

DRACULA

Simply a great horror story, or antisemitic?



Bela Lugosi as Dracula in the 1931 film. Note the medallion (please see below)

What inspired Bram Stoker to write Dracula? Published in 1897, the novel has never been out of print. But after more than a century, there are no clear answers to the question of influences. Some possibilities include Vlad the Impaler, a 15th century Wallachian warlord; Celtic mythology (Stoker was Irish); and his mother's stories of the 1832 cholera epidemic in Sligo, Ireland, during which the sick were at times buried alive to avoid the spread of disease (hence the idea of the "undead"). A number of Jewish-related influences have also been proposed, some of which evoke our current political situation:

I. The Wandering Jew. In 1820, Irish author Charles Maturin wrote Melmoth the Wanderer, a novel derived from the legend of the Jew who taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion and was then fated to roam the earth until the Second Coming. Maturin's novel is about a man who sells his soul to Satan in exchange for 150 more years of life. Later regretting his pact, Melmoth wanders the earth in search of someone to take his place.

II. The Blood Libel. Is Dracula's thirst for human blood an allusion to this antisemitic canard, which accuses Jews of murdering Christian children to use their blood in the baking of matzoh and other rituals?

III. Svengali. In Trilby, a novel by George du Maurier, Svengali is the evil mesmerist who manipulates the title character, a beautiful young woman. He is also Jewish. Trilby was published as a book in 1895 after being serialized in Harper's Monthly the year before. Du Maurier, a celebrated cartoonist, drew his own illustrations.

IV. Fear of the Other: As the Industrial Revolution progressed, so did urbanization, immigration, and the growth of slums. This was fertile ground for a genre of fiction called "invasion literature." Popular from 1871 – World War I, it told of 'alien' forces that threatened English morals, identity, and hegemony. Among the 'invaders' were Jews – both the elite (one newspaper described the Rothschilds as "leeches") and the immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe. Many of the latter settled in London's poor Whitechapel section, where Jack the Ripper murdered five women in 1888. Although he was never caught, two Polish Jews were suspected (and Jews were seen as hindering the investigation). Does Dracula, who comes to London from the East, embody the fear of foreign contagion engendered by such crimes? Some view him as feeding not only on human blood (suggesting sexually transmitted disease), but also on "imperial and national anxieties...the parasite (the speculator, represented so often as a Jew) waiting to benefit from England's decline." Historically, horror has also been used to express a fear of 'invaders' other than Jews.

Is Dracula Antisemitic? While Victorian readers accepted the many "casual" stereotypes found in literature of the time, bigots could easily adopt these clichés to further their own nefarious ends. In the novel, for example, the description of Dracula's "aquiline" face may imply a Semitic origin. Is he "just another vampire," or does he embody the idea of Jews from the East as "metaphorical vampires" who drained the economy and imperiled the English way of life? Stoker himself was Irish. Because the

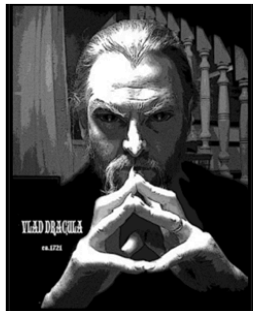
English also [associated Irish immigrants with crime and social disorder](#), perhaps Stoker felt a bond with London's immigrant Jews and thus did not harbor the antisemitic attitude that some critics infer. According to one biographer, Stoker based much of Dracula on [his employer](#), the formidable Sir Henry Irving, one of the British theatre's most famous actor-managers. And Hall Caine (the novel's dedicatee) wrote that Stoker's fiction had just one purpose: "to sell," with no ideology and "no higher aims."

Three artists' conceptions of Dracula based on the book

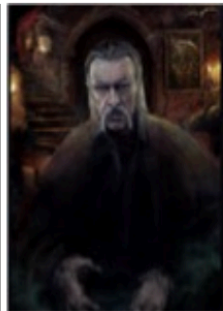
Was Dracula based on one of these figures?



Vedran Klemens



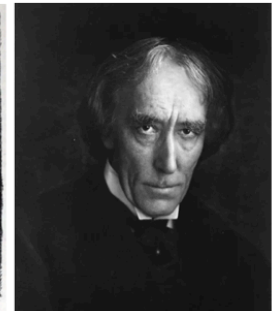
Sebastien-Écosse



Gony Harris.



Svengali (1894)



Sir Henry Irving

The Medallion. Although the 1931 film eliminates ethnic stereotypes (Karl Freund, the cinematographer, was Jewish), Dracula wears a medallion (a hexagram) that some see as a [Star of David](#). But the hexagram is also symbolic in the occult (including the Kabbalah), alchemy, and [multiple religious traditions](#). Formed of two overlapping triangles whose respective apices point up and down, it signifies a [union of opposites](#). And in witchcraft, the hexagram's six points, six smaller triangles, and interior hexagon make it a symbol of evil. Triple six is the "devil's number" (one explanation: written in Hebrew, the name of the evil "Emperor Nero" has a numerical value of 666). Up close, the "star" also resembles a [neck order](#) like those once part of an aristocrat's formal attire. In 1987, General Mills redesigned the box of its Count Chocula cereal (introduced in 1971) to feature Bela Lugosi with a medallion that looks like a Star of David. Responding to protests, GM apologized and removed the medallion.

Opposition to the Nazis

Carl Laemmle (1867-1939) founded Universal Pictures, the first major Hollywood studio, in 1912. In addition to [Dracula](#), Universal produced and released [Frankenstein](#) and other classic horror films of the '20s and '30s. Laemmle, a German Jew, immigrated to America in 1884. He anticipated the Nazi onslaught even [before Hitler rose to power](#) and, in 1932, pleaded with publisher William Randolph Hearst to expose the danger and protest openly. Moreover, unlike his peers at other studios, he took action, dedicating himself to the [rescue of German Jews](#) – family, friends, and strangers – at his own expense. Admission to the U.S. was fraught with obstacles. Up until his death, Laemmle enabled 300 families (over 1000 people) to reach our shores by guaranteeing his financial support and [doing his utmost](#) to facilitate the process. [He also found jobs for them](#). When officials doubted his ability to vouch for so many, Laemmle had others sign the required affidavits of support while he covered all expenses. Historian Thomas Doherty (author of [Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939](#)) [writes](#) that Laemmle "is the closest thing to an Oskar Schindler or Raoul Wallenberg that Hollywood has." Today, the hundreds saved by this selfless man are known as [Laemmle's List](#).



Bela Lugosi (1882-1956) Bela Lugosi (1882-1956) has become the classic Dracula. Even today, when someone poses as the Count, they are most likely emulating him. Born to a Roman Catholic family in Hungary, Lugosi was both an actor and a political activist committed to workers' rights. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1920, after fleeing Hungary the previous year because of his activism. In 1927, he created the role of Dracula on Broadway. After Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944, deportations of Jews began. As president of the Hungarian-American Council for Democracy, Lugosi [contacted the War Refugee Board](#) in August, trying to identify and assist 320 Hungarian Jews who had escaped to Basle. [He also addressed over 2000 people](#) at [an HACD-sponsored rally on August 28](#). At a time when few spoke out, his efforts were part of a larger campaign to urge U.S. intervention in Hungary and loosen immigration restrictions. Sadly, the results were limited. Although Lugosi was later able to pressure Hungary to stop the deportations, by then it was too late for most of the country's Jews.