

arvada  center

# PRACULA

*A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really*

- STUDY GUIDE -





# BREAKING THE NARRATIVE

In *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really*, writer Kate Hamill has adapted the classic Gothic horror novel *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, to upend the sexism often seen in horror and Victorian fiction. Her take on the story presents vampirism as a metaphor for the patriarchy, and really emphasizes that women are not just damsels in distress; they can fight monsters too with both their strength and their brains. This *Dracula* adaptation shows the power women have when they take control and steer their own destiny. Hamill is known for taking classic stories and bringing women to the foreground, and in *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really* we see gender-bending roles such as vampire hunter Van Helsing being played as a woman. A really tough woman!

## CHARACTER LIST

**Mina Harker** - Smart, caring, and loyal schoolmistress, pregnant with Jonathan Harker's child. Raised to be a lady but with a fire deep inside, she uses her brains and resourcefulness to help Van Helsing find Dracula, learning just how much potential she actually has.

**Lucy Westenra** - Mina's playful and vivacious best friend. In a relationship with Dr. Seward, and the first one to fall under Dracula's spell.

**Jonathan Harker** - Just a really good guy. A little delicate. Very British. A lawyer who has to travel on business to help Dracula deal with real estate paperwork in Romania and must leave pregnant Mina behind in England.

**Dr. George Seward** - Head doctor at an insane asylum and in a relationship with Lucy. A good man, but a product of his era and prone to talking down to women (or mansplaining, as the current vernacular would say.)

**Dracula** - Centuries-old vampire with an aristocratic air and dark, evil parasitic soul. An excellent mimic, he's incredibly strong with supernatural powers.

**Renfield** - Dracula's biggest fangirl. A madwoman locked up in the insane asylum who seeks Dracula's approval and believes he will make her free. You could say she has Daddy issues.

**Dr. Van Helsing** - Tough as nails American female vampire hunter with a big scar on her face who is called upon to help Lucy get better after being bitten by a vampire. Knows that sometimes you have to rely on things outside of traditional medicine and isn't afraid to embrace the supernatural and folk medicine. A bit of a know-it-all.

**Marilla** - One of the vampire wives of Dracula. More animal than human. Doubles as Maid, a resentful servant.

**Drusilla** - One of the vampire wives of Dracula. More animal than human. Doubles as Miller, a brutal asylum worker, and Merchant who just wants to make a sale.

# PLOT SUMMARY

Kate Hamill's adaptation of Bram Stoker's classic Gothic horror novel generally follows the original story. We start with asylum patient Renfield saying a twisted version of the Lord's Prayer while stuck in the asylum, warning us of what is to come. London lawyer Jonathan Harker travels to Romania to help Count Dracula with some real estate papers for Dracula's own move to London, leaving his pregnant wife Mina back home. Jonathan talks to Dracula about his pregnant wife and her beautiful friend Lucy. While Jonathan is away, Mina spends her time with Lucy, chatting about womanhood and sharing secrets about their men. Jonathan's letters home to Mina get increasingly more strange, and she starts to worry.

Lucy begins acting very strangely, and Mina takes care of her during her weird illness. Mina hopes Lucy's fiance Dr. George Seward, chief physician at the insane asylum, can help. He finds a strange mark on her neck, but is clueless as to what is wrong with her. Vampire hunter with modern sensibilities Van Helsing (that's DOCTOR Van Helsing) arrives and lets them know that Lucy is transforming into a vampire, and that they must hunt for the vampire who turned her - but first Lucy needs a blood transfusion. Dr. Seward is not quite following along, not believing. In this adaptation, the women not only have to outwit the vampire Dracula, but also the inept men around them.

Mina sees Jonathan at the market, disheveled and not making sense. He can't remember anything that happened, or how he managed to return to England. She brings him home to recover, and he seems to get better. Meanwhile, Seward is caring for Lucy, but interferes with Van Helsing's cures such as garlic around Lucy's neck.



