

## **The Uncanny Bedrooms in *Dracula* as Explored in Restored Victorian Homes**

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### **Abstract**

In the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker introduced audiences to one of Britain's most renowned Gothic horror novels, *Dracula*, and there has been an extensive amount of literary analysis and research produced since its publication. Unlike many of these publications, this research explores, with an interdisciplinary approach, how Stoker upsets the natural psychology of the bedroom scenes and how this reveals ideologies concerning women in the nineteenth century. Bedrooms similar to Lucy and Mina's have been examined to study the psychological implications of the materials and interior design for nineteenth-century women. Freud explains two ways that a place, object, or situation becomes uncanny: the phenomena of double and defamiliarization. Stoker uses both to transform the bedroom scenes from a natural place of safety, fertility, and comfort to a haunting locus of fear for Mina and Lucy. Using research conducted in historical homes on nineteenth-century material culture and architecture, I posit that while bedrooms should create a sense of safety, privacy, and comfort, in *Dracula*, the uncanny affect strips away these natural qualities. This paper explains—using evidence of material culture that has been collected from the houses, interviews that have been conducted with historians, textual research, and Freud's "The Uncanny"—just how uncanny Stoker made the bedroom scenes in *Dracula* and what this communicates to readers about the ideologies of nineteenth-century women. In sum, literary criticism, history, material culture, and written communication may effectively illuminate how the bedroom settings in *Dracula* significantly contribute to the novel's uncanny effect.

**Keywords:** *Dracula*, The Uncanny, historical homes

### **1. Introduction**

In the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker introduced audiences to one of Britain's most renowned Gothic horror novels, and in this novel, *Dracula*, Stoker upsets the natural psychology of the bedroom scenes by invoking the uncanny. Bedrooms in *Dracula*, and real Victorian homes, reflect the psychology of the inhabitant, so readers gain a psychological insight into the central female characters and how upsetting the natural psychology of the bedroom reveals ideologies about women in the nineteenth century. Examining women's bedrooms in historical homes, such as Stan Hywet Hall and Hower House of Akron, Ohio, allowed observation of how interior design and home furnishings from the late nineteenth century reflected women's psychological needs and social position as well as the tension between their private and public identities. This tension between the private, psychological self and the public, social identity has grounding in Sigmund Freud's essay, "The Uncanny." There, he refines the definition of uncanniness by suggesting that intellectual uncertainty alone fails to create the disturbing effect, but rather that it depends on the feeling of the "Heimlich"—that which is homely—transforming into its opposite, the "unheimlich," which then becomes weird and unnerving by virtue of its former familiarity and comfort. Stoker's work illustrates this concept of uncanniness to transform the bedroom scenes from a natural place of safety, fertility, and comfort to a haunting locus of fear for Mina and Lucy. The research conducted in historical homes on nineteenth-century material culture and architecture shows that while bedrooms should be a private sanctuary, a refuge, and a comfort, in *Dracula*,

the uncanny affect strips away these natural qualities. In sum, literary criticism, history, material culture, and written communication may effectively illuminate how the bedroom settings in *Dracula* significantly contribute to the novel's uncanny effect.

Because of the expectations and social pressures from the outside world, women viewed their bedrooms as an ultimate sanctuary where they could find privacy. The bedroom was the only room in the house where women could reveal the most private parts of their lives and identities, so it was completely sheltered from the outside world. While modern and Victorian readers would associate the bedroom with sex, Victorians would also expect a greater degree of seclusion in that room, which allows for the private expression of their physical and psychological lives. This is what makes studying restored Victorian bedrooms and the materials within them important. By particularizing the contents in Victorian women's bedrooms, it is possible to historicize the bedroom scenes in *Dracula* and then explain why Dracula's intrusion in this space would be so traumatizing to the female characters.

