

**The Experience of the Other in Practice and Reception:**

**The Example of *Dracula* and Eastern Europe**

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**Course Title**

Gothic Fiction (This course has been taught at the Community College of Beaver County although not yet with this newly created module. The module is also appropriate for Victorian Literature and Literary Theory.)

**Course Description**

Students are introduced to the origins and varieties of the Gothic before examining plot structures and literary motifs particularly associated with the Gothic literary form. Students will have the opportunity to examine the extension of literary Gothicism into other media such as film and music.

**Course Objectives**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to

1. Identify the antecedents of literary Gothicism
2. Discuss the nuances of meanings in early applications of the term Gothic
3. Produce a definition of Gothic that applies to manifestations of literature, media, and popular culture that presently are referred to as Gothic
4. Apply selected literary and cultural theories to the Gothic genre
5. Delineate literary motifs as they appear and modulate throughout the history of the Gothic.

**Lesson Module Title**

The Experience of the Other in Practice and Reception: The Example of Dracula and Eastern Europe

**Module Objectives**

Upon completion of this module, students will be able to

1. Discuss the Experience of the Other—a plot common to Gothic fiction and film—in terms of authorial practice/technique as well as in terms of reader reception
2. Perceive Stoker’s Dracula, particularly chapters I through IV, as one possible template for the Experience of the Other plot (see Course Objective E.)
3. Outline 19th century Western European perceptions of Eastern Europe, including its superstitions, as inspiration for Stoker (see Course Objective D.)
4. Relate the practice of Stoker and others to various articulations of Ostranenie (Making Strange, Defamiliarization and Estrangement), the Russian Formalist concept of various derivations first articulated by Victor Shklovksy in “Art as Device” (1917) and later elaborated in various essays. (see Course Objective D. and E.)
5. Identify both personal experiences and artistic works that bear similarities to depictions of the Experience of the Other plot

**Module Overview**

In fall of 2014, the Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh began a collaboration with the Community College of Beaver County under the aegis of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Bridging Cultures collaboration began with a series of classes designed for faculty at the community college. Our instructors presented a historical overview of the tension-laden relationship among Eastern European cultures. The overview was followed by a detailed consideration of the immigrant experience. In both cases, issues of personal identity were central. In Eastern Europe, inhabitants sought to preserve their cultural identities while at the same time co-mingling with other cultures. As Dmitri Kaminiar expressed in another context, the inhabitants viewed their neighbors as, “same as us but at the same time they are different.” Upon migration, Eastern Europeans faced an even greater sense of difference. They were Others among Others.

Our instructors employed excerpts from the first four chapters of Dracula as a means to illustrate the various cultures of the Eastern European homeland. In the beginning pages of Bram Stoker’s novel, Jonathan Harker describes the peoples of Transylvania. The section that we studied concluded with Dracula relating his family history and pride in his identity, to Harker.

The above experience inspired me to revisit Dracula and Russian Formalist literary theory and the Gothic. I perceived that the interaction of Eastern Europe cultures before and after immigration, brought to life by our instructors, resembled on a cultural level the ideas of “making strange,” “estrangement,” and “defamiliarization” that were first articulated as ostranenie by Victor Shklovsky in “Art as Device” (1917) and later elaborated by him in various essays.

**Teaching Sequence and Possible Assessment**

**The Personal**

We (both faculty and students since teaching cannot take place without both) begin with an informal discussion of experiences we might have had that approximate, in the words of Jonathan Harker, “that vague feeling of uneasiness which I always have when the Count is near” (30). Any number of possibilities can of course be substituted for the Count. From this general appreciation of the Experience of the Other, we discuss ideas of the liminal, or threshold experiences. In particular one topical example of liminality is the “uncanny valley” as the term is used to describe the uneasiness felt by some when robots become all too human-like.

**The Universal**

From personal experience, the discussion moves to the experience of travelers, immigrants, and political entities. The Elfenbein text, with readings derived from the nineteenth-century travels of Emily Gerard and others, is useful. These readings are available elsewhere.

In the Introduction to Dracula and the Eastern Question, Matthew Gibson delineates the role of the Eastern European setting for Dracula as grounded in notions of racial otherness, Orientalism, and political reaction to events of the nineteenth century, such as the Treaty of Berlin (8). In a paper published on the website of the International Gothic Association, Marie Cohut articulates our module premise in a precise manner: “part of the Western Gothic’s description is the fact that it extensively uses Eastern European locations and characters in order to create/express a sense of uncanny, or of ‘otherness’ through the partial exoticism of ‘darkest Europe’—see Bram Stoker’s Dracula as perhaps the best example in this sense.”

By bringing together the cultural situation of Eastern Europe, Stoker’s nineteenth-century reaction to the otherness of the Eastern European, we perceive that literature is indeed our record of what it means to live—in whatever period or place. Obviously the world situation in 2015 provides a wealth of potential discussion too.

**The Gothic**

In teaching Gothic Fiction, the Experience of the Other plot can be approached in a unit that employs plots constructed by Noel Carroll in The Philosophy of Horror (New York and London: Routledge, 1990. 99-128)—with the Experience of the Other plot as an addition. Carroll provides the Overreacher Plot and the Complex Discovery Plot.

Our three plots are presented separately. In fiction, these plots may borrow elements from one another and/or overlap. For instance, after the confirmation of the Complex Discovery, the Overreacher may be called upon to perform an experiment and save everyone from that which was discovered. The confirmation of the Other is itself a discovery. The Overreacher and the Other may be one and the same.