Jonathan and Mina are asleep together in their bed, when Jonathan wakes up, and seemingly possessed, begins squeezing Mina as hard as he can. She slaps him and hears him say "He is come." Dracula and his vampire wives have some type of magnetic pull on Lucy, and she dreamily approaches them. Mina desperately tries to stop Lucy but Dracula feeds her his own blood and they all begin to surround Mina. Van Helsing gets there just in time and stops the vampires with silver powder. But it's too late for Lucy, and as her body is wrapped in white linen, the maid steals the jewelry from Lucy's body.

Jonathan seems to recover from his illness, but he's still acting strange, and Van Helsing is very suspicious. Van Helsing asks Mina to help her watch for the vampires, seeing more in Mina than Mina sees in herself. Mina is scared, but she agrees to help Van Helsing, and they go to Lucy's tomb at the church to see if the vampires have nested there. Seward is already

paying his respects to Lucy. As they argue over whether the two women are strong enough to be running around in the night chasing after vampires, they see Lucy. Glowing, like an angel. Except she's no angel. As Lucy beckons her fiance to come to her, Van Helsing steps in and drives a stake through Lucy's heart.

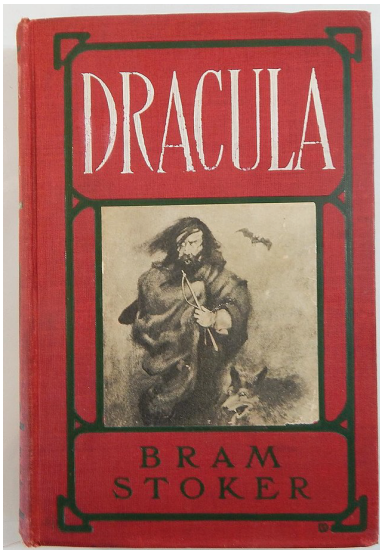
Finally, Seward understands that Van Helsing has been speaking the truth, and they all go to the asylum to shake down Renfield and get information about Dracula. Dracula is able to control Renfield, and later he is able to control Jonathan too. Dracula the parasite. They lock up Jonathan in the asylum as well - to keep him AND themselves safe. Dracula arrives for Jonathan, and Renfield begs Dracula to set her free. He gives her a rope, telling her to "free herself."

They go back to the church to fight Dracula's wives, then Dracula himself. Mina finds all of her strength and plunges the wooden stake Van Helsing gave to her right through Dracula's heart. Over and over and over. With Dracula now out of the picture, Van Helsing leaves, warning Mina to watch Jonathan carefully, and giving her a stake to protect herself.

## WRITING DRACULA

Irish writer Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* in 1897, and his classic novel gives a good representation of Victorian ideals at the time. At a dinner in 1890, Bram Stoker's friend Arminius Vambery told him about a book called *The Accounts of Principalities of*

*Wallachia and Moldavia* by William Wilkinson. This rare book was at the Subscription Library in Whitby, England, and was so rare that you could only read it under the watchful eye of the librarian. Bram Stoker went to the library, and from this book he scribbled down some notes in his journal.



**1902 BOOK COVER**



**BRAM STOKER**

The note he wrote was: "*Voivode (Dracula)*

*Dracula in Wallachian language means DEVIL. Wallachians were accustomed to give it as a surname to any person who rendered himself conspicuous either by courage, cruel actions, or cunning."*

With that, Stoker had the final piece for his story about a real-life bloodthirsty fifteenth-century Wallachian warlord known as Vlad "The Impaler" Tepes, also known as Dracula. He stopped by the Whitby Museum, where he looked at old maps and created a route from London to Romania. He also stopped down at the Whitby Harbour, where he heard tales of the sailing vessel *Dmitri* that ran aground a few years earlier with only a small



number of surviving crew members left. The ship's cargo contained mysterious crates of dirt, and some people claimed to see a large black dog run from the ship to the nearby church graveyard. Somewhere between fact and fiction was the story that Bram Stoker would create that is still being read today.

Bram Stoker presented the story as truth, claiming that Mina and Seward were friends of his. The narrative of the book was presented through letters, diary entries, and articles from newspapers. Worried about what the spread of a story like this could do, his publisher rejected it. The community was scared about a series of murders in Whitechapel, and they were worried this book could create mass panic with that serial killer still loose (who was named Jack the Ripper later).