## 2. Victorian Homes

To understand what Dracula's presence in the bedroom scenes really does, it is imperative to first understand what the Victorians were trying to accomplish when designing and decorating their homes and, more specifically, their bedrooms. Victorians viewed homes as a reflection of familial class status and of the men's success at work. Consequently, the most important element to note about Victorian homes is the way they are separated into public and private spheres and then by function. The public spheres were especially ornate (see figure 1) with floral carpeting and wallpaper, bronzed statuary, gilt-framed pictures, over-stuffed furniture crowding the room, ottomans, and decorated fireplaces with many souvenirs, ornaments, and bric-a-bracs atop the mantle and every other available surface<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 1. "A Parlor View in a New York Dwelling House," by John Maass. In *A Gingerbread Age*. New York: Rinehart, 1957, p 15.

All of these elements were present in the most public places of the home where guests were received, so they could appropriately present and define the public face of the family. The more stuff that was in a room and the more ornate the space was, the more the family displayed and proved their high status. The public areas (see figure 2) include the reception room, sitting room, drawing room, music room, parlor room, dining room, and many more depending on the family's wealth.

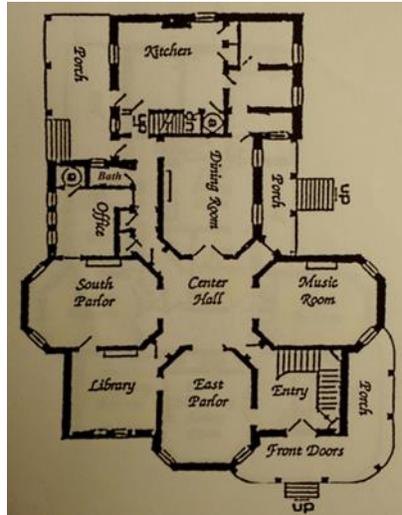


Figure 2. This diagram is displayed in the Hower House and depicts the first floor

Bedrooms were usually on the second or third floor to ensure ample separation between the public rooms and these private spaces. Even the closest of friends and cousins were not allowed in each other's bedrooms. It is evident that the Victorians worked very hard to make their bedrooms the private refuge they craved. However, this is not to say the home itself was not a safe retreat for Victorians, because it certainly was. As a matter of fact, the Victorian home became defined as a refuge, a place with different morals, different rules, and different guidelines to protect the soul from being consumed by the commerce that it was separated from<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the Victorians specifically designed and constructed their homes to have many spaces that provide as much privacy as possible and create a distinct separation between the public and private spheres.

As one might surmise, the Victorian house was not just divided into public and private spheres. The homes were completely compartmentalized so each room had a different, single function. In separating the rooms by class, function, and gender, the Victorians were able to achieve the social and spatial order they desired. This separation of rooms and home design allowed the home to fulfill the private and psychological needs of the inhabitants in addition to being the public and social representation of the family, but the pressures of the outside world are not always shut out because they occasionally appear in the private spaces of the home. Therefore, perhaps Judith Flanders, author of *Inside the Victorian Home*, put it most accurately when she said, "The notion of home was structured in part by the importance given to privacy and retreat, and in part by the idea that conformity to social norms"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is not surprising that the tension in home design was due to its necessity to simultaneously serve the psychological and social needs of the family. All of these elements and tensions are visible in the restored Victorian homes I analyzed.

The Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens' architecture, design, and décor provides a clear representation of the Seiberling family. The Seiberlings were a wealthy American family who built themselves a luxurious home for comfort. As seen in figure 3, the exterior of the home emanates the wealth, power, and aristocratic standing of the Seiberling family through the massive peaks, crenellation, stacked chimneys, and portcullis.



