangely alluring representation of nocturnal glamour and potent sexuality. The very concept of vampirism horrifies and fascinates in seemingly equal measure, and much of this perverse duality stems from the most famous vampire novel of them all – Bram Stoker’s Dracula, first published in 1897.

First edition of Dracula - Front cover to the first edition of Bram Stoker's novel Dracula, 1897. Yellow was synonymous with the more adventurous and transgressive elements of the Victorian fin de siècle - it was the colour of bruising and decay.

Anxiety and the vampire in late-Victorian Britain
Dracula – described by a reviewer in the 26 June 1897 edition of Punch as ‘the very weirdest of weird tales’ – presents a series of contrasts and clashes between old traditions and new ideas. Stoker uses the figure of the vampire as thinly-veiled shorthand for many of the fears that haunted the Victorian fin de siècle. Throughout the novel, scientific rationality is set against folklore and superstition; old Europe is set against modern London; and traditional notions of civilised restraint and duty are threatened at every turn by the spread of corruption and wanton depravity.

Dracula’s forays into London, for example, and his ability to move unnoticed through the crowded streets while carrying the potential to afflict all in his path with the stain of vampirism, play upon late-Victorian fears of untrammeled immigration. The latter was feared as leading to increased levels of crime and the rise of ghetto communities. Dracula creates several lairs in the metropolis, including one in Chicksand Street, Whitechapel – an area notorious for the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888 – and one in Bermondsey, the location of Jacob’s Island – the low-life rookery immortalised by Charles Dickens in Oliver Twist. The Ripper murders had created a storm of hysteria in the press with the local Jewish community bearing the brunt of the outbursts. The secretive nature of the Jewish ghetto was also cited as a reason why the murders were never solved, with the Jews seen as having closed ranks around one of their own number who had committed the crimes. Such fears, which Dracula mirrors very closely, ultimately lay behind the introduction of The Aliens Act of 1905, which was put in place largely to stem immigration from Eastern Europe.

Seventh Ripper murder' from the Illustrated Police News- Newspaper coverage of the seventh Jack the Ripper murder in Whitechapel, 1888. In Dracula, the post-Jack-the-Ripper urban environment is seen as an area where sensibilities of control are neutralised, and where free-thinking women lack the moral steadfastness to resist evil.

The act of vampirism itself, with its notion of tainted blood, suggests the fear of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and, more generally, the fear of physical and moral decay that was believed by many commentators to be afflicting society. Towards the end of the book the character of Mina, who stands for everything Stoker sees as morally upright and respectable, observes ‘The Count is a criminal, and of criminal type, Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him’ (ch. 25). The Hungarian social critic Max Nordau’s influential book Degeneration, an impassioned attack on what he regarded as the prevalent air of hysteria and moral decline in Western Europe, had been translated into English in 1895. Degeneration was dedicated to the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso whose work used a similar pseudo-Darwinian language to analyse the psychology of the criminal mind. In an era noted for its foppish dandies, its pleasure-seeking aesthetes and the rise and fall of brilliantly flamboyant figures such as Oscar Wilde, Stoker is deliberately aligning Count Dracula with everything ‘respectable’ late-Victorian society would have regarded as morally corrupting, criminal and perverse.

‘Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists’: from Degeneration by Max Nordau, 1895.

Victorian literature tends to present the vampire myth as a sexual allegory in which English female virtue is menaced by foreign predators. For example Sheridan Le Fanu’s short story ‘Carmilla’ (1872) places the virtuous English girl Laura at the mercy of the predatory East European vampire of the title. Dracula follows a similar pattern, with the Count’s attentions focused in particular on Mina, a woman who selflessly (and symbolically) spends her honeymoon nursing her sick husband in a convent, and the beautiful Lucy Westenra, who is, by
contrast, dangerously modern in her ways. All women, though, are seemingly at risk: as the Count suggests when he pointedly taunts Professor Van Helsing and his followers by saying ‘Your girls that you all love are mine already’ (ch. 23). During the course of the book Dracula attacks both Mina and Lucy; but Mina, due to the traditional Victorian qualities of determination and loyalty towards her husband is able to resist his advances. The rather more free-spirited Lucy is not so lucky.