**The Overreacher Plot**

The Overreacher is presented as a person of great wealth and/or knowledge but who cannot suppress a particular goal, desire, or need. The goal may be directed toward good or evil. The desire may be honorable or shameful. The need may be of internal origin (health/psychology) or it may be external (prompted by an event or character).

1. The Overreacher prepares for an experiment or a journey or some significant act, often ignoring the advice of others, in order to satisfy a goal, desire, or need.
2. The act occurs or is performed.
3. Something goes wrong during the act or the consequences of the act are not what is expected.
4. The problem presented is now conquered by the Overreacher, or the Overreacher is conquered by the problem.

**The Complex Discovery Plot**

1. The Onset to the Complex Discovery may be sudden or gradual. The author may shock us from the outset or may drop subtle clues that something is not right. There may be more than one Onset, ranging from a series of clues to a series of murders, etc. At times, characters may voice disbelief and say that nothing is wrong or they may voice warnings, which may not be heeded.
2. The Discovery occurs, at which point the story may end. Or…more than one person may discover that something is going on.
3. The Confirmation establishes the certainty that something is not right. This may be a time of reflection in the story. For instance, when more than one character discovers that something is not right, the whole picture might not become clear until they compare notes.
4. Confrontation occurs.

**The Experience of the Other Plot**

1. The Experience of the Other is always gradual. Characters encounter someone who initially appears and acts in an undaunting manner.
2. Through the process of making strange played out by the author, the Other reveals difference while select characters perceive difference. The Other is the “same as us but at the same time they are different.” The Other is not a monster in visual terms, at least not without transformation. The Other is more dangerous than the monster. We can only protect ourselves from evil/danger if it is recognized, and with the Other, what we first perceive are the similarities to ourselves.
3. The Experience of the Other might also occur with objects and with setting. In this case what we first perceive or expect is the normalcy associated with object or setting. An apparently benign object may be revealed to have sinister associations. A doll placed in a corner may be supposed to have moved subtlely from the previous day. Characters might walk into a room for the first time and sense something amiss—as if they should not be there or have been there before.

A note on film: Since the Experience of the Other is predicated on similarity and/or normalcy, visual examples work well. As an example of the Experience of the Other, an episode from The Old Dark House (1932) is particularly effective. Throughout this movie, Boris Karloff lurks about in a menacing manner as Morgan, the scarred, bearded butler. However, upstairs there lurks the mysterious Saul. We do not meet Saul until near the end of the film. He at first appears to us and the film’s lead as a harmless, pleasant fellow. The two engage in conversation at the dinner table. With a few subtle expressions on his face, however, Saul reveals to the lead as well as the audience that he is both mad and dangerous.

**The Literary**

Anyone studying the Russian Formalists and ostranenie will soon realize that the term has several derivations and applications. The term is sometimes translated as “estrangement” and sometime as “defamiliarization.” It has been applied to classic literature by Victor Shklovsky, genre fiction (by Shklovksy but also see Suvin), and cultural relations (see Szylak). The term makes regular appearances in studies of the Gothic.

Ostranenie is sometimes translated as “estrangement” or “defamiliarization.” My preference is for “making strange.” While Shklovsky first applied the term to poetic practice, in particular the manipulation of language out of normal form, he then sought to reconcile the term to notions of content. I apply the term to situations that occur through the telling of the story—events and characters, thus content.

A concise breakdown of ostranenie, here translated as “defamiliarization, is found in. Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory, under the general editorship of Irena Makaryk:

As applied to literature, defamiliarization, according to Shklovskii, operates on three levels. On the level of language, it makes language difficult and deliberately impeded, as, for example, in the accumulation of difficult sound and the use of rhythm in poetry. On the level of content, it challenges accepted concepts and ideas, by distorting them and showing them for a different perspective. For example, Leo Tolstoy’s story “The Strider” shows the illogicality of the human world from the point of view of a horse. On the level of literary forms, it “defamiliarizes literary conventions by breaking with the dominant artistic canons and introducing new ones, elevating some subliterary genres such as farce or detective story to the status of fine art.” (528)

In the case of the Experience of the Other as presented on the level of content in Dracula, we might say that Jonathan Harker is the horse. We might argue that the reader or filmgoer is also the horse.

*Dracula* begins with excerpts from the journal of Jonathan Harker. He is a travelling stranger in a strange land, and therefore his perceptions, and those of the reader, are often fleeting and suppositional. For instance, the first complete sentence of the novel reads “Buda-Pesth seems a wonderful place, from the glimpse that I got of it from the train and the little I could walk through the streets” (my italics, 4). At times he gets by with his smattering of German, and we are reminded of being same but not the same. At key times, the inhabitants withhold information. Throughout, Harker seeks information (he writes reminders to obtain recipes) to make his reality whole. His experience mirrors that of the reader who is also seeking to make whole the reality of a narrative but cannot, for the narrative is being written by one who is experiencing the Other during his travels and who will experience a more sinister Other once he reaches his destination.

**Thoughts on Assignments**

Students can identify our three Gothic plots in texts ranging from Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus to television’s *The Blacklist.*

Students can examine the Experience of the Other in the films of Universal (mainly under the auspices of immigrants to the United States) and Hammer studios.

Students can view one or more films by Val Lewton, a director known for his subtle presentation of horror.

Students can write a paper that relates their personal experiences as travelers to those of Harker.

Students can engage in further study of Russian Formalism, particularly the writings of Victor Shklovsky, which go into much greater detail about defamiliarization techniques than contained herein.

Students can debate whether the visual nature of film works more effectively than fiction in the creation of the Experience of the Other.

**Primary Reading**

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula.* Ed. Andrew Elfenbein. Boston: Longman, 2011. Print. Above page references to the novel are from this text.

**Optional Reading**

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