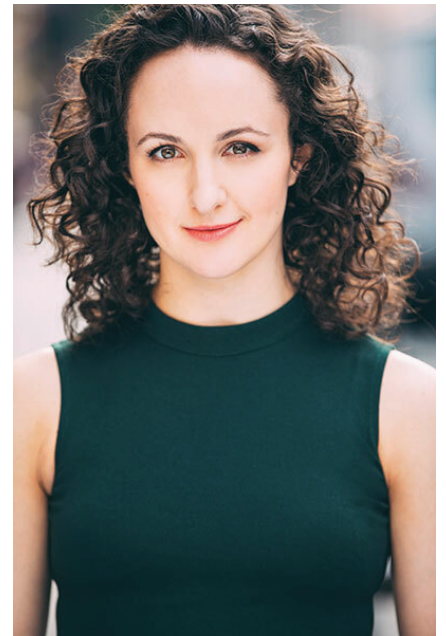
Stoker went back to his story, cutting a lot of factual details, thousands of words, and changing Dracula's ultimate fate. After spending at least seven years dedicated to writing *Dracula*, the novel was released on May 26, 1897. Although his novel was critically well received, he didn't make a lot of money off of it, and only gained fame after his death.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH WRITER KATE HAMILL

Portland Center Stage Literary Manager Kamilah Bush talked to *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really* writer Kate Hamill about "monster" stories, the fun of horror, and reclaiming classic stories as a feminist playwright.

Kamilah Bush: So much of your work includes adapting classics with a little twist. Can you talk about where that pull comes from, and what made you interested in picking *Dracula* to tackle in your canon?

Kate Hamill: Well, I was approached by Classic Stage Company in New York about adapting one of two texts - either *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*. And I read both, and I thought, y'know... *Dracula* is going to be the bigger challenge. The source material has lots of inherent challenges - people turn into bats and wolves! It's been done a million ways already! Everybody already knows the basic beats of the story! - and also is quite, ahm, misogynistic and xenophobic. So as a feminist playwright, I thought it was a really interesting challenge to take on, particularly in reclaiming a classic narrative and finding new avenues and meaning. And it also seemed... fun? I mean, people turn into bats and wolves! People suck other people's blood! It's got a lot of opportunities for fun as well as horror, and that was interesting to me.



KATE HAMILL

K.B.: The full title of the play is *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really*. A lot of your

K.B.: The full title of the play is *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really*. A lot of your adaptations have a grounding in feminist politics, but this is the first one that is specifically labeled a “revenge” fantasy. What about this story made revenge a theme you wanted to explore?

K.H.: Hahaha, that is a great question. Well - the story is about people who are not men standing up against serial predators, and that kind of empowering action felt like a very satisfying revenge fantasy. I mean, wouldn't it be great to stab toxic masculinity in its ancient heart? There's a kind of joy in that as well as fear. And it's exaggerated, you know, anything with vampires is inherently heightened - so that's part of the fantasy element.

K.B.: Another unique quality of your work is irreverence and, quite frankly, a bunch of silliness! This play has a lot of humor but is decidedly different from some of your other work. I feel like every question I have is “What's different about this story?” - but what's different about this play that made you change the relationship to humor?

K.H.: Oh, gosh, I feel like humor is a fundamental coping strategy that I use in life. My family is the type that makes extremely morbid jokes at funerals. So I can't help but sprinkle it in... I find it, truly, irresistible. I also feel like humor helps audiences listen better - if it's only grimness, all the time, they can shut down. This play is definitely walking a tightrope between real fear - fear of predation, of being controlled - and the humor people use to cope with those situations. And I feel that's very true to life. Some of my other plays are more straight-up comedies - this is swerving into horror.

K.B.: Fear plays a big role in this show. How did you navigate writing something that is so scary, creepy-crawly, and what do you see fear's importance being in the storytelling?