Some critics have argued that Stoker uses the character of Lucy to attack the concept of the New Woman – a term coined towards the end of the Victorian era to describe women who were taking advantage of newly available educational and employment opportunities to break free from the intellectual and social restraints imposed upon them by a male-dominated society. Those who took a hostile attitude towards the New Woman saw her either as a mannish intellectual or, going to the opposite extreme, an over-sexed vamp. Stoker certainly portrays Lucy as racily ‘forward’ in her desires. At one point Lucy receives three proposals of marriage on the same day and comments, as she regrets having to turn down two of the proposals: ‘Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?’ (ch. 5). Lucy’s moral weakness allows Dracula to prey repeatedly upon her during the night, and only a series of desperate blood transfusions from each of her former suitors – a sickly symbolic echo of Lucy’s desire for three husbands (and thus three lovers) – delay, for a while, the inevitable. As Lucy joins the ranks of the ‘undead’ she herself becomes a vampire, leaving her tomb by night to feed upon a succession of defenceless children in a parodic distortion of the Victorian ideal of maternal femininity. When confronted by Van Helsing after one such raid, Lucy behaves in a manner that would have been viewed as an affront to both femininity and motherhood: ‘With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog grows over a bone’ (ch. 16). For Stoker, Lucy’s decline from the Victorian feminine ideal to the perceived selfish unnaturalness of the New Woman is complete.

Promotion for the film adaptation of Dracula starring Helen Chandler and Bela Lugosi: 1931 film version; the scene shows Dracula at the point of attacking Lucy. The two women in Dracula (1897), Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray, embody two different views of womanhood, and meet very different fates.

Keynotes, a collection of short stories
Keynotes (1893) by George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne) is a collection of short stories seen at the time as typical of the ‘new woman’ sensibility. In the stories women manage their relationships with other women in a way that excludes patriarchal power structures.

Dracula and Modernity
Bram Stoker includes numerous references to the very latest ideas and inventions in his novel. Dr Seward keeps his diary using a phonograph which was a relatively new and expensive piece of technology in 1897; similarly, references to Kodak cameras, portable typewriters, telegrams being sent across Europe and the blood transfusions carried out by Professor Van Helsing all reflect the rapid technological changes taking place in the late-Victorian period. In addition, as already shown in the earlier mention of Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, the characters in the novel frequently refer to contemporary theories in medicine and psychology.

The entire novel is presented in the form of letters, diaries and newspaper cuttings: so the scientific method of observing and recording information is integral to both the structure of the book itself, and to the attempts of Van Helsing and his friends to destroy Dracula. Set against this atmosphere of scientific advance, however, are the intangible concepts of religious faith and the supernatural. Van Helsing may use blood transfusions in an attempt to keep Lucy alive, but he also resorts to garlic flowers and crucifixes to hold the vampire at bay. Throughout the novel there is a sense that Dracula, with his ability to pass through keyholes like a mist and his affinity with bats, rats and wolves, represents the inexplicable; an alien force which science on its own cannot defeat. Early in the novel Jonathan Harker observes the Count climbing lizard-like down the outside of the castle walls. Unsurprisingly the sight shakes him to the core. Returning to his room he writes ‘… in my diary in shorthand all that has happened since I closed it last. It is the nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance. And yet, unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have powers of their own which mere “modernity” cannot kill’ (ch. 3). Dracula suggests modernity and science may have their limits and, faced with the supernatural figure of the Count, Harker fears such limits may have been reached.

Written by Greg Buzwell
Greg Buzwell is Curator for Printed Literary Sources, 1801 – 1914 at the British Library; he is also co-curator of a major exhibition on Gothic literature, Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination, which runs at the Library from October 2014 to 20 January 2015. His research focuses primarily on the Gothic literature of the Victorian fin de siècle. He is also editing a collection of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s ghost stories, The Face in the Glass and Other Gothic Tales, for publication this autumn.