



## How Dracula draws on our biggest health fears

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Every Halloween we celebrate the bloodiest villain in literature — Count Dracula. But the man who brought him to life on the stage and silver screen is so synonymous with the character that the real man is often forgotten, except by those who adore the classic horror films of the 1930s.

“Dracula,” published in 1897 by Irish writer Bram Stoker, is a gothic, creepy tale about a vampire who moves from Transylvania to Merrie Old England in search of new blood to imbibe, and to infect others with the curse of vampirism.

Popular in both England and America, the novel was adapted for the English stage in the 1920s. In 1927, the American publisher and play producer Horace Liveright mounted a Broadway production featuring a revised and streamlined script that American audiences loved, as well as great scenery and casting. Its star: a rising Hungarian immigrant actor named Bela Lugosi.

Bela was born on Oct. 20, 1882, in Lugos, Kingdom of Hungary. His birth name was Béla Ferenc Dezső Blaskó but he later changed his last name to Lugosi to honor his hometown.

After distinguished service in World War I, Bela became an actor in the National Theatre of Hungary, where he was deeply involved in the actors’ labor union. His activism was not looked upon kindly by the Hungarian government, however, and Lugosi was forced to flee the country, first to Vienna and Berlin, where he continued his acting career, and finally to the United States.

“Dracula” enjoyed 261 performances on the Great White Way and then went on a national tour to rave reviews. Most appealing was Lugosi’s thick-accented, creepy demeanor, even though he never said the oft-misquoted line, “I vant to suck your blood!”

Then Hollywood beckoned — Dracula was a perfect vehicle for the monster films so lovingly produced at Universal Studios. The director Tod Browning, who specialized in weird movies about monsters, the occult and “freaks,” urged the studio head, Carl Laemmle Jr., to cast Lugosi. Laemmle at first demurred and wanted a bigger name to play Dracula, such as Paul Muni or Joseph Schildkraut. Fortunately, Lugosi was in Los Angeles with the touring company of the play precisely at this time. After Laemmle saw him, Lugosi put on his continental charm and lobbied as hard as he could for the role. Bela finally got the part after accepting the measly salary of \$500.00 a week, which was about 25 percent of the going rate for a lead actor. The 1931 film took only seven weeks to film.

Special effects like flying bats, a castle filled with cobwebs and fog, camera close ups, long silences in the dialogue, and dramatic music all helped to make the film a smash hit. In the years since, “Dracula” has been commended by the Library of Congress, the U.S. National Film Registry and the American Film Institute as one of the best horror films ever made. And, of course, Lugosi is widely regarded as the definitive, weird, slow-speaking, corpse-walking Count Dracula. The film was such a success that, later in 1931, Universal Studios turned to adapting another horror novel to the screen — Mary Shelley’s 1818 classic “Frankenstein,” which starred Boris Karloff and was directed by James Whale. It was, excuse the pun, a monster hit!

So why remember the lord of the undead in terms of medical history? “Dracula” abounds with fascinating references to medicine of the day.

For example, the victims, who are drained of blood, anemic and pale, recall the romantic 19th century portrayals of tuberculosis, especially in operas such as “La Traviata” and “La Boheme.”

The way Dracula spreads his vampirism — with a bite on the neck and drinking their blood, or forcing his victims to drink his blood — reflects the public fear of infectious diseases. At the time the book was published, these concepts were all the rage, thanks to the many discoveries then being made on the microbial causes of various public health risks, ranging from bubonic plague to rabies.

Dracula's nocturnal habits, for example, resemble those of the rat, which spread plague. The archaic Romanian word *Nosferatu*, a synonym for vampire, is also sometimes used as a term for plague carrier. And his snarling fangs, aversion to strong smells such as garlic, as well as water resemble characteristics of rabid animals.

The fact that Dracula particularly targeted female victims adds a sexual element to the mix and may connote the spread of syphilis, one of the huge infectious threats of the era. Dracula's prized victim, Lucy Westenra, in particular, becomes a "carrier" as she spreads the "vampire epidemic" by biting children.

Two of the main characters in Dracula are doctors — Dr. John Steward, an alienist (the 19th century term for psychiatrist) and Dr. Abraham van Helsing, M.D., Ph.D., D. Litt., a philosopher, metaphysician and "biting-edge" scientist. Van Helsing, for example, applies blood transfusions, hypnotism and physiognomy in his work and often quotes real-life, famous doctors of the day.

But let's get back to Lugosi. Although his greatest role was Dracula, he also starred in several films with Boris Karloff, such as "Son of Frankenstein" (1939), a slew of disappointing horror movies, and the underrated "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" (1948). He was almost not cast in this comedy because the producer assumed he was dead. Very much alive, Lugosi also appeared on Abbott and Costello's television show where he played himself. On the air, he joked with the comedic duo on how he enjoyed rattlesnake burgers for dinner and, for breakfast, "shrouded" wheat. Bela's career began to sag in the 1950s and his last film efforts were with the notoriously low-budget and downright weird moviemaker, Ed Wood.

Alas, Lugosi was stricken with herniated discs in the lumbar and sacral spine leading to chronic sciatic back and leg pain that, unfortunately, was treated primarily with morphine and methadone. These over-prescribed opiates turned him into an addict. Near the end of his career, he could barely remember his lines because he was so often under the influence. He even visited the 1950s version of a drug rehab hospital. But he relapsed and could not kick this terrible habit. Lugosi died of a heart attack on Aug. 16, 1956 at the age of 73. He was buried in his silk-lined, black Dracula cape.

Incidentally, as early as 1931, before the film Dracula was even released, Lugosi worried about type casting. He was offered another stage tour of the play and rejected it, reportedly stating, "No! Not at any price. When I'm through with this picture I hope to never hear of Dracula again. I cannot stand it...I do not intend that it shall possess me." Sadly, he predicted his fate. By the time he died, in 1956, he had played Dracula more than 1,300 times. Although he never got to play Hamlet or King Lear, he still has entered our popular culture in a most indelible way.

I considered suggesting you raise a glass of wine to toast his memory this Halloween season, until I remembered his most famous line in the film "Dracula," when he was offered a goblet of the stuff:

"I never drink ... wine."

*By* – Dr. Howard Markel

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