Figure 3. Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens

They borrowed this prestigious look from British styles to show off their wealth and family power. Thus, the Seiberling's home is their public face and it is used to communicate and reinforce their wealth, accomplishments, and leadership in the community. However, once inside the family members' bedrooms, it is easy to see the tension between the social face and psychological needs of the bedroom setting—especially in the bedrooms of the daughters, Irene and Virginia. The young women had strikingly different rooms, and because the Seiberling children had a significant input on how their bedrooms would be constructed, the structure and style choices in each room uniquely reflect the inhabitant<sup>5</sup>. Irene—the oldest child—loved the Tudor Revival style that is embraced throughout the estate, and her bedroom reflected that era, as seen in figure 4(5). The large beams on the ceiling and the textiles in Irene's bedroom reflect the Seiberling family's aristocratic status. This bedroom reflects the wealth and social standing of the family. Although these reflections may seem out of place in the bedroom, it actually illuminates a lot about Irene's identity. As the oldest daughter, Irene would be more likely to represent the family to the public, so her bedroom shows how the status, power, and wealth of the Seiberling family were integral parts of Irene's identity. This is a powerful example of how one of the most private spaces in the Victorian home can simultaneously serve the psychological needs of the inhabitant and simultaneously represent her social identity.



Figure 4. Irene Seiberling's Bedroom Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens

In contrast, Virginia's bedroom reflects a more private sanctuary that one would expect in a Victorian woman's bedroom. According to Julie Frey, the Curator and Director of Museum Services at the Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens, Virginia hated the Tudor Revival architecture that her older sister and father loved, so her bedroom is a French Revival style<sup>5</sup>. As seen in figure 5, there is no mistaking that this room belongs to a female because the entire space is decorated with pinks, whites, and golds, and it originally had floral wallpaper. Unlike the eclectic furniture choices present in other rooms, Virginia's bedroom is the only room with a matching furniture set that was purchased from a department store<sup>5</sup>. This bedroom stands out the most because it reflects Virginia's personal tastes even more so than the other bedrooms reflect their occupants<sup>5</sup>. This room served, and currently displays, Virginia's psychosocial needs because it does not rely on the social symbols and notions of masculinity that suggest power and wealth the way Irene's bedroom does. Virginia's bedroom represents what it would mean to her to be at home in the place she kept the most private parts of herself. Virginia's room—which is most like the room Lucy would have had in *Dracula*—makes it easy to see how the bedroom is considered a feminine refuge.



Figure 5. Virginia Seiberling's Bedroom Stan Hyet Hall and Gardens

### 3. Sleep Has Not Refreshed Me

Using Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny helps explain how familiar spaces like bedrooms become uncanny to the Victorian readers of *Dracula*. In his 1919 article "The Uncanny," Freud discusses the author Ernst Jentsch who first ascribed "feeling[s] of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty," but expands that definition to "something which is familiar and old established in the mind...which has become alienated" and included "the phenomenon of the double"<sup>3</sup>. Freud also associates the uncanny with the "Heimlich" and "unheimlich;" Heimlich literally means "belonging to the house of family," while the unheimlich suggests that what had been familiar becomes strange in a disturbing way that leads to terror<sup>3</sup>. Thus, it is quite fitting to analyze the private bedrooms in *Dracula* with Freud's concepts of the uncanny. One significant aspect of the uncanny is the phenomena of the double, in which someone is accompanied by another figure or character who is much like her, yet with an unnerving difference. In *Dracula*, Lucy and Mina transform from normative Victorian women to monstrous beings that are hardly human: encounters with the vampire transform them into doubles of their pure, untarnished selves that exemplify normative femininity. Additionally, their transformations, both of which occur in bedrooms, figure them as doubles of one another; once Lucy's vampirism is established, readers note the uncanny nature of Mina's illness when she shows the same symptoms. Thus, the uncanny and the phenomena of the double are vital to understanding how Stoker takes the perception of the familiar bedroom and characters and refashions them to create an uncanny effect.