K.H.: I'm a big scaredy-cat about things that go bump in the night, personally, so it was pretty easy for me to access that fear. I can't watch scary movies! I tried to frighten myself - to write about things that scared me. And I'm scared of toxic people who pose as charmers, and I'm certainly scared of \*powerful\* predators, and I'm scared of people being controlled against their will. So I just tried to arrange situations that would scare me, and hoped that would scare my characters, too!

K.B.: Why do you think we are so interested in and return to “monster” stories? Why, in your estimation, are we so drawn to vampires and vampire hunters? What do these kinds of stories have to teach us or reveal about our own natures?

K.H.: Well, what I think is so interesting about vampires - and not to be a complete nerd about this - is that lots of people find them quite sexy. And I get it; there's something about that power that is compelling - but I think part of the fantasy / appeal is that a vampire would also choose to make you a vampire, and you could get to be undying and beautiful and powerful forever. WHICH IS NOT TRUE! Statistically, you are so much more likely to be some

random peasant who gets eaten and forgotten. You are prey! It's like how people over-identify with billionaires and defend them because they wish / hope that they someday might also be billionaires. YOU WILL NEVER BE A BILLIONAIRE, AND YOU WILL NEVER BE AN IMMORTAL VAMPIRE SUPER-PREDATOR, so find some solidarity with your fellow peasant-class so we can fight predators together!!! I think vampires teach us that we often find incredible fascination in predation - while actually, we should learn to identify and stop predators. Like, be the hand that holds the stake. Question your idols. And if you find yourself over-identifying with somebody who wields a lot of power.... take a little step back and ask who's on the table.

## FAMOUS VAMPIRE STORIES FROM POP CULTURE

*What We Do in the Shadows* (TV 2019)  
*Twilight* (sparkly vampires!) (Books 2005, Films 2008)  
*Underworld* series (Film 2003)  
*Dracula, The Musical* (Musical 2001)  
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Film 1992, TV 1997)  
*Zoltan, Hound of Dracula* (canine vampire!) (Film 1978)  
*Interview with The Vampire* (Book 1976, Film 1994)  
*Count von Count* (Sesame Street TV show 1972)  
*Billy the Kid vs. Dracula* (Film 1966)  
*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (Silent Film 1922)



COUNT VON COUNT



WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS



NOSFERATU



# FEMINISM AND HORROR

German writer and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote that “horror aims at letting people come to terms with things they are otherwise blindly subject to,” and in Kate Hamill’s *Dracula: A Feminist Revenge Fantasy, Really*, she uses the horror genre to ask the questions “who are the real monsters? And who are the damsels in distress?”

Kate Hamill’s adaptation of *Dracula* mixes humor and horror while upending the sexism often seen in horror and Victorian fiction. Classic Gothic horror novels from the Victorian era, like *Dracula*, show perfect examples of Victorian ideals. The women are demure, at home, pregnant, ladylike. In horror books and films we typically see the men as heroes and villains with autonomy and self-determination, and the women as victims or struggling with mental illness. With the rise of Second and Third Wave Feminism, filmmakers and creatives who are women have used horror to dive deep into the feminine experience, taking back the narratives they are often victims in and showing their strengths.

Often in the horror genre, the women are delegated to screaming, scared victims whose bodies are subjected to humiliation and violence - prey. In many popular 1980s “slasher flicks” the purpose of women is to show them scantily clad and running away from something. Isn’t it interesting that some of the same tropes around women appear in Victorian Gothic horror and modern-day slasher films?

However, the horror genre can also provide a valuable place to subvert what society accepts to be normal or morally right, presenting the real world as fantasy and exploring deeply what our true nightmares are. In this sense, horror is an opportunity for a progressive creator to get across important ideas that society may have not accepted fully yet. Many women filmmakers and writers, like Kate Hamill, are using horror as a way to explore the anxieties and fantasies that often come with womanhood. Sometimes, being a woman in a world filled with violent misogyny is horrifying enough.

As a genre, horror can act as a window into our society’s fears - things we consider terrifying, perverse, or taboo. Horror can be validating, empowering, and cathartic at the same time that it grosses us out, makes us squirm, or sends chills down our spine. We can’t look away; and sometimes, we don’t want to.