The concept of the uncanny is first introduced to the bedroom setting when Stoker corrupts Lucy's sleep with dreams that haunt her. Evidence of these dreams is initially revealed in Mina Harker's journal entry on August 8<sup>th</sup> where she notes, "Lucy was very restless all night"<sup>6</sup>. However on August 28<sup>th</sup>, this restlessness leads Lucy to write, in the privacy of her diary, "It is all dark and horrid to me, for I can remember nothing; but I am full of vague fear and I feel so weak and worn out"<sup>6</sup>. Lucy cannot even recall why her dreams make her feel so horrible, which is even more uncanny because she has become intellectually uncertain of herself. This is noteworthy because Lucy should go to her bedroom to find comfort, rejuvenation, and safety as she sleeps each night, but these disturbing and reoccurring dreams prevent her from obtaining that familiar tranquility. Therefore, each night Lucy dreams, her fear accumulates.

For a nineteenth-century reader, Lucy dreaming would have been rather unnerving because sleep happens in the bedroom—the Victorians' sanctuary—and it's supposed to be familiar and rejuvenating, but dreams, generally speaking, were unwelcome. As Ronald Pearsall writes in his book *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, "There was not much place, in fact, for the dream itself, which was considered evidence of ill health or the harbinger of madness"<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Victorian readers would have found Lucy's restless dreaming, fear, and uncertainty rather alarming. In contrast to twenty-first-century readers who know that *Dracula* is a vampire novel before they read the first page, Victorian readers would not have known that the reason Lucy is so weak and afraid is because a vampire is feeding on her, and her illness would have been a mystery. *Dracula* popularized vampires, but its first readers would not have been able to connect Lucy's illness to vampirism, so the readers themselves would

also be experiencing intellectual uncertainty. Thus, both Lucy and Victorian readers would be experiencing the effects of the uncanny.

Stoker pushes the bedroom scene into an even more uncanny state when he transforms young Lucy's bedroom into a sickroom. The first time Dr. Van Helsing visits Lucy, he and Dr. Seward enter Lucy's room to find her "ghastly, chalkily, pale" with her "bones protruding unnaturally from her face, breathing painfully, and lying motionless" 6. Lucy's state was so severe that they decided, "There must be a transfusion of blood at once" 6. The act of performing a blood transfusion in the bedroom is significant because the purpose of the bedroom changes—as do Lucy and the nineteenth-century readers' feeling about the bedroom. The bedroom transforms from a place of privacy, safety, and familiarity into a sickroom, which is a place for healing and death. When a young woman's bedroom, naturally associated with health and fertility, is transformed into a sickroom, it has a very uncanny effect because sickness is anything but what should be expected of youth in their bedrooms.

One home that provides a great insight into Victorian's beliefs and practices regarding illness is the Stan Hywet Hall. The Stan Hywet Hall has a designated sickroom that is positioned in the most advantageous location for the three things Victorians believed were most important when healing the sick: privacy, sunlight, and fresh air. The sickroom is in one of the highest rooms—if not the highest—and has large windows that would let in copious amounts of sunlight and encouraged ventilation in sickrooms as physicians advised<sup>2</sup>. The natural environment for a sick person was anything but what Lucy is given. Dr. Van Helsing requires the windows to be closed—shutting her in—and so many people walk in and out of Lucy's bedroom that it might as well be a living room, not a private bedroom. This lack of privacy and cutting off fresh air goes against everything that is natural, so Victorians would have found this treatment of the sick quite uncanny.

After Lucy's bedroom is transformed into a sickroom, she finally acknowledges that her bedroom is a place of true fear, and she is only able to feel a semblance of safety when someone is with her. Consequently, Dr. Seward stays with Lucy as her guard, but he discovers that Lucy fights sleep, this "boon that we all crave for," because her unsettling dreams have made sleep "a presage of horror" rather than the solace that it should be<sup>6</sup>. Still, Lucy finds comfort in Dr. Seward's words, "I am here watching you, and I can promise that nothing will happen," so she yields to sleep<sup>6</sup>. Lucy's place of safety has become so estranged that she feels the need for a guard, which intensifies the uncanny effect; guarding of bedrooms only takes place in asylums and prisons, not in a young woman's home. Additionally, as Dr. Seward's is one of Lucy's former suitors, he should never be in her bedroom—much less while she sleeps. Throughout *Dracula*, Lucy has symbolized the ideal Victorian woman, and Dr. Seward's presence in her bedroom goes against the norm for every virtuous, unmarried woman. Therefore, Victorian readers would find it quite uncanny that Lucy derives comfort from Dr. Seward's presence.

Stoker pushes the uncanniness of the bedroom setting by converting it from a sickroom and then into a room of death, transforming Lucy from an ordinary and innocent woman into an unnatural and dangerous creature. In Lucy's final memorandum, she recounts, "I was dazed and stupid with pain and terror and weakness," as any ordinary woman would be when she had been seriously ill from six weeks of blood loss, but when Dr. Seward, Van Helsing, and Arthur entered Lucy's room in her final moments, Dr. Seward writes, "[Lucy] said in a soft, voluptuous voice... 'Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!'"<sup>6</sup>. Her overtly seductive nature clashes with Lucy's normally innocent and angelic personality, so readers—especially those of the nineteenth century—can see how completely she has transformed and how disturbing this transformation is. Soon after, Dr. Van Helsing declares, "It is all over. She is dead!"<sup>6</sup>. This declaration marks an even uncannier transformation of the bedroom setting. The bedroom is severely alienated from its original purpose when a young woman dies in the very place she should have found, health, safety, and rest. The uncanniness of both the bedroom setting and a principle character is crucial because together they form one of the most shocking moments in *Dracula*.

Besides the transformation of the bedroom, there is something very uncanny for nineteenth-century readers in Stoker's bedroom scenes because of the alarming number of men who walk in and out of Lucy's bedroom. In the Victorian era, men were never allowed in the bedrooms of young women, which would have been perceived as virgin sanctuaries. The presence of a man, even a fiancé, in a woman's bedroom would be very inappropriate because it would corrupt her moral image. Although Dr. Seward, Dr. Van Helsing, Arthur, and Quincey are in Lucy's bedroom on behalf of her physical health, they jeopardize her moral wellbeing with their presence. When Van Helsing confides to Dr. Seward that an early attack on Lucy jeopardized her "body and soul," this suggests that their male intrusion into a young woman's bedroom is paradoxically a moral safeguard<sup>6</sup>. This many men in Lucy's bedroom would be very unnatural and uncanny. However, it is simultaneously titillating readers because that many men in a woman's bedroom is "wrong" but also sexy, which is intensified when readers consider that three of these men are Lucy's former suitors. Therefore, Stoker's bedroom scenes would be all wrong and very radical for Victorian readers.

As one might surmise, the bedroom becoming a death room would have been frightening for the Victorians, but Lucy's voluptuous demeanor would be terrifying because it would signify a complete transformation. Throughout the

novel, Lucy exhibited the best qualities for a Victorian female—an ideal woman. Lucy is described by many characters—especially Mina—as being a dutiful daughter, “so sweet and sensitive,” and beautiful<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, Lucy’s voluptuous and overt sexual response to Arthur’s presence in her room, especially in front of multiple men, would have been incredibly shocking to a nineteenth-century reader. This shock would have made the once respectable Lucy uncanny for nineteenth-century readers because women were valued for, and associated with, their ability to be wives and bear children, not for outward expressions of sexual desire. The previous transformations of the bedroom did not betray Lucy’s normative femininity, but this transformation does because it defies her femininity and humanity. Dr. Seward recounts, “Death had given back part of her beauty...even her lips lost their deadly pallor”<sup>6</sup>. The fact that Lucy is full of more life the moment she dies than she had been in the past six weeks suggests a renewal, or rebirth. Lucy should have given birth and become a mother in her bedroom, but instead, she herself is reborn as a monstrosity—the undead. She is neither wife nor mother, but there is sex in the room because there is birth. This would be very wrong and uncanny for Victorian readers because they still would not connect Lucy’s symptoms with vampirism, but they would begin to understand that there is something unnatural and mysterious about Lucy.

After Lucy dies, Mina retreats to her own bedroom, but she discovers that she is becoming Lucy’s double as she goes through the same experiences Lucy did. Van Helsing dismisses Mina from the men’s conversation about how to kill Dracula and sends her to bed, telling her, “for you, Madam Mina, this night is the end until all be well. You are too precious to us to have such risk”<sup>6</sup>. Yet, just like Lucy, Mina disclosed in her journal that morning that, “sleep has not refreshed me, for to-day I feel terribly weak and spiritless” and is troubled by dreams she cannot remember<sup>6</sup>. Mina is a newly married wife who should associate her bedroom with privacy, safety, and legitimate sexual expression, but her recurring unease prevents her from doing so. Each time Mina enters her bedroom, she goes through the same uncanny experiences as Lucy did, repeatedly establishing Mina as Lucy’s double. In addition, readers already know Lucy’s fate, and because Stoker made Mina Lucy’s double, readers are forced to anticipate Mina’s demise.

Ultimately, any sense of peace or safety Mina Harker could have toward her bedroom is mutilated when Dracula essentially rapes her while her husband Johnathan is in the room. Dr. Seward bore witness to this and recorded in his journal, “[Dracula,] with his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress smeared with blood”<sup>6</sup>. This pushes the bedroom far beyond the uncanny sickroom—even further than a room of death—because a loving wife becomes a victim in her own bedroom, and this victimization would have been unimaginable for a Victorian woman. Victorian men would also be horrified by this scene because Johnathan, a dutiful husband, could not prevent the violation of his wife and their marriage bed. Therefore, the uncanniness of this bedroom scene is intensified by Johnathan’s presence because Victorians would understand this scene as an uncanny robbery of both Mina and Johnathan. This rape, this violation of the privacy and safety that Johnathan and Mina should have had in their marital bedroom is made even worse when Mina is transformed—not into a creature as Lucy—but the living equivalent as an unclean, haunted woman. This transforms the bedroom into a place of crime, helplessness, and terror, which is far beyond what Lucy experienced in death. Moreover, Mina’s rape is the ultimate infuser of the uncanny because it causes Mina to fulfil the role as Lucy’s double while the bedroom setting is defamiliarized to the point of mutilation, and beyond recovery. In sum, Stoker effectively made the bedroom setting very uncanny, and this shatters everything the Victorians worked to create with their social structure, their lives, and their homes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although analyzing the bedroom scenes in *Dracula* with a psychoanalytic lens focusing on women was a fruitful endeavor, further research needs to be done on Stoker’s uncanny bedrooms specifically focusing on men. Johnathan encounters the first uncanny bedroom of the novel in Count Dracula’s castle and, from there, the men experience just as many uncanny encounters in the bedroom settings as Lucy and Mina do. While some may argue that the uncanniness of the bedroom becoming a rape scene cannot be matched by a male’s experience, it could be argued that Johnathan’s violation at Dracula’s castle in Transylvania is even more radical than Mina’s violation. What happens to Johnathan suggests multiple women and, perhaps, a male violator as well. If more research was done, especially in historical homes, it may yield information on the psychology of the bedroom setting and how uncanny they would be for men. In essence, by documenting the things that make the bedroom home to nineteenth-century women and analyzing *Dracula* with a psychoanalytic lens, one can effectively articulate how Stoker upset the natural psychology of the bedroom setting by turning the Victorian sanctuary into an irreversibly uncanny bedroom: Stoker took the uncanny to its limit and then pushed it over the edge.

## 5. Acknowledgements

I am particularly grateful to my mentor, Dr. Deborah Fratz, without whom I would never have started my research. Her guidance and support throughout the entire project has been invaluable. I would also like to express my great appreciation to the directors, historians, and docents who enriched my understanding of Victorian homes and the families that lived in them—the information they provided was an incredible asset to my work. Finally, I would like to offer a special thanks to Deonti Norris, who helped photograph some of the historical homes by my side and offered his unwavering support throughout the grant writing process.

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